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TOOTH OR CONSEQUENCES

By Robert Bloch

"Hello, Doc. Got a little job for you."
So fascinated was Dr. King at the fangs
protruding from the horrible mouth, that
he failed to hear the stranger's words



A good dentist can always fill a tooth. But how would he fix molars that weren't even there?

DOCTOR KING rose to his feet abruptly. His lonely vigil as night physician in the clinic was interrupted by a curious sound. A very curious sound. A *clicking* sound.

Harry Spencer stood in the doorway. He was the young dentist from the office down the hall. King knew him well, but now he stared curiously, wondering if Spencer had a pair of dice in his hand.

No dice. But Spencer moved slowly into the office, a look of dismay on his usually cheerful face.

"Do you hear that noise, Doctor?"

"Yes," said King. "Sort of a clicking, isn't it?"

"Clicking, hell!" gasped Harry Spencer. "That's my teeth chattering!"

"A dentist with chattering teeth," chuckled King. "That's a novelty." But his eyes held no smile as he scrutinized the agitated Spencer.

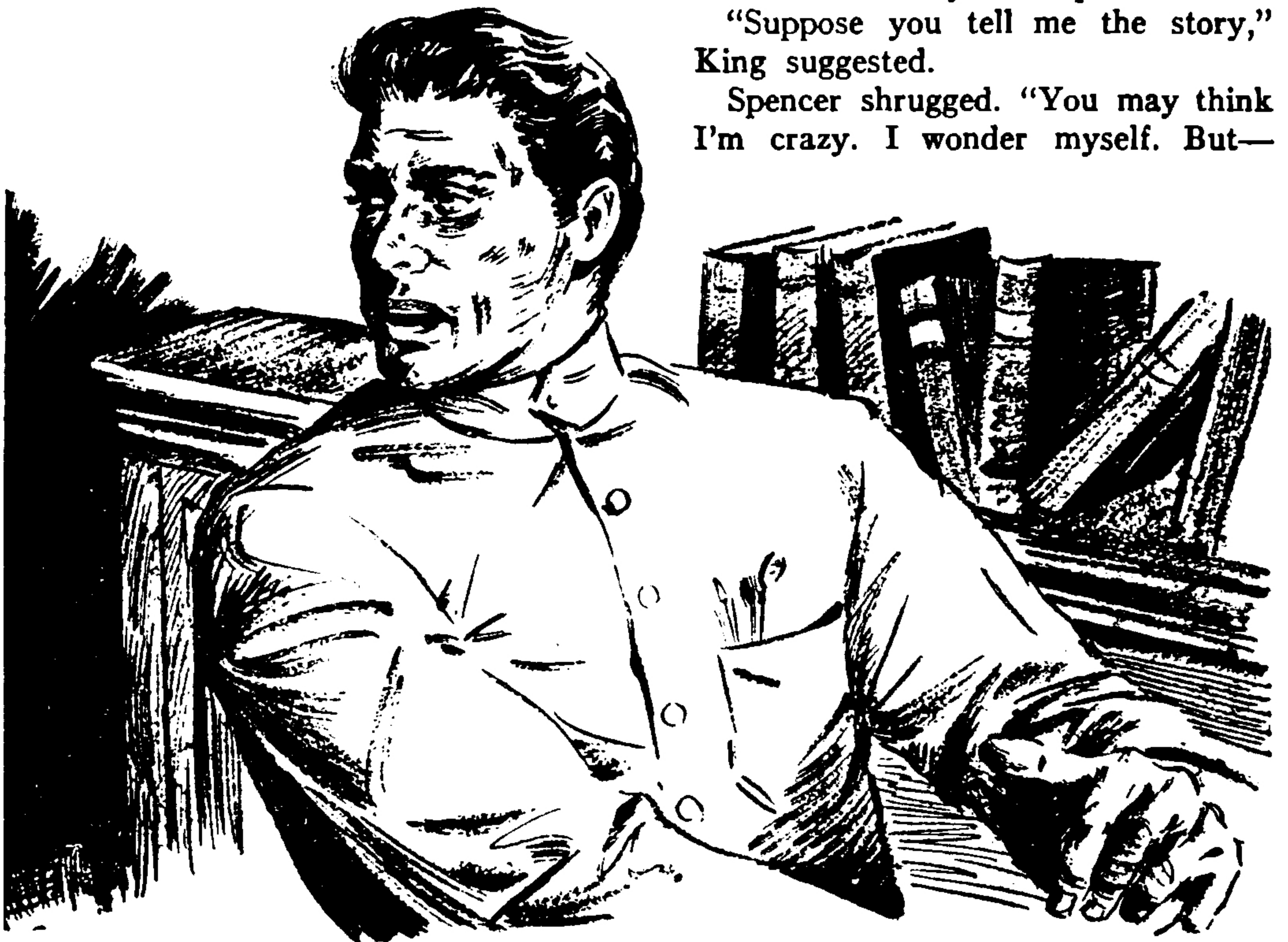
"Sit down— I'll get you a drink," he promised. And he did. Spencer gulped the whiskey gratefully. His teeth now clicked only against the glass.

"Better?"

"Much better, thank you. But Doctor— I didn't come in here for a drink. I need your help."

"Suppose you tell me the story," King suggested.

Spencer shrugged. "You may think I'm crazy. I wonder myself. But—



you asked for it."

King sat back as the young dentist began to speak.

"I had only one patient tonight. He came in about an hour ago. I'd dozed off in my chair, and when I looked around, this stranger was standing in front of me, smiling. He was a tall, dark man."

"Mae West type, eh?"

"You wouldn't joke about this guy if you saw him, Doctor. Or heard him talk. He looked—funny to me. Oh, nothing I could put my finger on. Just that he made me nervous, because he was so calm, so deliberate, so *cold*."

"He said his name was Vonier. Claimed to be a mill-worker. He was off the job at night, and he heard about the clinic so he came here to get some cavities filled."

"What's wrong with that?" asked King.

"Nothing. But he had a few ideas on how he wanted to be treated. He refused to fill out a patient's card with his name and address. He said that if he could come to me twice a week with no questions asked, he'd pay double for my work."

"Just an eccentric," King commented.

"Perhaps. But that no questions asked idea—that's bad. I realized that the minute I got him into the chair and took a look at his mouth. Then I wanted to ask questions."

Spencer shuddered.

"I wanted to ask him why his teeth were so large. So abnormally developed. Particularly the *biting* teeth."

Spencer shuddered.

King smiled. "Little Red Riding Hood and her grandmother?" he suggested.

"I told you it sounds crazy," Spencer murmured. "But there was nothing funny about that stranger's teeth.

Like the fangs of a wolf, or a dog. That's what they were, I tell you! Fangs. Fangs in the throat of a stranger with cold, deep eyes."

"Have you been having trouble with your nerves recently?" asked King, smoothly.

"No—but I will have from now on. You see, I haven't told you the worst part yet. The part that made my own teeth misbehave."

"After I took my first inspection I got my hand-mirror to examine a bicuspid. I thrust it into his mouth for a back view."

"Go on."

"I put it into his mouth to see the reflection—and *there was nothing there!*"

"Nothing?"

"No reflection at all! It may sound foolish, but have you any idea of how horrible it was at the time? You do the natural thing and get the unnatural. Like—like turning on your cold water faucet and having a snake wriggle out."

"I backed away from the chair and told him to go away. Told him to come back tomorrow night—I wasn't feeling well. He just smiled and left, because he could see it was true. I *wasn't* feeling well at all. That's why I ran down the hall to you."

Doctor King grunted. Then he went to work.

"Hallucinations, eh?" he mumbled, as he helped remove Spencer's shirt. "Dizzy spells," he commented, busy-ing himself with a stethoscope. "Delusions," he chanted, applying arm-bands.

Then— "Aha, just as I thought! Nothing wrong with you at all Spencer, except perhaps a little high blood pressure. Here—take these. Three a day, one after every meal. Ought to fix you up perfectly."

"What are they?"

"Garlic pills. Perfectly harmless. Now, don't worry. Come in again at the end of the week. You ought to come around nicely if you'll just forget this little incident."

Spencer thanked him, pocketed his pills, and left the office. King had given him back his courage, and his pills were easy to swallow. His advice, though—that wasn't easy to swallow.

Spencer did his best to forget, but that night he had a dream. It was a dream about a stranger with deep dark eyes, and long, pointed teeth. The teeth chattered, and Spencer woke up and listened to the clicking in his own mouth.

HARRY SPENCER breezed into Doctor King's office with a hearty, "Hello, Doc!"

"Well, how's it going?"

"Swell. No trouble at all."

"Glad to hear it. No more—spells."

"Not at all. This Vonier fellow came in again this evening. I examined his teeth with the mirror."

"Reflection O.K.?"

"Of course. Say, Doc, I must have sounded like a fool when I came babbling in the other night."

"Nonsense. I appreciate your little problem. Now, perhaps, you can help me with one of mine."

"Certainly—what's up?"

"Nothing much. But maybe you could help me. It seems something has happened to our blood plasma stores."

"Your what?"

"You know we keep canned blood for transfusions here at the clinic. In case of factory accidents at the mill. Well, during the last week they tell me some of the cans have been disappearing."

"Stolen?"

"Apparently. And at night. There's

plenty of staff people on duty all day, but in the evenings there's no one here in the clinic but you and myself. The refrigerator is down in the annex corridor. Haven't noticed anyone prowling around, have you?"

Spencer shook his head.

"No. But that's funny. Stealing cans of blood. Could it be a practical joke?"

King turned to his desk as he spoke. "No—I don't think so. You see, I found one of the cans outside in the alley last night. It had been ripped open. Here, take a look. Tell me what you think."

He held out the gleaming metal container to Spencer.

Spencer stared at the corrugated edges of the can for a long moment.

"Somebody has been feeding wolf-hounds," he said. "There are tooth-marks on this can."

"Thought so," said King. "Well, there's nothing to worry about. I'm putting a new lock on the refrigerator."

"No," said Spencer, edging out of the office. "Nothing to worry about at all."

But on the way home he worried, just the same.

During the last week, blood had disappeared.

During the last week, Vonier had come to the clinic.

The long arm of coincidence?

Granted. The long arm of coincidence might sweep away a few cans of blood. But the long arm of coincidence didn't have any teeth in it. Teeth, biting into can tops. Long, pointed teeth, like the ones in Vonier's mouth.

The following evening Spencer took a look at those long, pointed teeth again.

Vonier came in quietly, sat down in the chair. Spencer tried to smile

professionally as he produced his mirror and made his inspection.

Then he gulped.

The mirror thrust in Vonier's mouth showed nothing, again. Nothing at all.

He went dizzy, for a moment, because he remembered there was a new lock on the refrigerator down the hall. And now there was no reflection in the mirror.

Vampires have no reflections.

After drinking blood, after absorbing the *humanity* of blood, they might become normally visible in mirrors for a short time. Vonier, sneaking in and ripping open cans with his teeth; drinking deep. Then coming into the office for dental work. Once before he had missed, somehow, and there had been no reflection. Now the refrigerator was locked, and again there was no reflection.

SPENCER stared down into the thin, pale face in the chair. His mind whirled as he stepped back. He nicked his thumb accidentally as one hand brushed the instruments on his table.

"You'll—you'll have to excuse me," he murmured. "Another spell, I'm afraid. You'd better come in again tomorrow."

The tall, dark man smiled, shrugged, arose from the chair.

Spencer couldn't help it. He sat down, closed his eyes. He heard Vonier's footsteps across the floor. His eyelids flickered momentarily—but he saw.

He saw Vonier bending over the white tile table, his head darting like a serpent's to the spot where the tiny red jet lay. His tongue lapped—and then Vonier grimaced with a look of curious pain.

Spencer sat there, trying to control

his shudderings as Vonier left the room.

Now it couldn't be denied.

The dark stranger with the long teeth, the bad teeth, was a vampire.

Abnormal teeth because of an abnormal diet. Why not?

It explained the decay, too. There was another explanation for the decay—an explanation involving sleeping all day in a terrible way. In a coffin, packed in grave-earth, hidden somewhere in the city.

Vonier, who came only at night. Who drank blood from cans. Whose reflection vanished when he had no nourishment.

"The blood is the life."

Of course he wouldn't allow his teeth to be pulled! A toothless vampire?

Naturally he wouldn't give his address. If Spencer tracked him down by day he knew what he'd find.

Certainly he had to grimace when he encountered the spot of Spencer's blood. Spencer was taking garlic pills, and vampires cannot endure garlic. Some authorities—Spencer shuddered when he thought of a demonologist as an *authority!*—said that garlic killed vampires. Why should it have such an effect?

Well, why is an allergy?

So there it was.

Spencer didn't sleep that night. Early in the morning he went down to the public library. He wanted to read certain books.

About silver bullets and stakes through hearts, and crucifixes and holy water.

About bodies that decay not in the tomb, and rest not.

About things that never die, that walk by night and drink deep from the throats of men.

About sunset to sunrise and pointed fangs and the legends of all na-

tions in all times.

Early that evening he went in to Doctor King's office. He didn't have the courage to speak. King would accuse him of madness, in the stupid, melodramatic way in which people actually do accuse others of madness. The police would do nothing, and Spencer must keep still, keep the lock on the refrigerator door, keep thinking.

Doctor King gave him something to think about, all right.

"I'm out of those garlic pills right now, Spencer. Get another batch in Monday, I expect. It won't hurt you to wait a few days, I guess."

He guessed.

No garlic pills. No garlic in the bloodstream. And a *hungry* vampire!

Spencer backed out of the office, hurried down to his own quarters. "I must keep that refrigerator locked," he whispered. "I must. What if there's an accident and they need blood in a hurry and it's gone?"

Yes. But—*what if Vonier is hungry and goes for your neck?*

There was a solution to this problem, Spencer realized. He could run like hell.

He opened his office door with that resolve.

And the vampire walked in.

VONIER was tall, dark, thin. That's the way vampires are supposed to be—but so are a good third of all normal males.

Vonier was a foreigner with an accent. But there are many such in a mill town.

Vonier was pale. But Spencer was even paler, just now.

Now, it wasn't height, weight, complexion or accent that marked the vampire for what he was. It wasn't even the teeth, or the peculiar *faded* quality of his dark suit.

It was something about his lips. Lips that were thin, yet full. A paradox, unless you saw it. Lips that were used too much in partaking of nourishment, and became overly developed.

And of course, Vonier's eyes remained. Remained, staring sightlessly in death for twelve hours out of every twenty-four. Staring sightlessly at—what? No wonder they were dark and deep and knowing. No wonder they glared in hunger greater than human hunger. How long had they stared and hungered? How old was this creature?

Vampires are ageless and deathless until stake or silver strike their hearts into corruption. How many throats had been ripped before this thing discovered the blood transfusion cans in the refrigerator? How many would be ripped again, now that the cans were protected by a stout lock? And how soon?

Very soon, Spencer thought, unless he could act. For Mr. Vonier was quite pallid tonight. He was slow in his movements, almost drunkenly deliberate. Only his eyes were quick. Quick and hot, as they gazed at the dentist's throat with a desire he had never seen in human eyes before. An unimaginable desire.

"You're—late," Spencer choked out.

"I was held up," Vonier answered, with a little smile. "I had to do some shopping."

Shopping. That's what you do when you're *hungry*.

"Well, let's get started."

Vonier slid into the chair.

"What must you do tonight, Doctor?"

Spencer's voice trembled. He had to put this over. He had to.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Vonier, that some of those teeth must come out. If you'll let me make a cast of your

mouth now—just a wax impression—I can tell you in a jiffy where the trouble is.”

“Please, no. I am very sensitive. I do not wish for you to place anything in my mouth.”

What? No nice little plaster of paris cast that Spencer had worked on? No nice little plaster of paris cast, treated with liquid air, to harden immediately in the vampire’s mouth and clamp his teeth together forever?

That *was* a disappointment.

But there was plan number two. Spencer’s voice mastered a tremor. “Still, you’ll have to have a few extractions. Those lower left molars are pretty bad.”

“I do not wish—”

“I’m the Doctor! I’ll give you gas, so it won’t bother you. Those teeth are probably dead, anyway.”

Dead.

Vonier smiled, but Spencer didn’t like it. He got the gas going, fumbled with the tube and cone.

“Breathe deeply.”

Do dead men breathe?

The gates of Hell closed. Eyelids fluttered down over them.

He—it—was sleeping.

Now! Spencer was stern. Sure, they’d call it murder. But he must chance it.

HE FUMBLED with the drill. Put in the new head. The long steel bit he’d bought specially. The steel bit that was like a sharp splinter. Sharp as a stake. A stake to drive into the heart.

The drill buzzed. Spencer fed more gas into the creature that lay all white and still under the cold blue light; lay like a slick and glassy corpse in the morgue. Fill it with gas, and then drive that drill home into the heart—

Pulses pounding, he guided the

drill towards the rotten chest. One swift stab, now.

“Just a moment.”

The eyes flickered. Lightning. More lightning in the steel clutch of the long, cold hands.

“My teeth are not there, Doctor. You know that.”

“I—”

“You know a lot more, too. Don’t you, Doctor?”

Vonier sat up. The smile was full now, the long fangs exposed.

“You know why the blood was stolen, don’t you? You know about my teeth, too. You know why your garlic kept me off last night. Isn’t that so, Doctor?”

“Y-yes.” Spencer said it the way men used to when the Inquisitors tightened the rack.

“Ah. Then don’t you know that one of—us—cannot be killed by poison, or bullet, or sword? That fire does not consume us when we walk, nor gas drug our senses?”

Spencer realized the truth too late. Much too late.

“Who has locked the refrigerator?” A soft voice. Soft as the clinging caress of a serpent. And as cold.

“I don’t know. The clinic doctors must have the key.”

“Get it for me tomorrow. You know why. I will have it or you will provide me with nourishment.”

“Garlic—” Spencer began. It took courage to say anything without screaming.

The vampire smiled. “I think not. Something has happened to your supply of garlic, hasn’t it?”

“How do you know?”

Mr. Vonier’s answer was quite dreadful. “The *carnivorae*, my dear Doctor, have a very acute sense of smell.”

The black-clad figure slid from the chair, moved towards the door. Then

Vonier turned. Spencer looked into a haggard white face. There was hunger there—but for the first time he read something inherent in all starvation. A kind of pathos.

"I don't like this," Mr. Vonier said, softly. "You must believe that, Doctor. I was—normal—once. It's what psychiatrists might call a compulsion, you know. A compulsion. Something driving you."

"But that's beside the point, isn't it? You are not interested in the long years. The long nights. The longer days—"

Spencer stared, but Vonier regained his composure swiftly.

"I tried to fight it. I took blood from the cans, instead of in my *regular* way. But when you are denied food too long, you get hungry."

"Remember that. Give me the key tomorrow night—or I shall force my way to nourishment with my teeth. They are very sharp teeth, aren't they, Doctor? Good night."

The door closed.

Spencer didn't follow. He could have taken that last chance, trailed the vampire to its lair somewhere in the city, waited until daylight and entered with a stake.

But human beings are human beings. Sometimes they faint. Spencer did when the door closed.

IT WAS dawn when he came to. Dawn—of the last day.

Spencer didn't waver. If it wasn't his neck tonight, it would be somebody else's neck. He had to protect the blood supply, for he had seen the injured workmen roll in, their families clustering about them in moaning groups. They could not be denied. There was no way out unless he could find it himself.

The priest couldn't help him. It was noon when Spencer went to Father

Donnelly and gave him the refrigerator key to keep. He wanted to confess, but at the last moment he knew it would be no use. He just told Father Donnelly to keep the key for him.

He took a crucifix, too.

That might hold *it* off for a little while. The crucifix could not destroy, but like garlic, the shape held an allergy.

Then Spencer went home, took out his revolver, and began to mould a silver bullet.

The stake had failed. Garlic had failed. Gas had failed. Poison and fire wouldn't work. He couldn't pull the teeth or trap the mouth.

So mould a silver bullet.

Why should silver affect *them*? Perhaps it was the contact of silver with the blood stream. The blood circulates in 46 seconds. That is, in normal men. The physiology of vampires must be strange enough. Silver poisoned, silver might disturb elements of dead blood mingled with living blood.

The physiology of vampires...

Spencer believed in the silver bullet. He had to. It was the last resource of vampire legends and it had to work.

But it didn't.

Evidently legend was legend—legend from a day of rough pistols and muzzle-loaders. It was already dusk when Spencer realized he was beaten by ballistics. Mould and file as he would, the bullet wouldn't fit for firing.

And he had melted down the silver crucifix for the bullet!

It was the old story. Science against the Powers of Darkness, that sort of thing. And this time science had failed. Spencer smiled wryly. He wished he had the crucifix now. But with it or without it, he had his

rendezvous to keep.

How he walked to the clinic he never knew. Every step was a battle. But Vonier would be there, and if he didn't show up, Vonier would stalk abroad. Stalk abroad and drink—

Spencer hurried in. No weapons now. He knew what this meant. He was walking the Last Mile when he went down the hall to his office.

He sat there counting the minutes. Silver bullets shooting into Time. Silver bullets and a silver key and a silver crucifix. 46 seconds, and the physiology of a vampire. .

The door opened.

Vonier.

He didn't say anything. He didn't need to. Spencer read it in his eyes, read the hunger blazing there.

The smile in the pale face, the ageless face, was sardonic.

"I have two cavities to fill tonight, Doctor. One in my teeth and one in my stomach."

Spencer almost laughed. There was a jest—with teeth in it.

"Before we proceed, please, will you take a look at this one here? It's very painful."

Harry Spencer's most difficult patient climbed into the chair, and like an ordinary mortal, indicated a yellow fang. His long, talon-like finger fumbled in his mouth.

"Zhiz un eer."

Just another patient, indicating the source of his pain. Just another—

Spencer looked at the infected incisor. Enamel decay. Cavity. Against the roots, deep.

Fill the teeth of the creature that was to kill him? Anything! Just to stall, stall for time, stall against the question of where the key was. Perhaps the creature thought he had brought the key. Perhaps these last few moments might suggest a way out.

Harry Spencer was, after all, a professional man. He gave his patient's teeth a professional examination. He would give this tooth a professional filling.

"Lose the fear in routine. It's just another patient."

Spencer's brain mumbled to him, then shivered in fear as he looked into the deep eyes of Vonier, saw what waited there, what lurked in hunger.

HIS FINGERS didn't tremble as he drilled. How he longed to plunge that drill down the red throat—into the lungs from which welled an odour of unspeakable corruption! But it would do no good. Vampires do not die by steel.

His fingers didn't tremble as he turned away and compounded the filling.

But they did tremble as he packed it into the enlarged cavity. For a moment his pick slipped, and he cut a tiny nick in the gum of the creature as he finished the job. A little gout of blood welled, and Vonier winced in pain. But the filling was in place.

Vonier sat up. "There, now." His voice was hoarse with a hunger no longer concealed. "And now, Doctor—if you'll just hand over that key?"

He read the answer in Spencer's eyes, read it in Spencer's beaded forehead

The vampire rose swiftly.

Arms wound about Spencer's body, tight as the grip of shrouds. Fingers like white worms writhed into Spencer's throat, bending him back.

Clothes smelling of grave-earth, a breath of carrion, and through it all the white face burning bright, bending closer. Spencer saw the yellow fangs gleam, saw the teeth descend to his neck.

He fought desperately—but Vonier

held him as though he were a puppet with flailing arms. Vonier held him and the teeth descended.

Even at this last moment he could think about how long they were, and how sharp, and how they could sink into a throat and tear the life away.

The vampire ripped his head backwards, stabbed that mouth down into Spencer's neck—

And fell.

Spencer went down, too, when the grip was released. The creature was somewhere beneath him, groaning. Or was he? Groans died away, and Spencer stared at a litter on the rug.

Less than a minute since it had risen from the chair and gripped him. Less than a minute, and it was gone. Even the rotted clothing...

And it was less than a minute later that Doctor King walked into the room.

"Hello, Spencer. Just closed up the office for the night. Thought I'd drop in and see how you felt."

Spencer was busily engaged with a broom, sweeping up a little pile of powdery dust on the floor.

"Had a patient tonight?" King asked.

Spencer nodded. "He's gone though. Filled a tooth for him."

He stooped and picked something gleaming from the dust at his feet.

"Funny thing—the filling seems to have dropped out when he left. Careless of me."

"You're a bad dentist, eh?" King chuckled.

"No," said Spencer. He stared for a long moment at the tiny silver filling he held amidst the dust in his hand.

"No—I'd say I'm a damned good dentist, at that!"