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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



The Thing in the Trunk

By PAUL ERNST.

*A fascinating story about a heinous crime and its strange aftermath—
by the author of "A Witch's Curse" and other
weird thrill-tales*

SOMEHOW or other, the cat was the worst feature of this whole thing.

Now that it was all over, the stark

motionlessness of that which only a little while before had been a living woman did not trouble him so much.

But that damned cat!

"Get out!" he rasped. "Scat!"

The cat slunk back, eyes slitted warily, but did not leave the room.

It was a standard living-room in a standard small bungalow. An overstuffed chair stood in a corner with a floor-lamp beside it. Opposite the chair, along one wall, was a divan to match. A gate-legged table stood between the front windows—the blinds of which were very carefully drawn. More furniture, decorous, showing modest prosperity, was piled along the walls, leaving the center of the room clear.

The rugs had been rolled back from the center of the room. In their place was a large, waterproof blanket. On the blanket was the body.

George Opper ducked his head to wipe perspiration from his face onto the sleeve of his shirt. He was a big man, a bit too heavy, with a face that was normally florid. It was very pale, now.

THE cat, a sleek white animal, sidled toward the body on the waterproof blanket. With almost a sob, George Opper raised his hand to throw his gun at it. But he stayed the impulse. The gun, perhaps striking wall or floor, might leave a trace of violence for later investigators to seize upon. He didn't want that.

He had been very careful about that so far. He mustn't let his unstrung nerves give him away now.

He had been very careful about the whole thing, as far as that went. Martia, his wife, had come home secretly at midnight, from the next state where she had been visiting her mother. It had not been hard to do. A wire, given a messenger boy on the street by a man whose hat was pulled down and collar pulled up so that recognition was impossible.

MARTIA. I AM IN TROUBLE STOP COME BACK BUT LET NO ONE KNOW YOU ARE COMING STOP EXPLAIN LATER.

The wire might come out afterward, but it was improbable. In any event, it couldn't hurt him much. As far as the world knew, his wife had simply left her mother's home—and disappeared. He would let a year go by, however, before he married Lois Blye. Too much hurry would look suspicious.

He wiped his face on his shirtsleeve again, and stared at the thing on the blanket. Pretty soon it would be sunk for ever from the world of men. And then he would be safe. No body, no crime. . . .

"Scat!" he almost screamed.

The sleek white cat was back at the blanket, whiskers almost touching the body of its mistress. Devoted to Martia, the cat had been. The dumb brute didn't seem to sense the change wrought by death; seemed sidling up for caresses from the still white hand.

Opper leaped toward the thing, and kicked out at it. The cat jumped for the doorway, but stayed there, staring out of green eyes, tongue going over its chops.

Opper composed his quivering, raw nerves, and approached the blanket. Time to get going. Time to get this thing out of here. The cat was just behind him. He took a quick step backward and nearly tripped over the animal.

He stood still, hands clenched till the nails drew blood, yelling, screaming behind closed lips so that only a curious small whimpering noise came from his mouth. But he stopped that in a hurry. That was actually horrifying. Martia had whimpered like that just before he killed her.

A queerly terrifying thing, that al-

most inaudible whimper of Martia's. She had stood in the doorway of the living-room, hat and coat still on, staring in alarm and concern at Oppen.

"George! I got your wire. Luckily not a soul saw me get in. What on earth has happened? What trouble are you in? The bank? Funds gone? What is it?"

He had said nothing, and slowly, as she stared at him, the color had drained from her face. Drop by drop it had seemed to recede, leaving her skin like blue snow. She had read his intention in his eyes as clearly as if he had shouted it at her. He had expected her to try to scream. He had been ready to whip the silenced gun from behind him and cut off the betraying scream before it could get started.

But she hadn't screamed. And she hadn't moved. She had simply stood there in the doorway, swaying a bit, eyes wide—while from her blanched lips came the small, almost inaudible whimper.

Just that little whimper, like a distillation of all the screams for help and mercy human beings have given into the quivering air since time began. It had made his blood run cold, that odd little whimper.

HE COULDN'T figure out even now how he had summoned strength to raise the gun and fire it with the animal-like whimper seeping against his cardrums and with Martia's wide, glazed eyes staring at him. But he had.

"And I'd do it again," he said suddenly, aloud. "The stakes are worth it."

The stakes—Lois Blye.

Lois was as lovely as—as hell itself—with her amber eyes and her sinuous body. Lois seemed to think a great deal of the heavily good-looking assis-

tant cashier of the Nortown Bank. And Lois was wealthy. Marriage to her would relieve George of the bank work he hated—of all work, for that matter, if he wished. . . .

He cursed in a shrill whisper, and kicked out at the cat again. It leaped from its mistress' dead body, and this time fled from the room as Oppen jumped after it. One bloody paw-mark was left on the bare floor. . . .

"The thing will hang me yet!" he whispered, moistening dry lips with his tongue while he wiped away the damning mark. "Wandering around the neighborhood with blood on it——"

But he shrugged as he remembered how cats clean themselves. In a little while the animal would have licked from its paw any of the blood it might have touched from the small clean hole in Martia's breast. If some remained—it would not be too serious. Cats are always digging into things, or killing mice. Blood would be explainable.

He approached the body on the blanket once more. He must get away quickly.

He was supposed to be five hundred miles from here, starting his two weeks' vacation. He mustn't risk being seen here at home.

He wrapped around the still figure the blanket which had kept all blood from the floor, compressing the thing as much as he could, moving with great care lest he get a spot of blood on clothes or shoes. Then, shivering, he picked up the bundle and walked to the side door of the living-room. He snapped out the lights so that no illuminated doorway could reveal him when he opened the door. He went out to his sedan, parked without lights in the side entrance where trees and bushes screened it utterly from the sight of his nearest neighbor—should that neigh-

bor chance to be awake at half-past three in the morning.

The sedan had never been seen by anyone in his possession before. He had bought it only a few days ago, a big, old-fashioned, fourth-hand thing, for just this occasion. He had bought it principally because of its trunk arrangement: on a sturdy rack at the rear was a stout metal oblong for luggage which could be removed from the car.

The new cars had the rear trunk incorporated into the body, which would not have done at all.

The trunk was black-enameled and very strong. George Opper had further strengthened it by putting on it a heavy, case-hardened lock to replace the sturdy but lighter one that had originally secured the lid.

The twin suitcases were out of the trunk. Its emptiness yawned at him as he lifted the strong lid. Sweating, shivering, he forced the bundle he carried into the trunk. It was a devilish job, but when he had finished there was an amazing amount of space left. The difficulty had arisen only from the unyieldiness of the bundle, not so much from its size.

He went back to the living-room, snapping the lights on as he closed the door. He thought he would go mad if he saw the cat again. But the cat was not there, and he went on with his work.

He unrolled the rugs and put them back in place, after first making sure no stains were on the bare floor. He put the various articles of furniture back where they belonged. Then, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, he dropped into the easy-chair.

He shook all over. Perspiration poured from him in a weak, icy flood. His teeth chattered. He was on the

verge of fainting away, like a nervous girl.

He swore at himself. What in thunder was the matter with him? It was all done. He had not been tripped up in any way, and he would continue to go undetected. The first, and infinitely the hardest, part of his job was done. Now all he had to do was get away before the sky began to lighten and the newspaper delivery boys and the milk-men stirred.

But for fully five minutes he cowered in the chair before he finally got up and staggered to the side door. He turned out the lights, waited an instant, and opened the door. He stood there in darkness, a dim figure.

From the darkness of the room behind him came a sound that for an instant almost stopped his heart.

A faint, quavering whimper.

God! That was the way Martia had whimpered as he stared at her with the gun in his hand and death in his eyes. She had stood in the doorway, paralyzed with horror, while from her blanched lips came the whimpering sound. . . .

But after a few seconds the terror passed. The cat! After almost driving him mad while he moved about the living-room, the fiendish thing was now prowling the dark, mewing a little for its mistress.

Now that his fear had subsided, Opper was glad the incident had occurred. He had almost slipped here. Imagine locking the house with that cat in it as a mute witness that someone had been in this place at a time when no one was supposed to have entered it! The animal was supposed to be out in the garage, where a half-opened window afforded it entrance and exit, and where food was spread to last it the few days

till Martia was due back from her mother's. Had its starved yowling attracted the attention of outsiders, the whole show might have been given away!

He called it softly, "Puss, puss, puss. Here, puss."

Green eyes glowed dimly at him from the living-room doorway, where Martia had stood. But the cat stayed stubbornly there. The thing had always disliked him.

"Puss, puss!"

The green eyes moved a little, but moved away instead of toward him. Opper felt an insane desire to shriek laughter. To stand here calling a cat after what had happened! . . .

A choking sob of fear and rage gagged him an instant later. He cursed the dim green eyes in a harsh, strangling whisper. Then he calmed. He drew his pocket-knife out and threw it. The knife landed behind the cat, in the hall. The animal whimpered again, and Opper saw a dim shadow streak out the side door.

He staggered with relief, and felt for his knife in the hall till he found it. He went to the side door, closed and locked it, and stepped to the vague bulk which was the sedan. Quickly he slammed down the lid of the trunk and locked it.

He got into the car and released the emergency brake. The drive to his house sloped down a little to the street. He coasted down the slope, silent as a shadow, and rolled nearly half a block before his momentum died. Then, with all need for silence past, he started the motor and purred softly down the street toward the state highway.

But before he left the city limits, he stopped his sedan beside a corner curbing. He took the trunk key from his key ring and dropped it down the sewer

grating there, with a rasping sigh tearing from his lips as it tinkled to oblivion.

Now he was completely, utterly safe.

2

IN THE pink light of early morning, Opper drove at a modest speed along the broad concrete fifty miles from his home. He kept the speedometer needle under the forty-five-mile mark primarily because being arrested for speeding was a thing too fraught with risk to contemplate without a shudder, but secondarily because the even, effortless pace gave him a chance to relax and rest.

Visions of Lois filled his brain now, as he rolled smoothly farther and farther from danger.

Lois in a tennis frock, throat bared, amber eyes gazing provocatively at him. Lois in that cloth-of-gold thing she'd worn last week at the supper club, with men clustering around her like flies around honey. Lois placing her hands lightly on his cheeks and saying: "You're thrilling, my darling, but you have a wife. And I won't be anything to you—but wife."

Lois! Wealthy, beautiful, ruthlessly passionate but ruthlessly determined only on marriage!

Opper's hands tightened on the steering-wheel.

If Martia only had used sense! But she hadn't. She had grown hysterical when divorce was even mentioned. So he'd had to pack her off to her mother's house, with a vague idea in mind of how to get Lois anyhow. And he'd had to call her home again with definite, crystallized plans in his mind.

And now it was done. In the metal trunk on the rack behind him the Martia who had hysterically refused to lis-

ten to reason was being borne to eternal oblivion. No one would ever hear of her again. She would just—disappear.

Opper's lips jerked nervously, with something like a grin.

A little more than four hundred miles away, near the resort where he was supposed to be at the moment, was a great swamp. The muck of this swamp, in places, was bottomless. Anything thrown into the muck sank beyond possible recovery, to lie in slimy darkness for the rest of time.

Bottomless! He should know. He had spent his boyhood near the swamp. He had seen animals flounder in there, never to be glimpsed again. He'd heaved boulders into it, and watched while they sank slowly, soundlessly.

He glanced at his watch. In ten hours of easy driving he'd be beside the swamp. After a wait, with black night shrouding him, he would unfasten the metal trunk on the rack behind, and throw it into the muck with his silenced gun also within it.

As easy as that.

Trunk and body and gun would sink to eternal darkness. And George Opper, in a year or so, with the world convinced that Martia Opper had run off secretly with another man, would marry Lois Blye.

So he drove along the deserted highway, hat off while the morning breeze bathed his forehead, resting and thinking of Lois. And his sedan looked like any other rather outmoded sedan of a biggish sort. And the big metal trunk on the rear rack gleamed dully in the rising sun, giving no hint whatever of the burden it contained. . . .

At about seven o'clock, the dash indicator showed that he needed gasoline. He started to turn into a big filling-station in a town that he was passing through, decided against it, and went

on to the open country till he hit an obscure, single-pump station in front of a crossroads store. He stopped beside the pump and a young fellow in overalls came out.

"Fill the t——" Opper began.

Then he stopped. His breath whistled between his teeth, and his face went pasty white.

TILL this moment he had forgotten something. The gasoline tank was in the rear of the car, under the trunk. The gas intake was right beside it.

"You want it filled, you say?" the boy asked, staring curiously.

"Yes," faltered Opper, swallowing. "Yes."

He had to have gas, regardless of the position of the gasoline intake. The boy went to the rear of the car. Opper got from behind the steering-wheel and walked back, too, on legs that trembled.

He watched the boy's hands. They were brushing against the trunk. The intake cap stuck a little. Finally it came loose, and the lad's hand thumped against the trunk with the suddenness of it. The trunk gave out a dead, muffled sound.

Opper's teeth almost met in his lower lip. Sweat was dewing his forehead, feeling clammy in the cool of the morning.

"How many will she take?" said the boy.

"About twelve gallons," George Opper heard himself say. His voice had an odd muffled sound, as though he stood far off and heard it through a thin partition.

The boy inserted the bronze hose-nozzle into the intake pipe and carelessly draped the hose over the trunk. And then Opper heard it.

A faint, almost inaudible whimper

from the trunk, like the distillation of all the screams of horror uttered by human lips since time began.

For one bad instant Oppen thought he was going to faint, there beside the car. He clutched wildly at the fender, leaned heavily against it.

The whimper sounded again, distinct over the swish of gas through the hose—just as Martia had whimpered as she stood in the doorway waiting for death.

"Twelve gallons," called the boy. "Hey—what's the matter?"

He jumped to Oppen's side.

"Heart——" gasped Oppen. "It acts up like this sometimes. Yes, twelve gallons is all right."

He clung, panting, to the fender.

The whimper sounded again.

"Water——" said Oppen loudly. It was almost a scream. "Get me a glass of water right away. Then I'll be all right. Hurry!"

The whimper fought faintly against his loud, shrill words. But he drowned the faint sound out—or thought he did.

"You're sure——" began the boy doubtfully.

"Yes, yes!" Oppen almost shouted, drowning out the ghastly whimper. "Hurry! Water!"

THE LAD ran toward the little store. Oppen leaped to the tank. He pulled out the gasoline hose, spilling the fluid remaining in it over the ground. He screwed on the cap with trembling fingers. And as he moved, the whimper kept sounding faintly in his ears.

That half-paralyzed small cry for mercy! Just the kind of cry that had come from Martia's white lips as she swayed in the doorway and stared into his eyes.

He dragged his billfold from his pocket and got behind the steering-

wheel. Not till then did he realize just what had happened.

The animal-like little whimper hadn't come from the lips of the dead. It was as truly animal as it sounded.

Across his reeling brain shot the picture of the sleek white cat streaking out the side door just before he had come out himself and shut and locked the trunk. The cat, still seeking to be near its mistress. . . .

He had shut the cat in the trunk with the body!

He kicked the starter. The motor caught. He raced it till the hood shook, in an effort to drown out the mewling whimper of the thing behind.

The boy came out of the store with a glass of water in his hand. He gaped at Oppen, then began to run toward the car.

"In a hurry!" Oppen yelled above the roar of the motor, and the whimper. "Here's for the gas. Keep the change."

"But if you're sick——" protested the boy.

"That's it. Got to get to town and see a doctor."

Oppen snapped the clutch out and the car leaped toward the road.

"It's *that* way to the nearest town," he heard the lad call as he turned the sedan's wheels down the road away from the village he'd just passed through.

Then he was alone on the road again, shaking like a leaf, teeth chattering, moans coming from behind his compressed lips. He was almost done in when he stopped the car at the side of the road around the first bend from the gas station. He slumped forward over the wheel with his forehead resting on his clenched fists.

The first shock of hearing that whimpering and thinking it came from Mar-

tia's lifeless lips had been almost more than he could bear. But the following realization that the sound was actual—and coming from the damned creature he had inadvertently locked in with the corpse—had been almost as unnerving.

He moved his hands so that they covered his distorted mouth, and gnawed at his knuckles. The cat—in there—with the doubled-up bundle. . . .

"Oh God!" he whispered.

What was he to do? He couldn't drive along all day, passing through towns, stopping for gas and oil, with that half-dead animal mewling and whimpering in the trunk.

The tinkle of the trunk key as it fell down the sewer grating rang mockingly in his ears.

He'd thought he had been so clever when he threw the key away. In some totally unforeseen emergency in which he might be stopped and a demand made that he open the trunk, he could say, and a search would prove, that he had lost the key. That had been his idea. He would throw the trunk, still locked and with the key unrecoverable, into the swamp muck.

But now, in the trunk, was that horrible half-dead thing, whining and whimpering, locked in and with the key thrown away. . . .

What *was* he to do?

Drawing a long, uncertain breath, Opper got out of the car and lifted the front seat to get at his tool kit. There was only one thing he could think of to do.

That was to break the trunk open, free the cat, and then flee along his way to the concealing swamp.

The bottomless muck. Thought of it was like a tonic. If only he were beside it now!

The tools in the kit were ridiculously inadequate, as are tools in most auto-

mobile kits nowadays. There was a screw-driver with a cracked wooden handle, a pair of pliers, some wrenches too light to be used as hammers, and a jack with a separate round of wood for a handle.

HE TOOK the meager array to the back of the car. He listened. The whimper was not sounding at the moment. Maybe the cat was dead.

But he couldn't entertain that comforting hope, much as he'd have liked to. Enough air filtered into the trunk to keep the animal from smothering. It could live in there for days.

Opper gripped the screw-driver till his knuckles showed white. He inserted the flat edge under the lock and pried up. The screw-driver bent a little, that was all. Under a harder tug, the handle cracked entirely apart under his straining fingers. He cursed wildly as the wooden bits fell to the ground. Lock and trunk were scarcely marred by the pressure.

He had paid especial attention to the strength of this trunk when he bought the car. The lock he'd had put on it was more impregnable than the metal panels of the trunk itself. Well, he'd gotten the thing strong enough, all right!

But he had to get in there. He had to free that cat before it betrayed him.

He set his jaws hard as he thought of the animal. By God, it would be a pleasure to kill the thing. He'd have had to kill it in any event. Couldn't have it roaming loose. He'd have to kill it and hide it. A pleasure. . . .

He attacked the heavy lock with the pliers.

The whimper was sounding again, half animal, half human in its anguish, like a faint echo of all humanity's cries of terror, so like Martia's whimper be-

fore the bullet struck her that Oppen could hardly stand it.

Frantically he gripped the lock with the pliers and wrenched back. The rusted jaws slipped off the lock and he fell to his knees. He jumped up and bent over the lock.

It was scratched a little, that was all.

Oppen hammered at the lock with the pliers and with the wooden jack-handle. It was like the effort of a child to open a bank vault. After a few minutes of it, with the sound of his blows ringing over the empty fields around him, he stopped.

The whimpering of the trapped thing in the trunk was sounding louder. The hammering had frightened it.

Oppen snatched up the metal shank of the screw-driver and reached across the trunk to its hinges. He caught up the heavy, unwieldy jack. The hinges were almost concealed by the rear trunk panel, but he located them. He placed the shank of the screw-driver against one of them and pounded with the jack.

A long, jagged dent leaped into being next to the hinge. The hinge itself bent a little, but was not noticeably injured.

He lost his head a little and hammered wildly, frenziedly at it, with the whimper maddening his ears between blows. The hinge didn't bend any more. Hysterically he raised the jack and brought it down with all his strength on top of the trunk.

The top sagged inward in a deep dent, with a slight hole appearing where the corner of the jack's base had struck.

"My God, no!" Oppen chattered aloud, staring at the tiny hole. "Not that way! Somebody could see in!"

Panic-stricken, he battered at the metal around the little hole, trying to

force the jagged edges together. Then he stopped abruptly as the sound of a slowing motor came to his ears.

He stared back along the road and saw a battered small car coasting toward him. A leathery-faced man at the wheel was staring first at him and then at the trunk. The man got out of the car and walked toward the sedan. Oppen saw a star pinned to his vest, glinting as the lapel of his coat twitched with his walking.

3

WITH DEATH in his heart, Oppen faced the man and forced a smile.

"Let my temper get the best of me," he said loudly. The whimper had stopped for the moment, but it might sound faintly again at any time. "I've lost the key to this trunk, and I was trying to break into it."

"So I see," said the man, his leathery face expressionless.

His level eyes went again from Oppen to the trunk.

"Kind of funny, you stopping 'way out here on the road and trying to hammer a trunk open," he said.

"There's nothing funny about it," Oppen retorted. He wrenched his eyes from the tiny hole in the trunk's top. If you got right over that hole and looked down hard, you might see—"I've lost the key and I want to get into it. That's all. I—I have some route maps in there, and I need them for my day's drive."

"Route maps? You can get those at any filling-station."

"I know," Oppen nodded, smiling till his jaws ached. "I thought of that after I'd started to break open the trunk. But then, as I said, I rather lost my temper and gave it a bang on the lid."

"I should think you'd stop at some

locksmith's and have *him* open the trunk, instead of breaking it all up."

Opper said nothing. The thought of someone's opening the trunk made icy moisture ooze out on the palms of his hands.

"Sure this is your trunk?" the man droned flatly.

"What business is it of——"

"I'm the sheriff around here. You're sure it's your trunk—and your car?"

"Why, of course," Opper began pompously. Then his teeth went on edge as the sound he had been dreading came faintly forth.

The ghostly whimper from the trunk.

"Certainly it's my car," he chattered quickly, his voice loud and shrill. "I have papers and identification of every kind. And there's a tag on my key-ring with my initials on it—just step up here and I'll show you."

He caught the sheriff by the shoulder and began impelling him toward the front of the car, away from the trunk.

"What the hell!" exclaimed the sheriff, breaking away. "Are you crazy? Let's see your identification——"

"Of course! Of course! Just step up in front, here, and I'll show you my card of ownership and driving-license with my signature on it——"

"All right, I'm not deaf," snapped the sheriff.

But he walked after Opper, away from the rear of the sedan, to Opper's almost fainting relief. That ghostly, horrible whimper. . . .

Away from the trunk, with the whimper sounding so low that he was not sure he was hearing it himself, Opper began to realize from a practical standpoint just what was happening here.

Give name, address, and license numbers to an officer of the law? How fine that would be if anything slipped in the

future and he were brought into court!

He began to tremble again, but managed to conceal it from the man's keen eyes. At least he hoped he did. He felt elaborately through his pockets.

"I don't seem to have my wallet," he said finally. "I must have lost——"

The man's straight, slow stare stopped him.

"You'd better have ownership card, driving-license, identification, and everything else," he said softly. "Because it certainly looks funny—to catch a man out in the country trying to hammer open his car trunk when it would be so easy to go to a locksmith and have it done right."

Opper swallowed and brought forth his wallet. It had to be done.

In numb despair, he saw the sheriff copy down his name and address, his license and motor numbers, and the address of the bank where he was assistant cashier. It was about the worst thing that could have happened to him. But he couldn't move to stop it. It would be infinitely worse to be hauled to a local station and have the trunk forced open. . . .

His heart seemed to stop at the thought. And at the same time he heard the whimper from the trunk sound a little louder.

"Well, is everything all right?" he said instantly to the sheriff, his voice rising high again. "I can telephone the bank to identify me if you like, and I am slightly known in the branch bank at Huntingdon, thirty miles from here, if you want to go there with me and——"

"Stop yelling!" snapped the sheriff. "I guess it's okay, Mr. Opper. You have a right to break open your own trunk if you want to. But I still think it's funny."

Opper jabbed the starter button and

raced his motor. Its high rattle drowned the whimper. He leaned more calmly over the side of the car.

"I'll want to get into the trunk tonight, anyhow. And I might as well have it opened right away. Can you tell me the name of a good locksmith in the next town?"

The man gave him some name or other. Opper smiled with set jaws, waved, and started down the highway. He moved at a decorous pace, staring straight ahead for a few hundred yards. But his eyes would wander up to the rear-view mirror.

The sheriff was standing in the middle of the road, staring after him. He stayed that way till Opper had rounded a curve and could see him no longer.

Not till then did Opper remember that he had been in such a hurry that he had left his tools by the side of the road. He cried out in a high, cracked voice, at that. Now he was unable even to try to break into the trunk. And in addition he must have raised the sheriff's curiosity to a fever pitch.

SCARCELY able to see where he was going, he drove along the highway, toward the distant swamp which was beckoning now like a dim glimpse of heaven itself.

At noon, Opper slowed at a town which was about halfway between his home and the swamp which was his goal. He turned in to another filling-station and stopped. He had to. The dash indicator showed that he had less than a gallon of gas left, and he dared not run out on the road.

His eyes were staring, glassy, set in deep hollows in his face. His cheeks were drawn and grayish. Dried sweat matted his hair and was glued to his hat-band.

He was not thinking of Lois Blye's

money and beauty now. He was thinking of Martia Opper, in the trunk a few feet behind him, locked in with that mewling, half-dead animal.

All morning he had driven with the whimpers sounding in his ears. That dying sound, like the ghost of a scream for mercy, like the sound that had come from his wife's pallid lips the instant before he killed her.

He knew he could not really hear it, over the motor's noise; knew that he only heard it in reality when he was driving slowly and the engine was turning over in a noiseless purr. But tell himself that as he would, the sound beat against his eardrums constantly. The cat, in with that stark, doubled-up bundle.

But now, in spite of the dangerous, telltale whimpering, he had to drive in here and stop for more gas. However, he was crafty. He had chosen this station from among half a dozen others near-by because there was a big truck panting near the pumps while the driver tested his tires. The blast of the truck motor should drown the noise from the trunk.

A neat attendant stepped to the rear and unscrewed the gas cap almost before the car had stopped moving. Opper got hastily from behind the wheel and hurried back.

"Full?" asked the man.

"Yes, fill it," said Opper, thanking heaven for the dull thunder of the truck motor.

He watched the man put the hose nozzle in the intake. This time the hose was not draped over the trunk. Opper had turned as he drove in so that the other side of the car faced the pumps. The attendant started the gas to swishing down the hose. He stared at the dents and scratches on the trunk.

"Somebody try to break into your

trunk?" he called over the din of the truck motor.

Opper only nodded, exhaustedly. He could scarcely think, scarcely hear.

"Got to watch out for that kind of thing," the man offered amiably. "Minute you park your car somewhere some thief tries to break in."

Opper shuddered perceptibly. He thought of a thief breaking in, furtively sliding his hand along the trunk while he stared around to see that he was not watched. . . .

The attendant was staring at him. Opper pulled himself together.

"That fills it," he said. "Quart of oil. And I want some tire-tape too, if you carry it."

"Sure. How much do you want?"

"A lot. Two or three large-sized rolls—"

Suddenly Opper's voice was ringing in comparative silence. The truck motor had been abruptly shut off. Opper stared wildly at the truck. And at the same time, in the quiet, he heard the faint whimper sound from the depths of the trunk.

At once he raised his own voice almost to a shriek.

"I'm in a hurry—I'll take the hose out and screw on the cap—you get the tire-tape, three rolls—forget about the oil, I don't think I need it—hurry up—hurry—"

The bewildered attendant let himself be pushed away from the tank. Sweating and shivering, Opper drew out the hose, and screwed the cap back on. The mewling sounded constantly from the trunk. On and on. The driver of the truck near-by was staring first at the trunk and then at him.

The attendant came out of the building with three big rolls of black pitch tape in his hands. Opper fairly jumped to the steering-wheel, started the motor

and raced it. The whimpering sound was overwhelmed.

"Here's the tape," said the attendant. "What you want with so much?"

"How much is it?" babbled Opper, unhearing. "Never mind. Here's five—that'll cover it. Keep the rest."

He drove rapidly out of the station. Behind him the driver of the truck looked at the station attendant.

"The guy's crazy," said the driver.

"Drunk, maybe," the attendant supplied. "Funny way he had of looking at that trunk. Oh, well!" He shrugged and went on about his work.

TEN MILES away, Opper stopped once more at the side of the road. He got out, with the rolls of tire-tape in his shaking hands.

He had had an idea just before noon that he cursed himself for not having had before.

The cat, locked in the trunk, could live indefinitely on the air that trickled in the cracks. But if the trunk were patched at every slight crevice, the beast would stop that hideous mewling in short order. Then, without that sound coming forth to betray him, he could go anywhere he liked for as long as he pleased.

With unsteady fingers he peeled the foil off the first roll of tape. He pressed strip after strip over the jagged small hole made by the jack in the trunk lid. Then he went over the rest of the trunk.

The tape did not adhere very well to the metal at first. Shivering and cursing, mumbling incoherently, with his eyes glaring out of the hollows in his face like the eyes of a man staring up from the bottom of a well, he pressed the tape so that it would stick.

He sealed up every crack of the

trunk, using all three rolls of the tape. He even got down on the road, heedless of clothes and scratches, and sealed each little crease in the bottom of the trunk that might let in air.

The whimpering went on and on while he worked. And words came, cracked and crazy, from his twisted mouth.

"Damn you! There. And there. Now whine! Go on, it won't be for much longer. Whine, damn you—damn you."

The whimpering got fainter and fainter. But that was because the tape was sealing in sound as well as air, not because the cat was already suffocating. However, the thing couldn't live much longer now.

"Should have thought of it first thing," Opper's cracked voice sounded. "Then—wouldn't have had to worry so—now it'll go down into the swamp muck with Martia—down and down—forever."

Wearily, he climbed back into the car.

4

"ONE O'CLOCK. Be at the swamp before many more hours. The swamp."

He drove along the highway, a big man with a drawn, white face in which eyes like dull glass were sunk in deep hollows. He was no more like the George Opper who had met his wife with a silenced gun nine hours before than—than Martia Opper was like Lois Blye.

"Lois," mumbled Opper. "Lois!"

He realized suddenly that the car was weaving back and forth across the road under his unsteady hands.

"Can't do that. Suspicious. Mustn't act suspicious."

He stopped mumbling, and listened

intently, driving slowly so that the motor noise was at a minimum. Had that been a whimper he'd heard? A faint whimper sounding from the trunk?

It was. It came to him faintly but distinctly, like the ghost of a scream for mercy.

"Oh, God!"

That thing, clawing back and forth in there—

Why hadn't he had sense enough to shut the trunk on its grim contents before going back to drive the cat from the house? He should have realized it might jump to the trunk; it had certainly stuck by its dead mistress closely enough before that. Why hadn't he used his head? . . .

But the whimpering died down as miles and minutes slowly passed. Died down—and at last sounded no more. Opper laughed maniacally as he stopped the car, got up, put his ear to the trunk and heard nothing. It was dead at last. Dead. . . .

Almost like a dead thing himself, he got once more behind the wheel. The swamp. He only lived to reach that, now. To reach it—if he were not stopped at last with its green, tropical foliage almost in sight. . . .

It was at three o'clock that he began to hear the roar of a motor behind him, one that spelled a clear message—the fast-turning roar of a motorcycle engine. He glared into the rear-vision mirror.

Down the road behind him came a State trooper. Opper could not help but see that his eyes were glued on the back of the sedan. On the trunk.

And suddenly, like a rift of clear blue sky in black and pressing cloud, Opper caught in his chaotic mind a sharp comprehension of all the suspicious things he had done since discovering that he

had locked that hellish beast in with the grisly bundle.

The first gas station—yelling to cover the sound of mewling from the trunk.

Trying to break open the trunk and being caught at it by the sheriff—and fleeing so hastily that he'd forgotten his tools.

The crazily abrupt leave-taking from the second filling-station, after shouting to drown the whimpering of the trapped cat. Suspicious, insane actions. . . .

The sheriff must have phoned ahead on the road to have him stopped. Or else the last filling-station attendant had done it. . . .

To have him stopped . . . to have the trunk forced open. . . .

Opper shouted aloud and reeled in his seat as he shoved the accelerator down. The car leaped as his foot went to the floorboard. The speedometer needle climbed up from the forty-mile mark.

Caught—with that thing in the trunk behind him! Caught!

"But I won't be," he yelled, staring at the suddenly startled face of the driver of a car flashing past him from the opposite direction. "I won't be!"

The speedometer needle shook at seventy miles an hour, pressed on past to seventy-six. The car screamed around a long bend in the road, swayed sickeningly as it righted itself.

But behind, the motorcycle engine, under full throttle now, beat ever louder in his ears.

"I won't be caught!"

Ahead was another bend, not so gradual as the one he had just passed. He shot toward it, forcing the big old sedan at its fullest speed, glaring straight ahead, hands clamped to the bucking wheel.

The motorcycle drew alongside. The uniformed figure on it, regardless of speed and the curve ahead, recklessly drew over within a foot of the running-board.

"Stop that car!"

Opper's reply was to try senselessly to push the accelerator harder against the floor. The trooper drew still closer, leveled his gun at Opper's body.

"Stop!"

A last remnant of sanity drifted through Opper's brain.

After all, nobody knew what was in the trunk. The trooper couldn't open it without a key, unless he broke it open. And he'd have to have a warrant to do that. Meanwhile, the cat was dead, smothered long ago, so that its ghostly mewling could not be heard. Even now he might brazen the thing out, pay a fine and go on to the swamp.

WITH his front wheels almost on the curve, Opper took his foot off the accelerator. There was a shrieking of tires as the motor braked the wheels and the car took the turn. The trooper hung grimly to the sedan's flank.

In a vast silence, shaking and sick, Opper stopped the car. The trooper, gun still in hand, stood beside him after racking his motorcycle.

"Get out," he said, waving the gun.

Opper got slowly from the car and stood before the man. He felt deft fingers search him for a weapon, and thanked God he had put the silenced gun in the trunk.

"You heard me yell to stop, and you saw me beside you. Why didn't you stop?"

In the silence succeeding the rush of air and howl of racing motors, Opper heard his voice, muffled, as though it came to his ears through a thin partition.

"I'm in a terrible hurry. Wife sick. I knew you'd haul me in for speeding, delay me, if you caught me. So I took a chance on getting away. I'm due at the hospital, where my wife is, right now."

The man smiled bleakly.

"Wife sick. Afraid you'd get hauled in for speeding. So you try to crawl away from a machine that will do a hundred miles an hour. Sure."

He looked into the sedan warily, saw that it was empty. He walked to the rear of the car and stared speculatively at the metal trunk.

The trunk presented a strange appearance — dented, battered, with thickly pressed strips of tape crossing and crisscrossing the top and sealing the cracks.

The man just looked at it in the enormous silence—looked till Opper felt the taste of blood in his mouth with the hammering of his heart.

"Only afraid of being pinched for speeding," drawled the trooper. "Sure. What's in that trunk?"

"Nothing," said Opper, the roof of his mouth so dry that he hardly knew how he managed to get the words out. "Not a thing."

"Nothing at all, eh?"

"Well, there are two empty suitcases in there. You know how these trunks are—two special cases fit in them—"

"Why is it all stuck up with tape?"

Opper leaned against the fender. He couldn't stand unbraced.

"It was leaking when it rained, so I thought—"

His voice died away. By an effort that drained all the remnants of strength he had left, he kept from screaming.

The whimper had sounded again.

Like a man hypnotized, he stared at the trunk. Tape sealed every slightest

crack in it. Not one airhole, it would seem, remained for air to filter in to the cat.

But somehow it had stayed alive.

The State trooper was staring intently at the trunk. He turned slowly to Opper.

"I think we'd better open that and have a look," he said.

Opper's head shook back and forth like the head of a mechanical doll.

"No! There's nothing in it. I . . . no!"

"Come on. Where's the key?"

"I haven't the key. You can search me if you like."

"You haven't a key for the trunk. There's nothing in it. Yet you have it all sealed up as if it was full of rubies. Come on, come on, hand over the key."

"I swear——" Opper began. He stopped. The mewling whimper was a little louder.

"You have no right to stop me like this. I'm a respectable citizen and I can prove it. Take me in for speeding if you want to, but that's all you have a right to do——"

That hideous whimpering! It seemed to be rising as his voice rose, so that no matter how loudly he talked the whimper sounded through. How had that thing stayed alive? Some obscure slit for ventilation left unnoticed by him in the bottom of the trunk?

He talked on, ever more loudly, screaming against the rising sound of the whimpering.

"——absolutely nothing in the trunk—I'd prove it to you, only I haven't the key—search me if you want to—was going to a locksmith in the next town——"

His voice died, like a phonograph running down, at the look in the trooper's eyes. And in the silence the whimpering sounded so plainly from the

depths of the trunk that Opper knew that at last it must have been heard by another's ears.

"Well, why don't you go on?" said the man. "Go on yelling, and see how much good it does you."

Opper stood there, mouth open slackly, eyes glazing at the sound of the whimper from the trunk. He spoke without knowing he had spoken. It was a weary, numb surrender.

"All right," he said. "All right."

He backed away from the trunk, hands to his lips, staring at it with eyes that could not have been more horrible had they seen Martia Opper's bent form rising from it.

The last of his will snapped.

He began to scream and laugh, staring with a blank face first at the trunk and then at the State trooper. Words dripped from his writhing lips. And after the first few of them, the trooper, his own face whitening a little, manacled Opper's hands and led him like a blind man to his own car, which he drove, leaving his motorcycle beside the road, to the nearest State patrol station. . . .

THE sergeant at the station carefully folded a closely written two-page document and put it in his safe. It was the full confession of George Opper, signed by him and duly witnessed.

The motorcycle policeman strode in from the station yard. He had a sledgehammer and a cold chisel in his hands.

The edge of the chisel was a little reddened.

"I sure stepped into something," he grunted, "when I stopped that guy for speeding. I told you I was just cruising along behind this sedan when for no reason that I could see it started going like a bat out of hell. Naturally I took out after it and stopped it. Then I got curious about the trunk—all dented in and taped up that way. I fried him a little and he broke and squealed."

"And what squealing!" said the sergeant. "The dirty louse! And if he'd ever reached the swamp he talks about, he might have gotten away with it."

The trooper drew out a cigarette and reached, with fingers that were not quite steady, for a match.

"Damn funny freak of luck that tripped him up," the sergeant went on. "If he hadn't locked that cat in the trunk in the dark——"

The trooper looked up from his match and cigarette.

"Cat?" he said.

"Yeah," said the sergeant. "It's all in the confession he signed while you were out breaking into the trunk. How he locked his wife's cat in the trunk with—with her—and how the cat's whining and whimpering gave him away."

The trooper finished lighting his cigarette.

"He's even crazier than I thought," he said. "There wasn't any cat in the trunk."

