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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Thing on the Floor

By THORP McCLUSKY

A strange story of an unscrupulous hypnotist and the frightful thing that he called Stepan, who was immune to destruction while his master lived

1. Charlatan or Miracle-Man?

"DARLING," Mary Roberts told her fiancé, "I'm sorry, but I won't be able to go to the Lily Pons recital Thursday night. Helen Stacey-Forbes insists that I go with her to Dmitri's."

Across the spotless linen and gleaming silver that graced their luncheon table Charles Ethredge's gray eyes questioned.

"It's a subscription concert, Mary. I've had the tickets for months."

Her slender right hand reached across the table to him. "I'm terribly sorry, Charles. But Helen has been after me for weeks to go, and Dmitri's evenings are always Thursdays——"

Ethredge grimaced. "I think it's rather silly of you two—this thrill visit to an obvious charlatan."

Mary shook her head. "Helen Stacey-Forbes doesn't think Dmitri a charlatan. She swears by the man—claims he's done wonders for Ronny."

Ethredge laughed. "Dmitri not a charlatan? With his half-baked parlor magic and that moving-picture brand of mysticism he exudes? I've heard all about him. Doc Hanlon says that if he isn't exposed pretty soon there'll be a major rabies epidemic among our local psychiatry."

For a moment Mary Roberts did not reply, but sat quietly, her delicately oval face profiled, her wide-set, limpid eyes thoughtful as she gazed musingly through

the iron-grilled window at the row of dwarf evergreens in their stone window-box beneath the sill. Discreetly, from its palm-hidden sound shell on the mezzanine, the hotel's string quintet began to play a Strauss waltz. Abruptly Mary turned back to her fiancé, a strange little smile trembling on her lips.

"Oh, Charles, I wish that I could be so sure. Yes, you're probably right about Dmitri, darling. He's certainly theatrical enough—even Helen admits that. But you wouldn't want me to disappoint her, would you? And she *does* say he's saved Ronny's life."

"Lord," Ethredge grumbled, "I wish to heaven Dmitri didn't have that Vienna degree; we'd stop him so fast his teeth'd rattle. And by the way, where did Helen Stacey-Forbes get the crazy notion that he's helped Ronny? Good grief, that fellow's healthier than I am."

"Ronny's really been ill, Charles. It's not generally known, but he's a hemophiliac; he's had several severe hemorrhages within the past year. Dmitri's the only man who's been able to do anything for him."

Ethredge looked startled. "Why, I'd always thought hemophilia was hereditary; I've never heard of it in Ronny's family before. Two years ago, at the Wilmot's hunt, he was thrown, and pretty badly bruised and cut, but he was up and limping around the same evening. He even danced."

Mary shook her head. "I don't know; I'm no medical authority, Charles, but it's hemophilia, all right. It's been diagnosed as such several times within the past year. Why——"

But Charles Ethredge was not really listening. He was recalling some of the vague, ugly stories he had heard, in recent months, of Dmitri Vassilievitch Tulin—stories which could not *all* be put down to professional jealousy. And, curiously, he was thinking of the twenty-years-dead Tsarevitch, and of a mad monk named Gregori Rasputin. . . .

2. *The Spider and the Flies*

"——and the man is a perfect ghoul about money. You know most of the people here, Mary; you wouldn't say that any were really poor, would you?"

Mary Roberts looked about this room in which she sat. It was a long room, extending the full length of the second floor of a brownstone, solidly aristocratic house; obviously two interior walls had been demolished to provide the single large chamber. The wall to Mary's left, abutting the adjoining house, was blank; red velvet drapes covered the windows



"Mary knew that it was Dmitri's voice, yet it sounded millions of miles away."

at the ends of the room. Three doors, irregularly spaced along the right-hand wall, led into the second-floor corridor. A ponderous oaken table and chair stood close to the drapes at one end of the room; about sixty folding-chairs were arranged in orderly rows facing these grimly utilitarian furnishings. Perhaps thirty persons, the great majority of whom were women, sat in small, self-conscious groups about the room, talking among themselves in low tones. Occasionally someone laughed—nervous laughter that was quickly suppressed.

Dmitri's evenings, Mary Roberts suspected, were not particularly pleasant affairs. . . .

Mary knew these people. One or two were really ill, several were suffering from neuroses, a few were crackpot fad-dists, but the majority were merely out for a thrill. And all were wealthy.

The man Dmitri, Mary decided as she looked about, must be, even if a charlatan, certainly a personality. . . .

She turned, with a wry smile, to her friend.

"This gathering surely makes me feel like a poor little church-mouse," she admitted ruefully. "Father was never a financial giant, you know, Helen."

Helen Stacey-Forbes smiled reassuringly.

"Money can't buy character and breeding, my dear. I see old Mortimer Dunlop up there in the second row; you are welcome in homes he's never seen and never will see—except from the street. Damned old bucket-shop pirate! Have you heard the rumor that he's full of carcinoma? They're giving him from six to nine months to live. That must be why he's here; someone's told him about Dmitri——"

Mary gasped. "And people believe that Dmitri can cure carcinoma? Why, it's—Charles said only the other day that Dmitri was merely a half-cracked psychia-

trist who's had rather spectacular luck with a few rich patients' imaginary ailments. But carcinoma——!"

Gravely Helen Stacey-Forbes shook her head. "Dmitri's far greater than his enemies will admit. They call him a super-psychologist, a faith-healer, and they laugh at him and threaten him, but the fact remains that his methods succeed. He achieves cures, impossible cures, miraculous cures. I know, because he's the only man who can stop Ronny's hemorrhages. At five thousand dollars a treatment."

"Five thousand dollars!"

Helen laughed, a dry, bitter little laugh. "Believe me, Dmitri is a monster, not a man. Mortimer Dunlop will have to pay dearly for his carcinoma cure!"

The words sent an odd little shudder racing along Mary's spine. For, obviously, Helen Stacey-Forbes believed, believed implicitly, that Dmitri could cure—cancer!

Suddenly, then, the room was silent. The door at the upper end of the chamber had opened, a man had entered.

IN THE abrupt stillness the man, small, self-effacing, bearing in his hands a large lacquered tray, walked to the oaken table and arranged upon it several articles—a half-dollar, a pair of pliers, a penny box of matches, a small-caliber automatic pistol, a ten-ounce drinking-glass, a tinkling pitcher of ice-water, and a battered gasoline blow-torch. A curious, incomprehensible array. . . .

The little man left the room. The babble of nervous voices began again, as suddenly stopped when the door reopened and a monstrosity entered.

The man was huge. At least six feet three inches tall, he was as tremendous horizontally as vertically. A mountain of flesh swathed in a silken lounging-robe, he slowly walked to the table, and settled, grunting, into the big oaken chair. In-

stantly immobile, he surveyed the room through small, coal-black eyes set close together in a pasty-white face. Obscene of body and countenance, his forehead was nevertheless magnificent, but his scalp, even to the sides of his head, was utterly bald. Beneath the table his pillar-like ankles showed whitely above Gargantuan house-slippers.

This—*this*, Mary Roberts knew, was Dmitri. . . .

Leisurely the monster poured a glass of water and took a tentative sip, the glass looking no larger than a jigger in his tremendous, flabby hand. An expression that might have been a smile—or a leer—rippled momentarily across his fat-engulfed features, revealed an instant's glimpse of startlingly white teeth. He began to speak—

"I see a number of new faces before me today," he began in a voice incongruously, almost shockingly vibrant and beautiful; Enrico Caruso's speaking voice, Mary thought suddenly, must have sounded like that—"and for the benefit of those who are not already familiar with my theories I will repeat, briefly, my conception of the function of the Will in the treatment of disease."

He paused, sipped meagerly from his glass of ice-water. Then he went on, his speech only faintly stilted, only faintly revealing him a man to whom English was an acquired language:

"Speaking in the philosophical—not the chemical—sense, it is my belief that there is but one fundamental element—abstract mind. Of course, that which we term matter is, in the last analysis, energy; there is no such thing as matter except as a manifestation of energy. Yet it is quite obvious, or it should be obvious, at any rate, that mind—that attribute which we wrongfully confuse with consciousness—is totally independent of matter. A man dies, but his atomic weight remains

unchanged; the strange force which activated him has found its material shell no longer tenable, and has taken its departure.

"We are all well acquainted with the axiomatic law of physics which deals with the conservation of energy. But here we reach a paradox—either energy must have been non-existent at one time, or it must be eternal—contradictory and utterly irreconcilable concepts. The logical and the only conclusion is plain: *energy and matter do not and have never existed*. They are but temporary conceptions of an infinite, timeless Mind, a Mind of which we are part—"

There was a sudden snort from the second row. "Rubbish! What's all this jabber got to do with me? I came here to be cured, not to be preached at!"

The colossus slowly poured a glass of ice-water.

"Sir, you must understand—if you possess sufficient intelligence—that I can do nothing for you without your help." The bulbous lips writhed in a half-smile. "You have been rude, my friend—should I decide to treat your carcinoma I will leave you the poorer man by half your fortune before you are cured. That prospect, at least, you can understand."

Mortimer Dunlop, his seamed face livid with rage, got hastily to his feet and strode to the center door. He jerked the door open, slammed it behind him as he stormed from the room.

Unperturbed, Dmitri continued, "Mind came before matter; mind is the great motivator. Mind can conceive matter; matter cannot conceive anything, even itself.

"It is evident to any person who carefully considers these conclusions that in each one of us exists a spark, part and parcel of that great intangible Will which created all things. But this reasoning invariably leads to a conclusion so tremen-

dous that the human consciousness, except in rare instances, rejects it.

"The conclusion is plain. The unfettered Will, by and of itself, can work miracles, move mountains, create and destroy!

"Listen carefully, for Coué and Pavlov and your own J. B. Watson were closer to the truth than they knew. . . .

"I pick up this coin, and I place it upon my wrist, so. Now I suggest to myself that it is very hot. But my conscious knows that it is not hot, and so I merely appear, to myself and to you all, a trifle foolish.

"Nevertheless, any hypnotist can suggest to a pre-hypnotized subject that the coin is indeed hot, and the subject's flesh will blister if touched with this same cold coin! . . .

"Now I will call my servant——"

PLACING his two enormous, shapeless hands on the table, Dmitri heaved himself to his feet, and a tremendous belch issued from his barrel-like chest. That summons, though the words were lost in a gulf of sound, was unmistakable, and presently the door opened and the little man, prim and neat and wholly a colorless personality, entered.

"Yes, Master."

Dmitri stood beside the table, his right hand resting heavily on the polished oak. "Sit down, little Stepan."

The small man, the ghost of a pleased smile on his peasant face, sat down primly in the oaken chair and looked about the room with child-like pleasure. Obviously he was enjoying to the uttermost his small moment.

"You would prefer the sleep, little one? It is not necessary; we have been through this experiment many times together, you and I."

"I would prefer the sleep, Master," the little man said, with a slight shudder.

"Despite myself, my eyes flinch from the flame——"

"Very well." Dmitri's voice was casual and low. "Relax, little one, and sleep. Sleep soundly——"

He turned from his servant and picked up the fifty-cent piece. Turning it over and over in the fingers of his left hand he began to speak, slowly.

"I have told this subject's subconscious that its body is invulnerable to physical injury. Watch!"

The little man was sitting erect in the massive chair. His eyes were closed, his face immobile. Dmitri stooped, lifted an arm, let it fall.

"You are not yet sleeping soundly, Stepan. Relax and sleep——sleep——"

Slowly the muscles in the little man's face loosened, slowly his mouth drooped, half open. Small bubbles of mucus appeared at the corners of his lips.

Dmitri seemed satisfied. Quietly, soothingly, he spoke.

"Can you hear me?"

The man's lips moved. "I can hear you."

"Who am I?"

The answer came slowly, without inflection. "You are the Voice that Speaks from Beyond the Darkness."

Dmitri loomed above the chair. "You remember the truths that I have taught you?"

"Master, I remember."

"You believe?"

"Master, I believe. You have told me that you are infallible."

Dmitri straightened triumphantly and surveyed his silent audience. Suddenly, then, a roaring streamer of bluish flame lanced across the room. Dmitri had set the gasoline torch alight.

A woman was babbling hysterically. But above the steady moan of the flame Dmitri said loudly, "There is no cause for alarm. Now, observe closely. I am

going to go far beyond the ordinary hypnotist's procedure——"

He carefully picked up, with the pliers, the fifty-cent piece. For a long moment he let the moaning flame play on the coin, until both coin and plier-tips glowed angrily.

Calmly, without warning, he dropped the burning coin on his servant's naked wrist!

A woman screamed. But, then, gasps of relief eddied from the tense audience. For, although the glowing whiteness of the coin had scarcely begun to fade into cherry-red, the man Stepan had shown no sign that he felt pain! There was no stench of burning flesh in the room. Even the fine hairs on the back of the servant's wrist, hairs that touched and curled delicately above the burning coin, showed not the slightest sign of singeing!

Dmitri's face was an obese smirk.

"In order that you may be convinced that this is neither illusion nor trickery," he grunted, "watch!" Carefully he tapped the coin with the pliers, knocking it from the man's wrist to the floor.

Around the coin's glowing rim smoke began to rise. . . .

Still smirking, Dmitri poured a half-glass of ice-water on the red-hot coin, and the water hissed and fumed as it struck the incandescent metal. There was a little puff of thick smoke from the burning wood, and now the coin was cold—cold and black and seared.

No scar marked the servant's white wrist!

Dmitri rubbed his great, shapeless hands together. And, shuddering, Mary Roberts watched him, for she knew instinctively that this was, indeed, no trickery. . . .

Abruptly Dmitri lifted the roaring torch, thrust its fierce blast full in his

servant's face, held it there for a moment that seemed an eternity. Then he turned a valve, and the hot flame died.

Though the man Stepan's face was streaked with carbon soot, the flesh was smooth and unharmed as though the blue flame had never been!

Dmitri looked at his guests, and chuckled!

"One more test," he boomed, then, "and we will turn to more pleasant things. Believe me when I tell you that these horrors are necessary if you would have faith in me." He picked up the small automatic pistol. "Will someone examine this weapon, assure you all that it is fully loaded?"

No one offered to touch the gun. Dmitri shrugged. "Do not doubt me; the weapon is loaded, and with lethal ammunition." He wheeled, and for an instant the gun hammered rapidly, and on the breast of his servant's shirt, over the heart, there appeared suddenly a little cluster of black-edged holes, beneath which the white flesh gleamed unmarked. . . .

Dmitri put down the gun and rubbed his hands together affably.

"Should anyone care to examine the back of that chair, he will find all the bullets I have just fired, together with a great many others fired in previous experiments." He stooped over his still, pallid-faced servant. "You may awaken now, little one." Then, to the horror-ridden group before him, "There will be refreshments and music immediately, downstairs. I will mingle among you, and you may ask me any questions you wish."

Stepan, the slight, wholly undistinguished-appearing servant, had risen from the chair and was holding wide the door. Slowly, regally, his master walked from the room. . . .

3. *The Hypnotic Lamp*

"YOU really must meet him, Mary. He's—he's such an overwhelming personality, and it would be rude, really, to avoid him now. See, he's looking toward us——"

Casually Mary Roberts turned her head. Across the long expanse of this almost flamboyantly oriental downstairs room in which Dmitri's guests had assembled she saw the man. He was seated in a massive, ivory-armed, dragon-footed chair, and he was talking to a group of three or four women. But he was looking beyond them, speculatively, at Mary.

"Helen, I'm afraid of him. He's—he's evil—blasphemous!"

Helen Stacey-Forbes only laughed. "Blasphemous?" she echoed. "Nonsense! He's only years ahead of his time. Never fear—his interest in you will vanish as soon as he learns that you can't pay his outrageous fees." She was already—Mary's arm linked in her own—threading her way through the chatting throng. . . .

The colossus, as they approached, abruptly cut short his conversation with the group of admiring ladies and turned his flabby bulk toward them.

"They are thrill-seekers, Miss Stacey-Forbes," he exclaimed petulantly. "Still—I have made appointments with two of them. . . . But how is your brother, Ronald? And who is your friend?"

"Dmitri—Mary Roberts," Helen Stacey-Forbes said formally. "Miss Roberts is the daughter of the Honorable James Roberts. . . . Ronald is well; he is very careful not to endanger himself."

Dmitri chuckled. "Ronald is being very careful, eh? Well, well—but accidents sometimes happen—and then there is only Dimitri." He stared fixedly at Mary. "You are very beautiful, my child; our Police Commissioner Ethredge is a fortunate man—indeed he is."

Mary Roberts flushed. "I was impressed by your — demonstration," she said hastily. "It was—spectacular."

He lifted a monstrous, shapeless paw. "Histrionics," he said flatly. "My real work does not deal with such fireworks. Would you be convinced? Are you in every respect sound and well?"

Mary tried to repress the shudder of aversion that crept through her as she looked at the man.

"I am in perfect health," she said firmly.

Dmitri looked down at his great soft hands. Then he spoke, as it were casually, to Helen Stacey-Forbes.

"I have wanted—since your brother came to me a year ago—to examine you, as well. You come from an old family; should you marry it is possible that you would transmit to your children the hemophilia from which he suffers. Today is a propitious day; your friend can accompany us while I interrogate you; then, should she need me at some future time she would not fear me — as she does now."

Helen Stacey-Forbes' face was grave. "I had thought—of coming to you," she admitted. "Perhaps—if Miss Roberts is willing——?"

Mary objected only faintly. She was wondering if perhaps Helen had not really brought her here because she feared to be alone with this man. . . .

"The—guests?"

Dmitri glanced about the room, heaved himself ponderously to his feet.

"The guests!" he exclaimed. "We will be but a few minutes. Those in need of me will wait; the others are better gone. Come."

THE chamber into which Dmitri ushered the two young women was a small room, almost monastically furnished. There was a large table and

Dmitri's usual massive chair; several other, smaller chairs were scattered haphazardly about. A faded strip of carpeting ran diagonally from the door toward the table. There were no pictures, no bookcases or books, no filing-cabinet or desk. A telephone rested at one end of the table, close beside an ambiguity that—save for its grotesquely large bulb, full of an uncommon multiplicity of filaments and several oddly shaped and curiously perforated metal vanes—looked like an unshaded desk-lamp.

Dmitri lowered himself into his tremendous chair. "Sit down," he directed abruptly. "Compose yourselves. You, Miss Roberts, may watch this experiment; it is in no way new, yet it is always fascinating. Notice this lamp; it is so designed that it emits whorls of multicolored light, which move according to a recurrent pattern, somewhat in the manner of a pin-wheel."

His hands, hidden beneath the table, touched a concealed switch, and the odd-looking lamp began to glow in all its many filaments, while simultaneously the complexity of tiny vanes began to revolve, slowly at first and then faster and faster, until they had attained a maximum velocity beyond which there was no further acceleration. And as the filaments within the lamp gradually warmed, Mary realized that they gave off light of many colors, as varied and as beautiful as the spectrum seen in rainbows, colors which moved and changed in a weirdly hypnotic sequence of patterns. . . .

"Observe the lamp, Miss Stacey-Forbes," Dmitri said, in a calm, conversational tone. "Do not trouble to think—merely observe the lamp—see how the colors melt and run together and repeat themselves again—"

Abruptly the ceiling light was extinguished. And Mary Roberts gasped at the unearthly beauty of the whirling

lights; even beneath the cold glow of the Mazda lamp they had been a strange symphony, but now, glowing and whirling like a mighty nebula of spinning suns—! Her eyes were riveted upon them; they seemed to draw her toward them, to suck her into themselves. . . .

"Observe the lights, Miss Stacey-Forbes—" Mary knew that it was Dmitri's voice, yet it sounded billions of miles away. And, curiously, she believed for a fleeting instant that there was a new note in that slumbrous whisper—a hint of exultation. But the thought vanished in its second of birth, lost amid the maze of spinning lights—the lights that were too, too beautiful. . . .

4. *The Stolen Jewels*

MRS. GREGORY LUCE stood surveying herself with pardonable satisfaction in the almost-complete circle of full-length, chromium-framed mirrors that glittered their utilitarian splendor in a corner of her bedroom. It was well, she was reflecting, that the electric-blue gown fitted her with wrinkleless perfection, that her hair was a miracle even François had seldom achieved; today was her tenth wedding anniversary, and tonight Gregory was taking her to hear *Tristan and Isolde*.

With sophisticated grace she returned to her dressing-table and seated herself. In her walk, languid and self-appreciative though it had been, there was nevertheless a vague essence reminiscent of Mary Roberts; Priscilla Luce might almost have been a prophetic vision of Mary as she would some day be—their mothers were sisters. Only Priscilla was a little more the cautious type than was Mary; Priscilla had selected her husband with an eye to the future; she did not wholly approve of Charles Ethredge. Otherwise the two young women were very much alike. . . .

Slowly, then, Priscilla Luce smiled. Surprizingly, her marriage had turned out an emotional as well as a financial success; she was truly grateful to and in love with Gregory, now. There had been an unsuspected tinge of romanticism in him, after all; on their wedding day he had given her his grandmother's emerald brooch, set with its great, flawless, square-cut stone—and the ruby and emerald tiara. And today he had brought her a Cartier bracelet, also of cool green emeralds. . . .

Languidly she arose and walked to the south wall. Here, between the two windows, hung a single, exquisite little etching. Priscilla Luce reached up, swung the etching back on cleverly concealed hinges, twirled the combination of the blued-steel wall-safe. . . .

In the moment that she reached inside the tiny safe Priscilla Luce knew that someone other than herself had handled the little leather-bound jewel-cases within.

For a moment she stood stock-still. Then, carefully, she began to remove the jewel-cases, opening and examining each one.

When she had finished she walked to the dressing-table and sat down. She knew that she would not tell Gregory tonight; she would wear the Cartier bracelet, and he would not know; his evening would not be spoiled. But she would have to tell him, tomorrow, and they would have to decide what to do. . . .

The emerald brooch and the priceless old tiara were gone!

And very clearly Priscilla Luce realized that the thief was someone they knew—someone they trusted. . . .

She stared at herself in the mirror. She was beginning to feel frightened, beginning to feel a sick, anticipatory dread. . . .

5. *Ethredge Hears Startling News*

WHEN Police Commissioner Charles B. Ethredge received Priscilla Luce's enigmatic and disturbingly urgent telephone call he lost no time in getting to the Vermont marble and Bethlehem steel palace the Luce millions had built, ten years before, for Gregory Luce's young bride. "It concerns Mary, terribly," his fiancée's cousin had said, her voice taut and strange, "but do not, under any circumstances, tell her that I have called you."

Priscilla Luce met him in the library. She greeted him with grave gratitude; as soon as they were seated she began almost brusquely to speak.

"I called you, Charles, because you are both influential and discreet, and because you are vitally concerned in what I have to say. Charles, do you know anything of a psychiatrist who came to town about fourteen months ago—a man who calls himself Dmitri?"

Ethredge nodded.

"Why, yes, I have heard of him; Mary attended one of his Thursday evenings a week or two ago with Helen Stacey-Forbes. Helen is enthusiastic about what he seems to have done for Ronald."

Priscilla Luce smiled thinly. "It seems strange that Ronald was never ill until after he met this Dmitri. Do you know anything more about the man?"

"Yes," Ethredge grunted, "I do. Dmitri is a sensationalist. The more conservative psychiatrists have tried to convict him of extortion, of making Messianic and unfulfillable promises, of other unethical and even criminal practises. As he is still practising, their attempts, needless to say, have all failed."

Priscilla Luce nodded.

"What did Mary say about him?"

Ethredge grinned.

"Very little. Said that she was amused

—that perhaps, beneath all his stage trappings, the man might even be competent. That's all."

Nervously Priscilla Luce leaned forward.

"Charles, obviously you don't know that Mary has been after me these past two weeks to go to Dmitri's with her. She hasn't asked me merely a few times; she's asked me incessantly. I've always refused—Gregory, as you know, would disapprove—and since last Friday she hasn't asked me once. But last Thursday evening she went again to Dmitri's. Did you know?"

Ethredge's mouth was grim. "I didn't, no."

Priscilla Luce leaned forward and put her hands pleadingly on Charles Ethredge's lean strong wrists.

"This is going to be hard, terribly hard, to tell you. And please, Charles, please understand that I have not come to you because you are Mary's fiancé; I am not as despicable as that. I have come to you because you are the Commissioner of Police, because, if anyone can, you can help her——"

"In God's name," Ethredge whispered, "what is wrong? Tell me——"

The woman's face was drawn with misery.

"Between Thursday last and last night Grandma Luce's brooch and tiara were stolen from my wall-safe. Only two persons know the combination to that safe, and of those two persons Gregory is automatically absolved——"

"You suspect—Mary?" It was not a question; it was a statement—flat, lifeless. And in Ethredge's heart was a slow-growing horror, for this thing Mary could never have done; yet he knew, knew already that her hands had taken the jewels. . . .

"Yes. Gregory has had private detec-

tives—from Philadelphia. Mary's fingerprints——"

There was silence in that room, then, while Ethredge stared at Priscilla Luce's slender, patrician hands, still clasping his wrists.

"It was not in Mary to do this thing," he said at last, quietly. "There must be some other explanation, however incredible. Mary could never steal."

The small hands touching his wrists trembled.

"Perhaps I was wrong about you, and Mary," Priscilla Luce said softly. "I was arrogant—and ambitious for her. I am sorry."

Suddenly her eyes welled with tears, the great drops falling like glistening diamonds on Ethredge's hands. . . .

6. Ethredge Asks Help

"PETERS, come to my apartment; I've got to talk to you."

Detective-Lieutenant Peters of the homicide squad, sitting with his square-toed boots outstayed on the scarred top of his Detective-Bureau desk, listened, his face expressionless as stone, to the taut, nerve-racked voice of his chief. Calmly he spoke.

"O. K., Commissioner; I'll be right out." Carefully, leaning forward from his hips, he set the telephone down. For an instant he did not move; then he swung his feet to the floor and stood erect. His face, as he crossed the room toward the coat-rack, was still blankly impassive.

Yet within his skull his thoughts were seething. Through an instinct born of long association and mutual trust he knew that the Commissioner had at last decided to confide in him; between the Commissioner and his subordinate there existed a peculiar—and by most persons unsuspected—friendship. . . .

The distance to Ethredge's home was not great, and Peters, driving a police sedan, covered it quickly. The Commissioner, when he rang, let him in at once.

Definitely, Peters saw at once, Ethredge looked ill. But Peters knew, too, that something far less easily defined than mere illness had kept the Commissioner away from his desk these past few days. . . .

"Drink?" Ethredge gestured toward a nest of bottles and an array of glasses conveniently at hand.

"Thanks." Peters helped himself to two ounces of whisky, downed it neat. The men sat down.

"Peters," Ethredge began abruptly, "I'm up against something that I can't fight alone. And I can't use the police, because I've no case that would convince a jury; I'd be thought mad. Also, Mary is involved, and her connection with this affair must never become public knowledge."

Peters nodded. "Better tell me everything, Commissioner."

"Peters, can a hypnotist cure disease in another man through subconscious suggestion? Can an adept so control his subject's mind that that subject becomes his virtual slave, even to the extent of committing a theft? Can a hypnotist cause his subject to suffer and die from a disease which heretofore has not threatened him?"

Peters looked thoughtfully at the nest of bottles.

"Sounds like Dmitri."

"Yes," Ethredge exclaimed hoarsely, "it *is* Dmitri, damn him!"

Leisurely the Detective-Lieutenant rose, poured a half-drink of amber-colored whisky, sat down again.

"Commissioner, hypnosis, the powers of the will, the depths of the subconscious, are to a great extent unknowns—and limitless unknowns. I cannot say that

I would definitely disbelieve anything, anything at all, you might tell me concerning them. Dmitri? Certainly I believe the stories I've heard about Dmitri. Tales of men dying of loathsome diseases after willing him their money—tales of strange thefts and inexplicable gifts of which he seems invariably the beneficiary."

Ethredge leaned forward.

"Yet we can do nothing—legally."

Peters shook his head. "No, nothing—legally."

Ethredge spread out his hands and looked helplessly at them.

"Peters, I went to see the man. He has Mary under his control; I've been watching her, following her about for days. She doesn't know, and I'm tired, tired almost to death; I've had to do it all myself; I dared trust no one. Peters, a week ago Mary took her cousin Priscilla Luce's jewels, and brought them to Dmitri; God knows what he's done with them. Since then she's been trying to persuade Mrs. Leeds—Arthur Leeds' widow—to go to Dmitri's with her. God, I *know* that the man's a monster, yet I'm helpless against him."

Ethredge paused, and slowly his hands knotted into fists, relaxed.

"Peters, when I went to see him he laughed at me. More, he said that so long as Mary had access to wealthy homes he would continue to use her, and that if I so much as attempted to interfere with him he would make her suffer, horribly. She was my vulnerability, he told me, and she was his chattel."

Peters lifted his drink to his lips.

"A venomous fellow," he said softly, "and a strategist, as well."

"Yes," Ethredge muttered. "I'm afraid that he can do everything he says."

Peters set down the small glass, empty.

"You are right. Undoubtedly he can do everything he says. And yet we are

men, and when men meet a poisonous serpent they squash it, and we must squash Dmitri as pitilessly." He paused, then slowly continued, "There might even be a certain poetic justice in the method by which this may most safely be done. Yes, I think so. I think that on Thursday evening you and I will be included among Dmitri's guests, and then we shall see what we shall see."

7. *The Spider's Lair*

CHARLES ETHREDGE sat, alone, in Dmitri's small, first-floor consulting-room. He sat poised tensely on the very edge of his hard, uncomfortable chair. As the minutes slowly passed his fingers drummed, now and again, with a nervous, jerky rhythm on the top of Dmitri's massive table. Occasionally he glanced swiftly about the barren room, but there was little to attract his attention within that tiny chamber; even the cryptic lamp in the center of the table was dark and lifeless. And Ethredge was not really concerned with the room in which he sat; his whole attention was focussed on the room adjoining, the theatrically oriental reception chamber from which came, faintly, the sensuous sobbing of Dmitri's balalaika orchestra and the muffled murmuring of departing guests.

One by one the voices dwindled, and at last even the music of the orchestra ceased. There was the sound of brief confusion as the musicians packed their instruments and took their departure, and then utter silence.

The door opened, and Dmitri, wearing his invariable lounging-robe and slippers, entered. With slow, waddling shuffle he crossed behind the table to his personal chair, and carefully eased his flabby bulk into its capacious depths.

"Very well, Commissioner Ethredge; we are alone together, as you requested.

My guests have gone; my orchestra is already drinking vodka within some wine-shop; only my servant remains within the house. You see that I am not afraid of you."

Abruptly he paused. For the door behind Ethredge's shoulder had opened, and a man had stepped swiftly into the room, closing the door behind him.

Dmitri's cruel black eyes were suddenly wary.

"Who are you? I recognize you; you were among those at my demonstration, but—you disappeared. What are you doing here?"

Peters grinned reassuringly at the Commissioner, spoke almost soothingly to Dmitri. "There is a narrow space between your orchestra dais and the wall, uncomfortable, yet a sufficient hiding-place. Who am I? He shrugged slightly. "I am—of the police. Afraid that you might not agree to grant us a joint audience, I took the precaution of concealing myself."

For a moment Dmitri sat still. Then his fat shoulders heaved in a billowing shrug, and he spoke almost scornfully.

"One or two or a dozen of your kind; what does it matter? With your *mujik* here to lend you courage, Commissioner, what do you propose now?"

The words were goading, taunting; and swiftly Peters signed to Ethredge to remain silent. Almost gently he murmured, "What do we propose now? Well, Dmitri, we propose first that you release Mary Roberts from whatever enjoinders you have placed upon her subconscious."

He paused, for the obese colossus was smiling.

"Suppose that I refuse."

Peters literally purred his reply, "You are an intelligent man; I assure you that the police of this country have devised extremely piquant methods of making a

man suffer, methods which we would not hesitate to employ upon you."

For an instant the pupils of Dmitri's eyes dilated. Then, his voice blandly impassive, he said, "You forget that, even if I would, I could not, in her absence, release Mary Roberts' subconscious. I am not a story-book magician, and I cannot command her conscious to come here. She will not come here again, except of her own free will, unless she brings—another with her. And that will be only on a Thursday. She did not come tonight; would you wait here seven days for her to present herself?"

Slowly Peters smiled. "Mary Roberts, at Commissioner Ethredge's request, is waiting in a small restaurant not far from here. I will telephone her." He rose, took a step toward the table.

The colossus seemed to swell in his chair like an infuriated toad. "Stop!" His chest heaved, and from his cavernous interior there issued a half-shriek, half-bellow that beat in that small room like the scream of an ape. "Stepan! Stepan!"

Peters' hand flicked to his hip. But Dmitri only smiled, smiled and shook his monstrous head.

"Your weapon will be of no avail against my Stepan."

8. Stepan

ABRUPTLY the door opened, and the small, wholly self-effacing Stepan entered, glanced imperturbably about. He carried Dmitri's small automatic pistol in his right hand, and instinctively Peters' fingers moved, again, toward his hip, then paused helplessly as his mind recalled with sudden sharp vividness the incredible demonstration he had witnessed only a brief hour before. Too well he knew that his gun was, indeed, powerless to harm Stepan. . . .

Dmitri was grinning broadly.

"Watch these men closely, Stepan, and usher them from my house. Should they attempt any tricks do not hesitate to shoot. After all, they are here against my will, and they have threatened me."

The servant Stepan, only a slight tinge of color in his cheeks revealing that he felt any interest whatever in the proceedings, gestured with the small automatic. And in that instant Peters whipped to the floor, his hands grasped the end of the strip of carpet on which Stepan stood, his body jerked backward.

His arms wildly flailing, Stepan plunged to his hands and knees; the automatic skittered across the floor. And suddenly Dmitri, half lifting himself from his chair, was babbling unintelligible, fear-ridden words. Ethredge, as Peters rose to his feet, had pounced upon the outplayed servant, pinioning him to the floor; Peters, his right hand at his hip, swung alertly toward Dmitri.

"I've—got him, Peters," Ethredge gasped, the little man beneath him no match for the Commissioner's sinewy strength. And chill, shuddery horror abruptly swept him as he realized that this man he touched, this squirming, writhing thing beneath his hands, was invulnerable to lead or to flame, a being that could be overpowered, but that could not be destroyed! "*What'll I do with him?*"

Grimly Peters snarled, "Hold on to him. I'll handle this death-ridden diabetic!"

His service automatic a blue-steel menace in his right hand, Peters walked to the table. With his left hand he lifted the receiver from the telephone and dialed a number. Warily he stooped over the table as he spoke, presently, with Mary Roberts. Then he cradled the receiver and sat down, facing the colossus.

"She will come here, at once."

Seemingly, Dmitri had collapsed. His shapeless hands lay limply on the chair

arms, his great chest heaved gulpingly; only the snaky brightness in his darting ebon eyes warned Peters that his tremendous brain was thinking, planning, calculating with chain-lightning rapidity. The servant Stepan was only spasmodically struggling.

Peters spoke abruptly to Ethredge.

"When Mary comes someone will have to admit her. Can you keep this devil covered while I go to the door?"

Ethredge, crouching across the servant's chest, his knees crushing the man's shoulders against the floor, nodded. . . .

Silence, rolling on with interminable slowness, gripped the room. Gradually the rattle of Dmitri's breathing was growing quiet; he sat now in his chair like some obscene, waiting idol, his face an undecipherable mask.

From beyond the tight-closed door a bell faintly tinkled. Peters edged toward Ethredge, slipped his automatic into the Commissioner's outstretched hand. Then he was gone. . . .

Dmitri did not move. A minute passed; to Ethredge it seemed as though all the suspense of myriad ages was bound up in that brief span. Then the door re-opened and Peters, followed by Mary Roberts, re-entered the room. Mary's fair, oval face was a composite of bewilderment and apprehension; in the instant that she glimpsed the tableau within the room her slender body trembled violently and the color drained from her face, leaving it white as new paper. But then her straight, strong young spine stiffened and her firm little jaw set hard. Pale though she was, she glanced inquiringly at Ethredge.

"Charles——" she whispered.

Shakily, Ethredge smiled. He nodded toward Dmitri, bloated, swollen, huddled inscrutably in his chair.

"I'll have to tell you—now, Mary," he said slowly. "Try to understand. On the

night that you came here with Helen Stacey-Forbes, Dmitri ensnared you. He cast a—spell over you. We have come here, we have asked you to come here—we are going to force him to release you."

Mary, staring at her sweetheart, was frowning. Almost musingly she spoke.

"I have had—terrible dreams," she said, her voice low, "dreams in which he told me to do—strange things; dreams in which I—obeyed him. But I believed that they were only nightmares. And yet, though I loathed him, I know that I have surrendered to the strangest impulse to ask others to come here with me—Mrs. Arthur Leeds——"

Ethredge's eyes, as he glanced at Dmitri, were suddenly cruel. Then, gently, he spoke again to Mary.

"We must free you now, free you from Dmitri—for ever. But Peters believes that you will have to go, once more, beneath his spell."

For a long moment Mary stood there quiet. Then, the words barely audible, she breathed, "Very well, Charles. I am ready."

Peters, who until this moment had been standing, hands in his jacket pockets, with his back against the door, advanced into the room, stooped for the automatic in Ethredge's outstretched hand, and dropped into one of the row of chairs that faced Dmitri's huge table.

"Very well, Dmitri," he said, gesturing significantly with the automatic, "let us waste no more time. Proceed, and understand clearly, that if you attempt to trick me I will certainly kill you."

Briefly the men's eyes met and clashed. Then, with surprising suddenness, Dmitri rolled his flaccid shoulders in an expressive, acquiescent shrug; his loose lips split in a good-humored leer.

"Shall I confess that I am beaten, then?" he asked affably. "Yes, let it be so; I begin to believe that I have, in any

case, overestimated Mary Roberts' value to me. If you will sit across from me, Miss Roberts, and look fixedly at the lamp——"

Warningly Peters exclaimed, "Don't look directly at that thing, Commissioner!"

Did a flicker of disappointment cross Dmitri's face? Peters, as he moved from his chair to stand directly behind Dmitri, the muzzle of the automatic inches from Dmitri's silk-swathed shoulders, never knew. . . .

9. *The Spider Spins*

DMITRI'S fat fingers touched a small button set beneath the edge of the table. And instantly, though Peters forced himself not to look up, he felt, beating against his lowered eyelids, the incredibly soothing, incredibly beautiful monotony of whirling color produced by the fantastic lamp. Abruptly, then, the ceiling light went out. Except for the diabolically cadenced, leaping reiteration of pinwheel color dancing in the center of the table like some chromatic dervish, the room was dark. Grimly Peters kept his eyes averted, kept his gaze boring into Dmitri's black, pillar-like silhouette.

Slow seconds passed. Then Dmitri spoke, spoke in that vibrant, beautiful voice of his that was like the chanting of a cathedral organ.

"You are asleep, Mary Roberts?"

There was a moment's pause. Warningly the police automatic in Peters' hand touched the sodden flesh at the base of Dmitri's neck.

Through the stillness came Mary's reply: "Master, I am asleep."

By not so much as a single, involuntary shudder had Dmitri betrayed even the slightest awareness of the cold gun-muzzle. Yet Peters knew that even now

the man was planning, calculating chance against chance. . . .

"*Who am I?*" The words boomed like great mellow bass notes.

Mary's answer came unhesitatingly: "You are the Voice that Speaks from Beyond the Darkness. You are the Infalible One."

Peculiarly, Peters sensed that in that instant Dmitri had reached a decision. . . .

The strong, resonant phrases rolled on, "You will forget the assignment that I have given you." There was a pause, and Peters realized with a curious, crawling anticipation that Dmitri was gathering himself together, concentrating himself upon himself, ominously.

Then the black words boomed, "Let your nerves go mad and your muscles tense and writhe until death releases you!"

"Damn you!" Peters snarled the curse; his gun-muzzle sloughed savagely into Dmitri's obese flesh. Yet the gun did not speak, and Dmitri, wincing beneath the torturing steel, chuckled. . . .

"I gambled that you would not fire," he gasped, his voice suddenly gloating. "And now we are no longer stalemated; before I will consent to release Mary Roberts from the agony she endures you will promise me immunity, and more than immunity—you will promise me protection, henceforth. Take that cannon from my neck——"

The ceiling light flashed up, the whirling of the multicolored vanes slowed and died. And, as the eyes of Ethredge and Peters grew accustomed to the increased illumination within the room, the two men felt their bloodflow pause, then run like ice-water in their veins.

For Mary Roberts had toppled from her chair, and now lay weirdly, unnaturally sprawled on the naked floor beside Dmitri's table, her spine bent backward like a tight-drawn bow, the slender heels

of her tiny shoes nearly touching her chestnut hair beneath her chic little hat, her throat and jaw muscles stretched like oversharpened violin strings, her teeth and pink gums bared in a ghastly grin. Her breasts were rising and falling spasmodically; she breathed in choking, rattling gasps. The fair, pale flesh of her oval face was purpling.

"God!" Ethredge stumbled to his feet, stood swaying drunkenly, his hands outstretched; he had utterly forgotten the servant Stepan. For an instant the little man struggled to rise, then sank back weakly.

The obscene colossus grinned. "Do not fear; she will live a long time. Her nerves will tire; then she will relax for a moment. She will breathe more easily, then."

And, as though the prophecy were a command, Mary's body went suddenly, horribly limp, melted against the barren floor as though death had abruptly collapsed every straining muscle. Only her gulping, hurried breathing and the gradual fading of the terrible purple congestion from her face told that she was still alive. Mucus was beginning to run from her loosely open mouth.

Ethredge took a slow, uncertain step forward. "God!" he mumbled, again. Then he found words, babbling, pleading words. "You—devil! Free her, only free her, and—"

"Commissioner!" It was Peters' voice, harsh, rasping. "Commissioner—" With a sudden, gasping sob he paused, for, with the sharply reiterated exclamation Mary's body had once more tensed, knotted into a backward-bent bow more terrible to look upon than had she twisted and writhed.

"Dear God!" Ethredge moaned. He took a second, wavering step forward. And then Peters found speech.

"Commissioner!" His voice was im-

placable, steely. "Stop! Do you know what you are doing, in surrendering to this—beast of hell? You are dishonoring yourself for ever, you are promising him immunity to torture, and murder, and debase—yes, for he has done all of these things—"

Ethredge's lips were a twisted snarl. "Peters, I would promise him my soul—to free Mary!"

Dmitri was grinning, grinning. . . .

Peters' words were like the flicking of a rapier. "Mary would loathe you—if she knew. Mary would never permit this—sacrifice of honor."

Ethredge took another step forward. He seemed not to have heard.

10. *A Little White Pellet*

WITH sudden, grim determination Peters plunged his left hand deep in his breast pocket. His right hand dropped the gun to the floor, his right arm constricted about Dmitri's throat. There was a small white pellet in the fingers of his left hand.

"Dmitri!" he snarled, "this tablet; can you guess what it is?—it smells of almonds!"

The powerful biceps of his right arm tightened. Caught in that strangling embrace, Dmitri writhed weakly, horribly, his pig-like eyes wildly staring.

Peters' face was inches above Dmitri's fear-maddened eyes. The pellet moved closer to Dmitri's slavering, gasping jaws.

"Just a touch against the tip of the tongue! You attempted trickery, Dmitri; had you not done that we might have drawn your fangs and let you live. But now—"

Swiftly, then, he forced the bitter-smelling pellet into Dmitri's wide-distended mouth, crushed the man's jaws violently together.

The taste of almond was strong on Dmitri's tongue.

For a split second his eyes seemed bursting from their sockets. A horrible, retching moan welled from his saliva-drenched mouth; blue veins leaped on his hairless temples. Then, like a pin-pricked balloon, he collapsed; his massive head rolled forward upon his flaccid chest; he huddled there, stilly, in his chair. . . .

"The end of you, Dmitri," Peters was whispering. "The end of you!"

And then he heard Ethredge's voice, dazed with the horror he had undergone, yet implacable, now, with heartbroken resolve.

"We must kill him, Peters! You are right; Mary would not have us sell honor, even to save her!"

Ethredge, his eyes unseeing, his mind near-crazed by suffering, did not know that Dmitri was already dead. And yet—

"Dmitri is dead," Peters said softly. His whole attention was focussed upon Mary, upon the small huddled figure that, in the instant of Dmitri's passing, had suddenly relaxed, lay now in semi-conscious exhaustion. And in Peters' heart there leaped exultation; for in his mind had been, all along, the strange, weird conviction that the end of Dmitri would bring release to those he had enslaved. For Peters knew that Dmitri had instilled into the subconscious of his victims the belief that he was infallible, the belief that he was a kind of god, protecting them, shielding them, curing them of their ills. But now the man-god was dead, and, of necessity, in each of his dupes the blind, limitless sea of the subconscious was rejecting the theories he had taught, spewing out his broken image, obliterating him, in disillusionment, from the chasms of memory. Before Peters' eyes the unnatural tendency to

convulsion that Dmitri had instilled in Mary Roberts' subconscious, the cruel weapon he had implanted within the core of her being and goaded, in terror-ridden desperation, into life, had died in the instant her subconscious became aware of Dmitri's passing, had ceased as abruptly as though a circuit had been broken, as completely as though an evil light had been extinguished. . . .

Peters, stooping over Mary, now limply, weakly relaxed, slipped his strong right arm beneath her shoulders, murmured swift, soothing words. Sanity, he saw, was flooding back into her eyes. And then she looked toward and beyond Ethredge, and she screamed—and screamed again.

Peters' eyes followed her rigid gaze, and as he looked at the servant Stepan his nerves crawled and the short hairs at the base of his neck bristled in an ecstasy of horror.

"Dear—God!"

In that second of unsurpassable horror there blazed across Peters' mind a strange kaleidoscope of tableaux, tableaux that were all the same, tableaux of the obese Dmitri and the small, self-effacing Stepan enacting a multitude of Dmitri's experiments, experiments in which invariably the small automatic hammered bullets into Stepan's chest, the blow-torch flamed in Stepan's face, hot coins were dropped with seeming harmlessness on Stepan's wrists! That horror on the floor, that horror that had been the servant Stepan, that horror that had, in the moment of Dmitri's passing, *changed!*

"Dear—God!"

For the flesh-and-blood face of the servant Stepan had vanished, and in its place there remained only nightmare, only a flame-charred, crimson skull! The horror lay upon its back, its arms outflung, as it had lain while Ethredge pinioned it down. Its jacket was open, and the

exposed expanse of shirt-front was a sticky crimson smear.

"Dear—God!"

Those bullets, those hundreds of bullets, that Dmitri must have fired, during the months and years, through Stepan's chest! And somehow Peters knew, as he gazed through mercifully glazed eyes upon the horror outplayed there, that beneath the red-drenched shirt there remained no shred of mortal flesh, but only a bleeding, bullet-blasted hole!

And on Stepan's wrists Peters saw the holes, the great fire-seared holes, the charred, circular holes the size of a half-dollar. . . .

"Dear—God!" Peters was babbling, over and over, inanely.

DIMLY, while his brain reeled and his soul retched as he gazed upon the ghastly thing on the floor, he yet realized that the same release that had, in the instant of Dmitri's passing, loosed Mary Roberts' nerves and muscles from the death-laden throes of convulsion, had also, and in that same awful instant, freed Stepan's subconscious from the enjoinder that his body was invulnerable to physical injury. And with that release had come Stepan's doom—the long-delayed death that should have been his in the instant, now perhaps years in the past, that Dmitri had first blasted a bullet through his heart.

In that moment Peters was hardly a man—he was more an animal, terrified, near mad with horror. He realized only vaguely that his hands were clenched into rigid fists, that his heart was pounding with frantic rapidity. He could feel his spine crawl and bristle; sweat, reeking with adrenal secretions, leaped from his pores.

But warningly, through waves of horror, some tiny figment of his brain was reiterating the command, "Don't let go

of yourself! Don't let your nerve break!"

Slowly, then, he tore his gaze away from that horror on the floor. And, gradually, his vision cleared, his brain resumed its functioning. He had been close to madness. . . .

He saw Ethredge, then, standing close beside the table, gazing at the horror at his feet, swaying, tottering drunkenly. Just as the Commissioner would have reeled to the floor Peters stumbled to his feet, grasped the man, guided him like a shambling cretin to a chair, fumbled in the Commissioner's hip pocket for his whisky-flask.

"Dear Lord!" Peters whispered, as he forced whisky into Ethredge's trembling mouth. "Dear Lord! if this doesn't drive him—drive her—mad——"

That horror—that horror on the floor!

But the hot, burning stimulant was bringing color back into Ethredge's face. Swiftly Peters turned to Mary, tilted her head back, poured a staggering draft down her throat. Gently he lifted her up, supported her to a chair, where she sat dazedly. Mercifully, she was in almost a comatose condition.

Ethredge was beginning to find words. "That thing—that—thing!" he was mumbling.

Incisively, then, Peters spoke.

"Commissioner, you've got to get hold of yourself. We must get the medical examiner here, get Hanlon and Delaney and men from the Medical Association; we must hush this affair up. Thank God we have influence; thank God the horrors Dmitri has perpetrated on this man have been witnessed by many persons. Perhaps the story will be—a private experiment that failed, and Dmitri dead—of heart-failure. Dmitri was, after all, diabetic, and his heart was untrustworthy. But—we cannot wait; we must call Hanlon at once." He moved toward the telephone.

"But Dmitri!" Ethredge whispered. "Dmitri — dead of cyanide poisoning! The medical examiner will know. Dmitri — murdered!"

Peters turned. His face, as he slowly shook his head, was enigmatic.

"No, Commissioner. Remember that I once told you that there might even be a certain poetic justice in the manner by which Dmitri might be most safely—destroyed? That pellet was harmless, made of crushed almonds and flour; Dmitri was his own executioner. He believed that he was tasting cyanide, and so he died; his own weapon, the power of suggestion, killed him—justly."

He was lifting the telephone to his

ear. But before he dialed the well-remembered number he looked, thoughtfully, for a long moment, at Dmitri, at the bloated, repulsively hairless hulk that had once housed a brilliant, utterly evil soul.

"Poor, warped devil!" he softly mused; "he could treat and cure others by suggestion, but he could not treat himself. And now he is dead. Well——"

The short, stubby fingers of his right hand were dialing the number. And, as he listened to the small, reiterated grating sound of the whirling dial, he realized, vaguely, that Ethredge had gone to Mary Roberts, that Ethredge was stooping over her comfortingly, soothing her within his strong, embracing arms.
