

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MARCH, 1943

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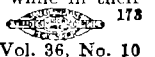
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The Whispering Wine

YOU can have your ghosts! I got all I want of them, but I know where you can still get a few quarts, if you're interested. Yes, that's

right: Ghosts! They only come in quart sizes.

It was strictly the Boss's idea in the first place. He said to me, "Hatch, I wonder

By **THORNE**
LEE



Fear can take a man's face in its two hands and twist that face into a horrible knot with nothing that looks human left to it.

if you'll ever make a good, honest criminal. Sometimes I think you aren't really sincere in your work."

I knew he was warming me up for something pretty sinister. I started to give him the old sauce: "Boss, I don't like the careless way you use that word, criminal. A criminal is just an individual who disapproves of the 'status quo,' which for your enlightenment—"

"Don't give me that college education gab!" snapped the Boss. "This next job is strictly muscle stuff, and you got to talk tough!"

"Okay then, how's this," I said: "A criminal is just a guy who don't like the way things are, so he does 'em different, and about ninety per cent of everybody would like to do things different. So what? So we're all criminals!"

"That's the line I want, son," the Boss said to me, very fatherly. "Now this little job is at a place called Glen Echo—"

"Mountains?" I yelped, gleeful.

"Somewhere north of San Berdoo," the Boss grunted, slapping a newspaper on his desk.

HE HAD drawn a little box around a single paragraph, which said:

"Is Professor Joel Lehn, famous inventor, working secretly for the war department? His mysterious retirement for the past six months at a lonely cabin in the California Sierras has aroused the curiosity of newspaper men, but the Professor refuses any interviews—"

"What that guy needs is a press agent," I said.

"Not now," said the Boss. "After that article, what he needs is a bodyguard. All the foreign governments will have their toughest gunmen on his trail. You will apply for the body job tomorrow. Of course, if you find that the Professor really is on to something big, you will act accordingly."

I said, "Boss, you ain't goin' into the war racket, too?"

"Uncle Sam has a lot of money to pay for what he wants," said the Boss.

I groaned. "Don't I know. My last income tax—"

"Get going!" the Boss clipped, "or that body you're going to guard will be a dead one!"

That was funny! If the Boss only knew how close he came with that crack!

IT WASN'T exactly a racket, the way the Boss had his business figured. We were a very legitimate private dick agency, and was it wrong to work a few angles of our own whenever we struck something ripe? The Boss figured that we kept the real criminals out of things by getting in ahead of 'em, and it's better for a respectable business man to have his fingers in your pockets than a guy who is really dishonest.

Anyway, that's how I come to be riding an old broken down hack up a mountain road that the government ought to do something about.

I wasn't any too soon. There were three other people riding to Glen Echo in the storekeeper's sedan, and I figured it was too much of a coincidence to be true.

I could see that none of the three was glad to see me. One was just a big tough overgrown kid, probably twenty-five—the kind who starts robbing banks at the age of twelve. The other man was the hard-to-figure type. I guessed he was very old for his looks. He had one of those cold, hard faces that don't wrinkle but just gradually set, like cement. His hair was long and coal black, but the sideburns were thick, milk-white, like a man who clamps a toupee on his head and forgets to tuck in the edges. His head was so big that you never noticed his body, how it was dwarfed from the hips down. I'm over six feet, but that head made me

dwindle in size. It was a very handsome head, but it wasn't pretty, if you get what I mean.

I liked the girl, though. I usually look at the body first and work up to the face, but this blonde had everything right between those sad blue eyes and that round white neck. The cheeks seemed to tremble they were so soft, and her lips smiled even when they didn't mean to. She had the figure to support it, too, when you got around to noticing. I wondered what she was doing with a couple of thugs like that.

"I'm a newspaper guy," I explained to the man with the big head. "Hatch Egert."
"What paper?" he snapped.

I never get caught like that. "The Chronicle," I said. "You friends of the Professor's?"

He laid a folded paper in my lap. There was an ad marked in the Help Wanted Column: "Small theatrical troupe of two or three, willing to assist in scientific experiment. Expenses and salaries. Restful conditions. Write, GLEN ECHO, California."

I couldn't figure what an inventor would want with a corny show troupe, but I wasn't doing much figuring yet. I hadn't even bothered to notice where the big boy's coat bulged with gun butts. It's so peaceful in the mountains.

Joel Lehn's cabin was something. Made me think of the horse barns at Santa Anita. At the top Glen Echo canyon broke into three loose ends like a frayed rope, and the cabin had three wings that fitted right into the grooves. The rest was just wild brush and scrub, and in California that's wild!

"Who'd want a hole up in a spot like this?" grunted Sol Abbott, the young punk.

"Me for one!" I said, sniffing the raw air. "This stuff gives me vitamins."

"I love it!" said Rayma Donelson. The name fitted her—smooth.

"I can see that you and I got lots in common," I said to her.

The girl smiled, but the guy with the big head didn't. His cold eyes reached out and slapped her hard across the mouth. He was like that with people. He could hurt them without moving a muscle. His name was Serge Michael. Abbott always called him Mister.

"Are you sure this is Glen Echo?" the Michael asked old Kim Jones, who was driving us.

The storekeeper grunted, "Ain't no other!"

"It's strange that a man like Joel Lehn would let his home run down like this. Every one of those windows is broken! That left wing seems ready to collapse!"

"Earthquake, maybe," said the old man, scratching his gray beard. "We get lots of 'em. Ain't heard of none lately, though."

IT DID seem funny about the broken windows, but I was busy wondering how Serge Michael knew about a man named Joel Lehn. Not from that newspaper ad. Nor from me. If this Michael was supposed to be tricky, he would have to watch his remarks closer.

There was broken glass strewn all over the porch. The door was wide open and I was the first one through. The big front room off the center wing was homey and comfortable. With one glance I took in the half-filled pipe on the smoking-stand; an open book on the table, and the bowl of fruit beside it. It was like a place that's lived in, but still it didn't seem right. The fireplace was full of cold, dry ash-dust. I tapped the bowl of the forgotten pipe and my thumb came away with a smudge of dust. An apple core on the table had shriveled up like a dry leaf.

I knew that Joel Lehn hadn't seen this room in a week, but I waited to see how sharp the Michael was.

Michael didn't say a word, but he leaned

heavy on his cane and his eyes whipped around the room. Then he twisted around quick, his dwarf-legs tying in a knot. His cane shot out, the elbow-hook catching the shoulder of old Kim Jones, who was backing out the door. "Wait!" he snapped. "We may want to go back with you."

"It gits dark early!" muttered the old man.

"You afraid of the dark?" said Sol Abbott.

"Not ordinary, human dark, I ain't!" growled old Kim.

"Yeah?" I said. "What's different about the dark around here?"

Old Kim pushed away Michael's cane and shrugged. "Places gits the smell of people livin' in 'em. This place is a dead place, I can tell ye."

Old Kim's talk was enough to get us interested. I wanted to look around, and the Michael didn't seem to want me out of his sight; so we all went together. It was routine stuff until we got to a solid oak door in the basement. I have a way with locks, and I wangled this one easy. There was a long, cement-walled tunnel that seemed to bore right into the mountain. We found light switches and the bulbs were working; upstairs they were all broken.

I was the first one to spot the laboratory: If you'd take a long glass tube and tie it into all the knots in the Boy Scout Manual you'd have something like the apparatus which sprouted out of a huge glass flask squatting in the middle of the room. Under the flask was a gas burner. Serge Michael's face was a blank, but I looked in his eyes and it was like he was licking his lips with glee.

Sol Abbott found the wine cellar through a side door. His laugh belched out so loud that the big web of glass tube trembled. "Have a look, Mister!" he hollered.

There were rows and rows of bottles, every size and shape. I picked up a whiskey bottle built like Mae West and

there was a neat white label with a lot of symbols which didn't make sense. "Greek, maybe," I said.

All the bottles had little labels. The Michael was getting more excited in the eyes. Rayma Donelson said, "Imagine one man drinking all that stuff!"

Sol Abbott wiped his lips. "I'm gonna like it here," he said.

"Seems to be just a common distillery," said the Michael, very matter-of-fact.

"Seems to be, like hell!" I thought.

I saw Sol Abbott tuck a wine bottle up his sleeve on the way out.

When we got upstairs the Michael had decided to stay the night, and I knew it wasn't to drink wine. I thought about young Abbott drinking the stuff, and I wondered how he would look after a chaser of nitroglycerin. Must be some kind of explosive, I thought, if it's war material. I didn't like the reckless way Abbott was carrying that bottle, but I couldn't say anything to give the Michael ideas.

The Michael set Sol Abbott to cleaning up broken glass and turned loose the girl in the kitchen. Old Kim Jones high-tailed off in his sedan when twilight clamped the lid on, the sudden way it does in California. I said if there was something to be afraid of around here, it ought to make good newspaper stuff. I also said I could make gravy.

That got me in the kitchen with Rayma. "Does it still give you a thrill when you first get out there under the proscenium?" I asked her.

She looked at me, blinking. "I always like the mountains at night," she said.

"Well, that's settled. Now, if you're not an actress, what are you?"

"Why, what do you mean?" she gasped.

"Lady, if you were an actress, you'd know what I meant by the proscenium, and it ain't mountains at night! Tell me about yourself. I'm always on your side!"

I got a loop on her waist and we wres-

bled for a minute, but when I got my mouth nicely planted on her red lips, I could tell she liked it. "You must get away from here," she whispered, kind of pushing and pulling me at the same time. "They'd kill you in a minute!"

"Two minutes maybe," I said. "I'm tough. I'll get out in ten seconds, if you'll come along."

Her eyes bulged. "I couldn't do that. They do terrible things to people who run away—things you can't talk about!"

"How did you get into this league?" I said.

She sighed. "I was born in it."

"That runt isn't your father?"

"Oh no! My father—they keep him in prison!"

"I see," I said. "Think I'll stick around. I don't like guys who carry guns."

I squeezed another kiss out of her, and just then the voices began to talk.

Rayma whipped out of my arms. "What's that?" she said.

VOICES. They were right in the house, in the same room with us. It wasn't nice. It was a lot of words all twisted up, toppling over each other, snarling around each other, like a dozen people talking at once. It was just blab, but it made you think of a ditchful of snakes, slopping and sliding all over themselves. I could feel my spine tying itself in a knot.

They came from every place, bouncing out of the cupboards, slithering down from the ceiling, rolling around the floor. You can't imagine voices doing that. I can. I was there.

Rayma wasn't hanging on to me. I was hanging on to her. "Who is it?" I shouted.

The answer was a lot of hissing sibilants and wailing vowels that wriggled in and out of my ears.

All of a sudden they stopped. I dug my ears out with one hand. With the other

I seemed to be holding up the remains of a beautiful blonde. I carried her in by the fireplace and draped her on a sofa. Sol Abbott was there on a chair with his tongue hanging out, looking right through me.

"Did you hear 'em, too?" I said.

The young punk was shattered, I could see, just like safety glass. He wagged his tongue and mumbled nonsense. Serge Michael came in from outside and found us like that, staring at each other. He swore and pulled a long wine bottle out of Abbott's stiff fingers. "You damn fools!" he murmured. "Have you been drinking that stuff?"

Abbott's eyes cleared up a bit, but he was a long time finding his voice. "I didn't drink it, Mister," he moaned, squeezing his head. "Honest!"

Michael sneered and tilted the bottle. It was empty.

Abbott gaped. "It wasn't empty a minute ago!" he wailed. "I was gonna drink, but I didn't. There was people's voices talkin', Mister. You never heard such—"

The Michael brought his cane down hard across the boy's knuckles where they gripped his knee. Abbott yelped.

"The kid's right!" I snapped.

Michael whirled and jammed his stick in my ribs. I grabbed it and pushed the dwarf back against the wall. "You and I can do business, but don't give me that cane stuff or I'll tear you limb from limb! Such as they are!" I snorted, glancing at his shrivelled legs.

The Michael didn't like it, but he took it. "You tell me what happened," he said.

ITOLD him and he was so excited that his eyes were doing snake dances. He didn't speak; he just trotted his big head down to the basement and that wine cellar.

"It was like ghosts!" Sol Abbott muttered.

"Indubitably," I said. One of my best

words. While the boy wrestled with it, I worked on Rayma. I took one of those First Aid courses.

When the girl came around I suggested that she could do with a nice, cool walk under the vast "proscenium" of the night.

We found a trail climbing up behind the cabin. "What is a 'proscenium,' anyway?" she asked, squeezing my hand.

"I'm glad you're a little stupid," I said. "I don't like gals that know everything. The proscenium is that big square arch at the front of a stage; it's what the audience looks through to see a play."

I was using my flash to feel our way along. The girl shied from something in the path and screamed down my neck. I picked up a dead rabbit. Harmless enough, and yet there was something different about it. Have you ever seen a frightened rabbit at the end of a flashlight beam, with its eyes popping out of its skull? This rabbit was like that, only the look was frozen right into the body. Otherwise there wasn't a scratch on it. Poison maybe, I thought.

I hung on to the rabbit for awhile, just so the girl would hang on to me. That was only the beginning. Farther up the trail we heard something moving in the brush. I doused my light and crept toward it. I tried to be quiet, but in that dry scrub I sounded like a small army. In a patch of moonlight I met the thing face to face. The animal let out a squeal and leaped a good ten feet, right over my head.

I trotted back to Rayma. "This is a damned queer jungle, I said. "I never heard of a deaf deer before, but I'll swear that baby didn't hear me at all, and I'm no Daniel Boone!"

"Let's go back!" the girl said, shivering.

"Shucks kid, you haven't seen anything yet," I said and gave her a taste of what I meant, which she seemed to like.

I didn't know the half of it. About fifty

yards farther there was something long and black crouching in the path, and around it a bunch of little eyes picked up the beams of my light and winked them back at me. The bottom of my stomach fell out, but I kept going mainly because Rayma was behind me and I didn't want to trample her. Finally I made out a big foot sticking up, and I couldn't think of any animal that wears shoes. The blinking eyes turned out to be hundreds of slivers of broken glass, reflecting my light. I bent over the body, took a long look, and then I whipped around and pushed the girl back.

"We better get back for some help," I said in a voice that was dead and buried.

I let Abbott and Michael look for the body. I'd seen enough. In my business you get to look at a lot of dead men, but I never saw one to compare with this. I know now you can frighten a man so bad that fear becomes torture. Fear can take a man's face in its two hands and twist that face into a horrible knot with nothing that looks human left to it, except maybe the big bloated pupil of an eye or two gaping holes that used to be nostrils. The teeth and lips are nothing but ugly red scabs, from grinding the tongue into shreds. As I've said before, you can have it!

MICHAEL let the body lie where it was, I guess. When he came back he seemed quite happy in his best Dracula manner.

To celebrate the event the rat produced a big bottle of wine and asked us all to sit in on it. "I thought you were against drinking the stuff!" I said.

The Michael let his eyes wash over me very mildly. "I always drink to the forming of a partnership," he said.

"Yeah? Who's gonna be partners?"

"You want a story and I want more help. I suggest that we pool our resources," he said smoothly.

"It's got to be a good story!" I snapped.

"It will be. You must admit that you don't know what hapened to Professor Lehn? I think I do. It will make remarkable reading in the—what was the name of that paper?"

"The Chronicle,' if I remember right," I sneered.

"As the beginning of our business association, I think we should share all information that we have secretly observed—"

"Such as?" I inquired.

The Michael produced a big knob of glass from his pocket. It was broken off at the base. "Such as this," he offered. "Ever see anything like it before?"

"Yeah," I said. "There's a glass bell down in the wine cellar about half as big as a barrel. It had a handle on top just like that."

"I like men who observe things. Apparently, Professor Lehn was carrying a glass jar to some sort of storehouse. Apparently, he dropped it," said the dwarf. "What else have you seen?"

"I've seen a young deer that was deaf as a post, I drawled proudly. "Can you top that?"

The Michaels nodded. "Excellent. It would seem that there must have been a violent explosion in the vicinity, enough to deafen a deer."

"And bust a lot of windows, and kill a lot of animals," I added.

"A lot of animals?"

"I saw two or three," I said, "and that man's been dead quite a while. If the animals aren't dead, why haven't they been busy?"

Rayma Donelson shrieked.

"What puzzles me," I went on, "is why an explosion wouldn't tear up trees and things. Did you see any signs?"

"I think," said the Michael, "that we are dealing with something new in the way of explosions. Shall we drink to more discoveries?"

I shrugged. I knew I wouldn't be the first one to taste that bottled stuff.

We never got around to that, anyway. Sol Abbott had no more than popped the cork on the wine bottle than things began to happen.

It was those damned voices again! Uncanny, it was. The room was alive with them. If it was ghosts, I could see why people are afraid of them; they didn't talk sense. A dribble of words like that, coming from every direction, is enough to turn any man's stomach. Serge Michael was the only one who didn't sprain his neck trying to find the voices.

It stopped in less than two minutes. I yanked the bottle and a glass from Sol Abbott. "I think I need a drink!" I said.

I tilted the bottle and stared at the nothing which poured out of it. "Hey!" I yelped. "This's an empty bottle!"

Sol Abbott leaped up. "See, Mister! It's like I told you. That bottle wasn't empty a minute ago!"

"Don't be a dope!" I snorted. "If it wasn't empty, where's the stuff now?"

The Michael twiddled his crooked, dwarf fingers. "I expected you to be more clever, Hutch."

"Hatch!"

"Hatch. Obviously, if the wine is gone, it has evaporated!"

"In two minutes flat?" I bellowed. "There ain't no such juice!"

"You forget Joel Lehn was an inventor. An inventor is supposed to create wonders."

"Well, I'll be damned!" I said. "What good is a wine that evaporates before you can drink it?"

The Michael laughed with his teeth, but his lips were still cruel. "Most wines loosen people's tongues. This wine seems to preserve them."

I gulped. "Are you trying to say that those voices came out of that bottle?"

"I don't say it. The bottle speaks for

itself. What a creation — a wine that talks!”

“I don’t believe it!” I said. “I’d rather believe in ghosts.”

To prove his point, the Michael took Sol Abbott down to the wine cellar, leaving me to discuss the new angle with the girl. Rayma and I got our arms untangled before they came back.

Each of the thugs brought an armload of bottles. I couldn’t read the symbols, but I knew enough Roman numerals to see that Michael had picked the bottles that numbered one to ten. Before he opened number one he parked each one of us in a corner with a pad and pencil and told us to write down every word that we recognized. “Keep writing even after the voices stop!” he insisted. “Put down everything you can remember.”

I decided our partnership wasn’t so legal that I couldn’t pull a fast one. I didn’t tell Michael that I am the Boss’s stenog in my weak moments. I’m a demon on shorthand.

The Michael was right about the wine. He flipped out a cork and grabbed his pencil, and the wine fizzed just like champagne, but every bubble was a word and they came so fast and loud that it was like taking dictation from a tommy-gun. Even so I got a lot of them down. As I say, I’m a demon.

I copied off about thirty words on another sheet and handed them to the dwarf. “Excellent!” he remarked. “I’m glad I asked you in. You’re sharp!”

All in all he only got about seventy-five different words out of the mess. I had near two hundred in shorthand.

We opened all ten bottles and I got at least five words to everyone that Michael had on his list.

WHEN it was over, I said, “The more I hear that stuff, the more it sounds like the same man’s voice. There’s a lot

of changes in pitch and volume, but it’s the same quality behind ’em. It just seems like a lot of voices because it comes so fast. What I can’t figure is why any guy in his right mind would want to talk so fast when he’s got nothing to say in the first place.”

“Just like playing a phonograph record backwards,” said Sol Abbott, shaking an empty bottle.

The Michael reached out with his eyes and gave Abbott a good shaking up, as much as to say, “If you must have ideas, keep them to yourself!”

Then the Michael bent over his list of words and pulled the thick blinds of his eyebrows down over his black, piercing eyes. Whatever he was doing, we were shut out of it, just as though he had slammed a door in our faces.

“Think I’ll find myself a slab of hay,” I said.

Sol Abbott stretched out on a sofa. I could see Rayma didn’t like me to leave her, but there was no place to go except bedrooms, and I’m really a decent sort, though you probably hadn’t guessed it.

I found the kind of room I wanted, tucked under the eaves upstairs. There was a small dresser that I could use for a desk. I blocked the cracks of the door, drew the blinds and used my flash for a light. I didn’t want the dwarf to know I was free-lancing.

I could follow the dwarf’s reasoning: If he could unravel all that ghostly talk, it might explain the secret of the whispering wine. I knew that I could figure it out just as well as Michael could, especially when I was several hundred words ahead of him. Things like that only show what a college education will do for you.

I took only the first bottleful of gibberish. There was no logic in trying to unscramble all ten bottles at once. I’m pretty good at crossword puzzles, but this was different. To make it easier I made

five lists of the words: phrases of more than one word, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and a fifth list for all the extra little stuff that holds a sentence together.

Although at the time it had sounded mostly like hash, I discovered from my notes that a lot of words gushed out in phrases or half-sentences that made a certain amount of sense. This would put me way ahead of the dwarf, because I was the only one who could possibly have gotten down so many words in rapid succession.

The longest single phrase gave me a clue to the whole show. It went: "intend to explode the theory that a solid is the best conductor of sound."

There was one fancy bit that went: "the deep, throaty voice of the great oceans." That blasted wine bottle spouted poetry!

Some of the words I put on the wrong lists, of course. For example, I had "babble" and "chatter" first as verbs and then later as nouns.

There were very few words broken in half. Whenever I found a syllable or piece of word that could mean almost anything, I tossed it overboard.

When I ran out of ready-made phrases, I started fitting words together that seemed to belong to each other. Once I had wised-up to the Professor's literary style, I turned out several fancy mouthfuls. I soon figured that the word "lane" should have been "Lehn," and all of a sudden I had "Professor Joel Lehn, the inventor." Words like "revolutionary device" went together like boy meets girl, but some were tougher, such as "the process of vapor condensation."

I MADE plenty of false starts—probably fifty at least. It was a struggle before I would give up "stupid, misguided, feeble ladies," because they sure make a choice phrase. Finally I settled for "ladies and gentlemen."

I had to throw in a few of my own

words in parentheses, to fill out the gaps, but here is the way I got it doped, just before the dawn poked its head in the window and I fell asleep in my chair:

"Ladies and gentlemen. (This is) Professor Joel Lehn, the inventor (speaking). (You are listening) to my greatest achievement, the ultimate in sound reproduction. That stupid, misguided body known as the scientific world, wasting its feeble mind energy on war, violence, and destruction (has failed) to grasp the true (possibilities) of sound and tone. (By this) demonstration I intend to explode the theory that a solid is the best conductor of sound. Why (have scientists) neglected liquid as a sound phenomenon? Why must they torture the ear and shatter the peace of man with crude, electrical sound instruments, ignoring (the fact) that true tonal perfection is a fluid, not a solid quality? The secret has cried out to them in the babble and chatter of every brook, in the deep, throaty voice of the great oceans, in the (gurgle) of bubbling champagne. (This bottle) proves it is (possible) to capture and to store up sound in liquid form by projecting sound impulses (into) (during?) the process of vapor condensation. By the opposite process of evaporation, the sound may be released. This bottle of concentrated liquid sound, like a phonograph (record), will tell my story for me. What at first (seems) terrifying will soon be recognized as a perfect sound machine (with) the cool tone quality of running water. (I have prepared) in the same manner a complete description of this revolutionary device, which will be continued in other bottles."

Part of it was sheer guesswork, but I was pretty proud of my effort—especially that one: "the gurgle of bubbling champagne!" "Gurgle" was my own idea!

I was gurgling down my own throat when I woke up with a snore so loud that it scared me. For a while I was com-

pletely fogged, and then I remembered: Words out of a bottle, sound in liquid form, whispering wine!

I muttered to myself, "You may be able to seal up a word in a bubble of wine, Professor, but can you teach a wine bottle to speak the King's English?"

I folded up my scribblings and crammed them in a pocket. I could hear voices and they weren't coming out of a bottle. Down on the front path I could see the dwarf, swinging on his cane. He handed a long envelope to Rayma Donelson and pointed his stick toward the fork of the main road, where a mailbox perched on a stump.

I beat it out the back door and did a Boy Scout slouch through the scrub, working around to the mailbox before Rayma arrived. When she saw me, she looked happy but scared. She has that kind of hair that stays awake all night and comes out bright as the sun in the morning. I saw her cram the envelope down the throat of her dress.

I grabbed her for a quick kiss and the letter crackled.

"Let me see it," I said.

She knew what I meant. "I can't!" she said. "He'd kill me!"

"That runt?"

"You don't know him. He's the cruellest man I ever knew—and terrible cunning; he seems to know your thoughts before you think them! He always knows when I'm lying."

"Baby, we're wasting time!" I snapped. "You wouldn't want me to go after that envelope, would you?"

Her eyes were big circles. "You wouldn't dare!"

I laughed. "Listen, baby, there are only two reasons that I ever molest a lady—business and pleasure. This is business."

I started to demonstrate; so she went after the envelope fast.

"Thanks, kid. I don't like to be a cad, but it pays well," I said, and then I made

another grab for her. "This is pleasure, this time."

She wiggled out of my clutches and laid a backhand across my jaw.

I shrugged and started up the path. "Think it over," I said. "An American rat is better than an Axis diplomat. Let me know when you want that dwarf pushed in the face."

Back in the cabin the Michael and his stooge seemed to be down in the laboratory. I took a quick peek at the letter. It was addressed to a man in Washington, D. C., and I don't mean J. Edgar Hoover.

The letter told everything that had happened since we arrived.

Sure enough, the dwarf had included his own interpretation of the crossword puzzle that belched out of that wine bottle. This is the way his version went: "Ladies and gentlemen, Professor Joel Lehn will be recognized by the scientific world as the inventor of the most terrifying sound phenomenon known to man. This demonstration—this bottle of wine—proves that it is possible, by projecting tone impulses into liquid form, to create the ultimate achievement in instruments of war and destruction. Through the process of vapor condensation, I have been able to store up great sound energy that will, by the opposite process of evaporation, explode with violence. Enough sound force is released by a single bottle of this concentrated fluid to shatter the ear and torture the mind and body."

WELL, I nearly split a rib laughing. To think the guy could get an entirely different story out of the same words! It only goes to show that a person usually finds what he's looking for.

The Michael had a little comment of his own at the end of the letter. "Gentlemen, imagine!" it said. "An explosion that strikes like an unseen hand, leaving no visible marks, but with all the man-

shattering power of a giant gunshell—terrific, hellish sound concussion that either kills or drives men mad. The whole democratic world will quail in its boots!

"Since the liquid evaporates automatically upon exposure to air, the amount of explosion can be controlled by limiting the process of evaporation. I am already experimenting with the liquid sound as a means of individual torture. If a man can be crazed to a certain extreme, without any physical pain, he will tell anything and be alive to tell it! I have an excellent ready-made guinea pig by the name of Hutch Egert. . . ."

"Guinea pig!" I roared, and crunched the letter in my fist. "We'll settle that right now!"

I'll never forget what I saw when I busted into the laboratory. At first it looked like a body wearing a fish-bowl for a head. Then I saw that the dwarf had put a huge glass jug over Sol Abbott's head, stuffing cloth around the shoulders and neck, with just enough cracks for air to circulate. The jug had a spout and Michael had jammed the throat of a wine bottle into it so that the liquid would evaporate inside the jug.

I could hear a noise like a dozen dog fights going on in that jug. Sol Abbott was tying his body into a crazy knot. His face was awful. The eyes were rolling—in opposite directions! The skin tightened against his jawbones as though two hands were yanking his ears back on his skull. I saw his gnashing teeth with the bare tongue lying helpless between them, and I dived.

I meant to slap the wine bottle out of Michael's hand, but my shoulder caught him in the ribs and rolled him into a corner. He piled up there, all head and no legs, like a spider drawn up into a ball.

I lifted the glass jar from young Abbott's head and crashed it hard on the cement floor in front of the dwarf, hoping

that a few splinters would find their way into his hide.

"What d'ya think this is, a concentration camp?" I snapped.

The dwarf looked up at me, all eyes, and I knew I had a fight on my hands.

I started working on Abbott, but he was crazy! He kept muttering, over and over: "I didn't drink any—not a drop!"

I know how those fellows felt when Moses turned a stick into a snake. I saw that cane of the dwarf's suddenly come to life. It lashed out at me with a swishing sound, slicing right through my belt and my clothes and there was a long red scratch running down the middle aisle of my rib-section. The dwarf was wobbling on his legs, but his cane was now a long rapier, razor-sharp. And my pants were falling down!

I've read "The Three Musketeers," but that's all I know about sword fighting. There was nothing at hand but the jagged neck of a broken bottle, which was very one-sided. I found myself against the wall, making weird passes at thin air, while a sharp blade tickled my Adam's apple.

"What do I do now?" I cracked.

The dwarf smiled, but his teeth weren't funny. "You have a sense of humor," he said. "Now I shall demonstrate my own. Will you please sit down, Mr. Hutch?"

"Hatch!" I said. "No reason to be so polite. Let's all sit down."

HE DIDN'T answer. He just tickled me into the chair. Rayma Donelson stepped into the room with those pretty saucer eyes, and he made her tie me to the chair.

"You're all wrong about this thing," I said to Michael. "It isn't supposed to be an explosive. It's just a new way to record sound. This guy Lehn figured out that liquid is a better conductor of sound than anything we've got now. So he thought up this scheme of bottling sound by distilling

this wine stuff and shooting words into it at the same time. I don't know what sort of apparatus he used, but it must be tricky. Where he slipped up was thinking that the stuff would evaporate the same way it went into the bottle. Instead the words were all mixed up. Do you get the picture?"

"How did you know all that?" snapped the Michael.

"I'm way ahead of you!" I said. "I do shorthand. And I didn't sleep last night."

The dwarf shrugged. "I'll teach you not to deceive me. Whatever the Professor's intentions were I shall improve upon them. When I get through here I am sure you will do anything I tell you. And you will talk. Oh, yes. You will tell everything. They'll all talk, all of them—whatever is on their minds will come out—the fools!"

At the end his voice was wound up to a scream.

Rayma wasn't happy about it. The dwarf found another big jar, and clamped it down over my head. The last thing I heard was the girl's voice, thin and sharp: "What are you going to do?"

My eyes began to bulge even before he got the neck of another wine bottle tucked into my headpiece. I blinked at Rayma and let my lungs out with: "I'm always on your side!"

My voice exploded like a bomb inside that glass shell. I knew what I could expect from that talking machine-gun in the wine bottle. I began to think about a lot of nice people who would have to go through this same little scene. I guess the girl was thinking about it, too, because I saw her trembling, and she reached toward one of the shelves of bottles that lined the wall. She stood on a chair to get a bottle that would make a good club.

I saw her slip, grab for the top shelf, and start the bottles rolling. A big gallon jar crashed to the floor and all hell broke

loose. Rayma threw up her hands and crumpled to the floor, the way a soldier topples into a shell explosion.

The dwarf began to spin around and around on the tiny sticks of his legs.

The Professor's web of glass tubes splintered into a sleet of fine glass that I could feel needling through my clothes. My glass shell split in half and fell away from my shoulders. Luckily, it had protected my ears. In a flash it came to me what had happened to Joel Lehn out there on the mountain—he dropped one of those big jars and the concussion killed him.

The dwarf had gone berserk from the shock. I could see what was coming. He was heading for the shelf of bottles.

I had to get Rayma out, and there I was tied to a chair. With a twist I toppled the chair, banging my head on the floor. I managed to get up on my knees and one shoulder, doubled up like a caterpillar caught in mid-stride.

"Michael, wait!" I hissed.

The madman laughed and smashed a quart bottle on the floor. That sound stabbed through my brain. I had to grind my teeth into the cement. The room was swimming around me, but I managed to wiggle over to the girl. I got her wrist in my mouth, and began to drag her toward the door, inch by inch. Every time Michael broke a bottle I wanted to scream and gnaw something. The poor girl's wrist was a mess.

I saw the dwarf, a bouncing monkey, leaping high in the air. With a cut of his sword he swept off a whole row of bottles.

THEY say a madman is strong as a dozen men. I know the shock of those bursting bottles was so great that I tore loose from that chair with a terrible convulsion.

I must have done the thing that was fixed in my mind, because I don't remem-

ber throwing the girl to my shoulder with one hand and holding up my pants with the other. I do remember a huge glass cask of that explosive stuff, the size that killed Joel Lehn, trembling on the edge of its shelf. I reached the end of the tunnel before it fell and then the world went to pieces around me.

When I came to, lying on the floor of the tunnel, Rayma was mauling my face with kisses and shouting over and over, like a broken record, "I love you, I love you."

She must have had that on her mind before the fireworks started, because right now she was out of her head. I slapped her back to normal.

We groped back along the darkened tunnel; my flashlight picked out the two bodies on the floor of the laboratory.

As I said, the Michael's body was hardly a body at all, just a little knot of flesh. But the head was big, very big, and the thing in his mind was still there in his

bursting eyes: "Kill and torture, torture and kill!"

It was torture to look at them.

Rayma was wrapped tight around my neck, and when we got out of that place she wouldn't let me go. "I hope you know what you're doing," I said.

She was still with me when I got back to the office.

"Boss, what do you think of men, and women, and children being tortured until they go mad?" I asked.

The Boss said, "How much money is there in it?"

I said, "That's all I wanted to know. I quit!"

"Yeah," he sneered. "Who's been giving you offers—Pinkertons?"

"Pinkertons!" I snorted. "Shucks, I got offers from Uncle Sam! I'm gonna join the army!"

The Boss had no answer for that. I may repeat it when I get to be a sergeant, but not here.