

Satan's Incubator

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Randolph Craig

CHAPTER ONE

City of the Damned

WHEN Dr. Skull came back to his office that morning, the dust was unusually thick on his desk. He looked about him with oddly young brown eyes. The bust of Galen on his bookshelf, the books themselves... No, Mrs. Timiny had not been in to clean, which was strange, for she had not missed a morning before in six years. Absently, then, Dr. Skull employed the black sleeve of his neat and ancient coat to rub the city grime from his desk top.

The old man frowned. He had seen much dust that morning during his calls, dust that lay unheeded in houses where misery had ended all thought of daily chores. He thought too, while his back straightened as against some invisible burden, that thus it must have been at the destruction of other cities, with the dust at last burying outraged ruins from the eyes of the future.

And now there was dust in his own office... Suddenly he wheeled about, at the whoosh of a falling weight hurtling through the half-open door. A cry died in the doctor's throat—for the thing that lay inside his threshold had once been a little boy.

He was Michael Timiny, one of the doctor's great army of godsons. Four years ago, Skull had brought him into the world—and now, with a great icy blast of outraged sorrow, the doctor knew he would see little Michael out of the world. One of the child's eyes was a gaping red hole; the left arm, clawed and tooth-marked, hung limp and gory at his side, and in at least one spot, through that torn little linen suit, Skull could see how the vitals had broken out of the skin.

"Michael!" He thought he must be screaming, but the name came out in a gentle whisper, as he lifted the moaning child and carried him to a couch. "Michael, boy.... Who—what?" And then he clenched his lips against further questioning.

He guessed what the answer would be, if the child could still make an answer. He had seen other mangled human wrecks in the past fortnight, heard a dozen horrible, unbelievably shocking accusations.

It wasn't only he. It was everyone in New York who had eyes to see. This was

new, this attack on the threshold of a doctor's office—but then, some of the doctors had gone mad themselves, turning, bare-toothed and blood-lusting, on the very patients they had been called in to help.

One tiny hand was reaching up toward him. From the small flecked lips, working spasmodically against the approach of death, came faintly terrified, incredible words: “Mamma—Mamma hit me...Hurt me...”

So that was why the office hadn't been dusted. That was why every simple routine in the City's vast life had been disrupted by the forerunning events of terrifying, complete collapse. Men were turning on the women they loved, people tortured children and cats and dogs, anything helpless they could lay their hands on. The infection had spread to widowed Kitty Timiny, who had sworn she would get on her hands and knees to lick the streets clean, if she had to to provide for her beloved Michael. Now she had become the carrier of this pestilence of mad brutality and violence. Skull whispered to the child, “Where is your mamma?”

“Mamma—gone...” He was talking in a dream before death, was Michael Timiny, in an infant nightmare of pain and treachery. Skull filled a hypo needle and gave him the blessing of morphine. It was all a human being could have done.

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DR. SKULL stepped to his threshold and looked up and down the hall for some sign of Kitty Timiny. Neither she nor anyone else was there. The attacks had always happened that way, when attacker and victim were alone. Always, afterwards, the attackers had disappeared, and not one of all the hundreds had been found for questioning, though police were working night and day.

He straightened and shut his door. The office was dark, with its thick curtains muffling the blazing Indian Summer heat outside. A neat, modest, but well-equipped office, with no sign of disturbance save the ominous dust and the child's blood on the couch.

A metallic hatred came into those oddly young brown eyes. Kitty Timiny? It was impossible for him to believe Kitty Timiny criminally responsible. No, something had been done to her, and to all those others who had committed unspeakable atrocities and then vanished.

Ordinary homicidal mania would not take the same pattern, always, with this terrifying frequency of occurrence—surely, unless a single brain were behind the whole monstrous epidemic of murder and torture, some of the maniacs would have been found! It was too hard to believe that hundreds of persons, insane enough to kill their loved ones, should suddenly become clearheaded enough to effect a complete escape from New York’s trained police force!

In all his medical study and research, Dr. Skull found only one phenomenon which might account for the murder epidemic. He remembered a quotation from the article he had actually written, intending it for the American Medical Journal, but then he had decided not to send it, believing it too fantastic for men of science to accept:

The recurrence of garnet-purple pigmentation in the irises of such persons as I have mentioned above should be taken as a grave warning to the world at large.

During every great social catastrophe in ancient history, purple eyes have made their appearance as eternal harbingers of destruction. They have been either the cause or effect of terror among a people already ravaged by war or pestilence, inducing an unaccountable mass hysteria, often leading to wholesale atrocities.

This mass hysteria reduced the population in some cases as high as seventy percent in certain districts of Central Europe after barbaric invasions, and ruined entire sections of civilized society. By dint of incredible and impoverishing taxes, terrorized peoples have sometimes bought off self-claimed leaders of the purple eyes, who many insist to have been the same person, living through centuries.

For some time, the phenomenon of changeable garnet-colored eyes had been observed in New York, and commented upon by some of Skull’s colleagues. But none of them had made any connection between that phenomenon and the wave of murder threatening the City, for the good reason that no one but Skull had tapped the ancient books which contained the little-known legend of the Purple Eye.

Superstition? Certainly. But—Dr. Skull thought back to the single human agency he suspected behind these multiple atrocities.

At his desk—the desk Kitty Timiny had not cleaned and would never clean again—he wrote another of those death certificates which had so annoyed authorities

to whom the matter was obvious. It was for Michael Timiny, aged four, giving as cause, murder—by person or persons unknown.

Sooner or later, that unknown murderer would attempt to silence the one doctor who sought to pierce the screen hiding his existence. So engrossed was Dr. Skull that he did not hear the garbage truck pulling to a noisy stop just outside his door.

And then the door opened again.

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THE man on the threshold was short and he wore a battered grey suit, and a low-pulled cap that shielded half his face. Two other male figures, dressed with similar anonymity, their eyes like-wise shielded, hovered behind him.

The man in grey snapped, “I know what’s on that certificate. Change it. The mother did it.”

And for emphasis, he steadied the revolver in his hand.

Dr. Skull put his pen down slowly. Was this the direct attempt at silencing him that he had expected? His brown eyes were intent and unafraid as he returned the stranger’s scowl. If he could only fathom the color of the man’s eyes—but the very fact that he and his comrades kept their eyes covered was a sign in itself.

“You’re sick, my friend,” Skull said.

“Sick?” The man turned to those behind him, snorted, then took a further grip on his revolver. “Listen, Doc, you got us wrong. We’re not sick. But you’re going to be sick—if you don’t make out a new certificate.” They advanced.

Skull did not move. His eyes were fixed on those cap visors. The cold bore of a revolver touched his temple.

“I’m afraid you lose,” he said simply. “Dead men don’t write—and while I’m alive, this certificate stands.”

They must have known that, there must have been more planned than the mere bravado of threatened murder. And then he smelled the chloroform coming. It

was that split-second of recognition, for which he could thank his medical training, which saved him. Had he waited an instant longer... but he didn't wait. The man who held the chloroform-soaked handkerchief felt that handkerchief jerked upward into his eyes.

Skull ducked, and the self-appointed anaesthetist's howl of rage rang out simultaneously with the gunman's shot. He had learned before that the odds are not always on the side of numbers, and in the brief instant before the three disentangled themselves from one another, Skull tackled the gunman with surprisingly modern football tactics, floored him and hurled the weapon from his grasp.

He flung himself toward the gun, seized it just before the third stranger's foot covered the spot where it had landed. Another bullet buried itself in the floor moulding, missing Skull by less than an inch... and then the doctor was facing them, armed himself.

A humorless grin played over his old mouth as he stood erect at last. What they had planned for him after the chloroform, he didn't know, but he knew it would have been unpleasant. The scrap was his own impromptu addition to the proceedings, and he was having the best of it. Before the trio recovered from their astonishment at this coup by a scholarly old doctor, the gun in his hand spat a muffled finis to the encounter, and a would-be killer dropped with a hole in his kneecap.

Three against one, and the odds were swinging the wrong way. The pair who were left scurried from the room, and Dr. Skull let them go.

"No! Don't, Doc, don't—" The wounded man shrieked as Skull bent over him, and his words ended in a groan.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Skull began. Then he stopped, frowning, for the man had fainted. It wasn't recrimination Skull wanted of him. So far, the melee had been private—the roar of a big motor outside drowned out that last shriek, and the mufflers on the killers' guns accounted for a satisfactory lack of investigation from without. But soon the others would come back with reinforcements, to cancel just such a confession as Skull hoped to extract from their wounded comrade.

That the wounded man could give him information, he was positive. When he

rolled back the unconscious man's eyelids, the irises shone at him like twin garnets!

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HE LOOKED again at the rigid tiny body of Michael Timiny on the couch. Twenty years later, there would be an empty place in the world that Michael Timiny might have filled... Skull thought of dreams that would never be dreamed, work that would remain undone till the end of time because Michael Timiny was dead. There would not be too many such empty places, he swore silently, his eyes tragic with compassion.

Then he picked up his phone, and reported Michael's death at the precinct. The voice at the other end was harried, almost bored. It was that bad—death by torture in the City had become a commonplace.

In half an hour, maybe less, he could expect the police. The wounded man on the floor was moaning aloud again; soon he would come to. Skull flung him over a powerful shoulder, and walked through the back entrance of his office, down a dark narrow staircase into the basement. Through a mouldy wooden door at the back of the bin, he entered a windowless chamber furnished with cot, bureau, chair and mirror. It was an inglorious enough chamber in which to begin a city's salvation, but it would serve.

He laid the limp body on the cot, and began a systematic search through the pockets of the shabby grey suit. Suddenly he stood bolt upright. Could Kitty Timiny...? But that was impossible. It contradicted the reasoning which had already led him this far.

For what he had found was a page from his own calendar, rumpled and soiled, but unmistakably his—and he had thrown it away three days ago! The purple-eyed stranger hadn't picked it up that same morning, because Skull knew that the slip of paper had been out of his office since Saturday.

Into what hands it had passed in the interim, he did not know, but it was obvious that they had not been friendly hands. He looked again at his own blunt handwriting. "Suggest medical investigation, possibly under Victory Hospital auspices, into wave of murder-mania. How many persons with purplish eyes still in city? Will their apprehension prevent further atrocities."

It was only the scribbled rough germ of an idea that was to end in war between the forces of life and death—but it had been important enough to warrant this recent attack. The enemy had been apprised, had opened fire. Now, more than ever, Skull knew he was on the right track.

Suddenly, the man on the couch came to life. He scrambled to the end of the cot, backed into a huddled shape against the wall. His shriek echoed with peculiar hollowness through the underground chamber.

“The Scorpion! Oh, God, he’s after me! He—he’s coming!”

Skull wheeled as the sound of a slow, dragging footstep approached. It was as though some monstrous beast were advancing on deliberate, crooked claws...

And then in the doorway he saw something that shouldn’t have been a man, but was. He was of normal height, but his body was unnaturally lean. His dark face was vicious, a wrinkled screwed-up area on the enormous head, and his hands were covered with the strangest gloves Skull had ever seen. They were of flexible brown metal, and the fingers ended in claws.

He paused there for a moment, and then he said in a thin arrogant voice, “I have been sent for you, Dr. Skull. You will come with me.”

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IN THE split-second before the stranger darted at him, Skull found the revolver in his side-pocket. He fired but strangely the bullet ricocheted off the being’s chest. The man must have come protected against such an eventuality—that gruesome accoutrement on his hands could not be the only metal he wore. Only the little dark face was vulnerable.

Before he could fire again, his throat was tightened by the grip of a metal claw. He struggled furiously, guessing that it was more than his own battle he fought now—but the breath was ebbing in his lungs, and his heart was pounding tortuously, as though for escape from its cage of ribs. He managed a short vicious kick that sent his attacker momentarily off balance, and loosened the death-like grip. Skull backed, his lungs sucking desperately for air, and aimed at the small ugly face.

The man on the cot shrieked again, in pain and revulsion that scratched like a

cat's-claw down the doctor's spine. Skull saw a four-inch-long living arc of deadly venom loosening its claws from the wounded man's face—a live scorpion! It fell to the floor, started crawling... In the next instant, it died under the doctor's heel.

Skull's fingers still clutched the drawn pistol, but that momentary distraction of his attention had been enough. One of the cruel claws was tracing a red line under Skull's chin... And it was as in a dream that he saw the evil smile of the man who had been sent for him.

“Not deadly venom, Dr. Skull—don't be alarmed, this scratch won't kill you. It will only make you quite, quite harmless.”

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WITH a mighty effort, Skull freed his arms from the predatory clasp, shoved the man from him again, and fired. His enemy dropped, hideous fingers clawing at a gaping hole in his jaw. The face—Dr. Skull knew he had hit that vulnerable face at last. He knew from the direction of the bullet that it should have traveled upward, toward the brain—any movements the man made now would be reflexive, and would end within minutes in death.

The stranger laughed, and it was inhuman laughter that he might have used seconds later in hell. “Dr. Skull—you have not won yet! I am only the Scorpion's emissary—but the Scorpion himself cannot die at your hands, or at any man's! You will have him to deal with.”

The hysterical braggadocio suddenly quieted, and the evil figure humped into dead flesh. Skull turned to look at the man whose life he had spared earlier, upstairs, but that wounded kneecap had been fatal, for it had not permitted escape from a poison-insect.

Bitterly, Skull rifled the dead hand in his. He stared fixedly at it.

Branded into the palm was the outline of a scorpion.

He removed the gloves from the man he had killed. Concealed on the inside of each metal finger was a tube containing a clear, colorless liquid. Like the sting of the scorpion, those fingertips were venomous. Probably not immediately fatal, that transplanted venom—but certainly paralyzing. Under the gloves, the man's

hands were normal and human. But the palm was branded.

Branded with the mark of a scorpion!

The doctor's mouth was grim as he took a steel stamp from his shiny suit pocket. Its harmless-looking handle was hollow, and contained the acid which moistened the die. Between the eyes of the Scorpion's henchman—eyes that gleamed even in death with a tell-tale purple light—he pressed the outline of a human skull.

That night, he knew, the papers would announce that the mysterious Skull Killer had resumed operations.

Six years ago, the legend of the Skull Killer had come to flagrant life when three insurance policy racketeers were found one by one, in various lonely corners of New York, with raw outlines of skulls burned into their foreheads.

In the underworld, the Skull Killer was a dread legend, and the Mark of the Skull was known as a declaration of war to the death. Among the police, he was regarded benevolently, though each fresh killing brought assurances from the Commissioner's office that the Skull Killer would shortly be brought to justice.

The big shots whose convictions wouldn't stick, the nasty small fry who were protected by crime's big shots one by one, during the past six years, fifty of them had been found with the Mark of the Skull on their brows. And so the police, who know their business, talked loudly of investigation, patrolled their beats, and did absolutely nothing about the matter.

No one suspected a connection between the name of a harmless, scholarly Eastside doctor and the elusive Skull Killer. True, from time to time, sundry men had made that connection, but they were now in a world from which none can return.

Dr. Skull left the dead emissary with his dead underling, the mark of a scorpion burned into his palm and the Mark of the Skull on his brow. He had closed the door on that room, when a remote clangor through the wooden corridor told him the police were coming.

When they entered his office, Dr. Skull was again seated at his desk.

“AND that's all I know,” Dr. Skull concluded. For minutes he had been

answering their questions mechanically, and now the medical examiner had gone, and he was left with the plainclothesman.

“No idea where we can find the kid’s mother? That’s pretty damned funny. The kid’s murdered, and his mother doesn’t show up. Maybe she didn’t want to show up. How long did you say she worked for you?”

Dr. Skull hadn’t said. For the moment, he was not listening to the big, harried-looking and perspiring detective. Outside, through the freshly—drawn curtains, he saw one of the city’s huge grey garbage trucks. Its motor idled ominously, reminiscently. A motor had drowned out the scurried escape of his two morning visitors with their guns and chloroform, and he could have sworn this was the same motor.

The conclusion that dovetailed in his brain should have been incredible. But it was also incredible that Kitty Timiny should have turned on her own son. Incredible, horrible things were happening. That three-day-old calendar page in a madman’s pocket, wherever else it had been in the interim since it left Skull’s office, had left by only one agency—the only agency which collects the things which a man throws into his scrap-basket. And that agency was the Sanitation Department!

“Doc!” The detective was weary, impatient. “You know this neighborhood. Now, had the kid any other relatives? Will someone else take care of the funeral, if we don’t find the mother?”

“I will,” Skull said quietly. “I was Michael’s godfather. And now, if you’ll excuse me... A doctor is kept fairly busy these days, as you must be, yourself.”

He turned toward the open window, and threw his voice forward, so that the gaping men on the garbage truck outside might hear every word. “If you should find it necessary to get in touch with me later, I’ll be at the Victory Hospital within an hour.” He reached for his pad, and wrote the address.

The detective grunted, “I know where it is,” and left, not taking the note.

It had not been intended for him. Skull rolled it into a crumpled ball, and tossed it out of the window. Covertly he watched and saw a white-wing leap from the garbage truck, grab at the note, and pocket it.

The doctor's mouth was almost smiling. He had no tenable ground as yet for making a wild-sounding accusation against the City's own employees, but if he gave them enough rope, he would have grounds enough and more.

There was a good chance that he might have more company now, and he didn't want it just yet. He went down the back stairs to the chamber where he had left his dead. There was a message he wanted the corpse to deliver for him—that was why Skull had been so loud and clear about his destination.

He gathered, from the faint thuds that sounded above the cellar chamber, that someone was already searching Dr. Skull's office. Not for the doctor—though he would have been a profitable end, to their murderous way of thinking—but for that tell-tale corpse, with the mark of the scorpion branded into his palm, and the garnet glint of evil in his eyes.

When they found their corpse, he considered, it would be even more revealing. For then they would know that the City was championed by the Mark of the Skull, stamped clearly on the brow of a dead killer.

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IF THERE was little about the aging Dr. Skull to suggest the phantom killer, there was even less about the man he was about to become. He faced the mirror, and began to towel his face. As he toweled, the wrinkled disappeared.

He stripped a flesh-colored band from his forehead, and the grey wig from his head. Then the removal of two pieces of padded wire from his lower jaw radically altered the shape of his face.

The man in Dr. Skull's mirror was as young as his strong brown eyes. Black-haired, lean-cheeked, obviously no more than thirty, he had the look of a man who had learned much and forgotten nothing, who had dealt with matters of life and death, executed responsibility—and had known tragedy.

He put the neat, shiny black suit into a bureau drawer, and donned in its place an impeccably tailored navy serge. He would have been welcomed at any exclusive club in New York, but his business now was grimmer. He spread the decency of a plain cover over the stiff figure on the couch—later, he could dispose of the corpse through automatic medical means. Then he slung over his shoulder the body he had branded, and went out by another door.

Through a series of twisting corridors and sagging cellar doors, he made his underground way through the cellars of the block. Undetected, his burden still heaving with every step, he entered an abandoned gas-main which ran beneath the Second Avenue traffic.

In such fashion, he came to the enormous cement basement of the Victory Hospital. Here he thrust the marked body into a large, half-filled ashcan and covered it with debris. It would surprise the garbage collectors, who had manned the truck in front of his office, to find a message from the Skull Killer so conveniently in the course of their daily work. And they, and their leader would know of the old doctor's double life—which knowledge, in times past, had always proven fatal.

He brushed his coat-sleeves, made sure that he was unobserved, and sauntered out into the September sunlight.

Even if he had been observed, the young man knew he would have aroused nothing more than casual wonder at his presence in the basement, and that wonder would likely have gone unexpressed—for the Victory Building, a fifty-story skyscraper whose size and facilities had made it the medical center of not only New York but of the entire East Coast, was owned by Jeffrey Fairchild, who was now using this strange mode of entrance to the building.

Jeffrey had used his enormous inherited fortune to purchase the building on Columbus Circle shortly after its erection, and had endowed the famous Victory Hospital on its premises. The best available doctors comprised the hospital staff—patients all over the country for whom no other hope was left, were sent to the Victory Hospital, and there, often enough, they were cured.

A twentieth century miracle, people called the Victory Hospital—and sometimes they wondered why rich, idle Jeff Fairchild had sponsored so idealistic a project. There were some who praised him for it, and others who cynically pointed out that he could well afford so generous a gesture for the pampering of his easy conscience. Jeff disregarded the applause and the cynics alike—he had presented the Victory Hospital to humanity, purely and simply for the good it would do.

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HIS own younger brother, Robert Fairchild, was almost a permanent patient in the Victory Hospital. Jeff's eyes clouded a little at the thought of Robert. The

boy hadn't been born an incurable cripple—no, that had come later. Robert had been strong and handsome and very young when it happened. It was something that might have happened to any headstrong boy, he thought defiantly. The boy hadn't been really bad...

Just a gambling debt, such as any youngster might contract. And he'd been too proud, that year at school, to write home for additional allowance to cancel his foolishness. Proud, and maybe a little desperate, for only utter desperation could have made him consent to be an accomplice for a fake accident insurance policy ring. He'd pretended to be injured by a truck belonging to a well-known company, in a staged accident. He was to get a cut of the money paid by the company in compensation. The company had been insured against such eventualities, and the insurance company investigated before paying off. By that time, Robert was ashamed of his connivance—he was ready to forego the money, ready even to face just prosecution for his single slip from grace.

Not so Robert's crooked sponsors. Rather than reveal the true state of affairs, they themselves had crippled Robert for life, made the faked injuries pitifully, lastingly, real. Again Robert's pride had kept him from accusing his attackers. He had come home to a heart-broken family, ashamed, irrevocably lame, with a bare chance for life. Robert wasn't bad, Jeff assured himself, only weak. And how strong or stable is the morale of a boy of sixteen? What chance had he had?

That had happened six years ago. Robert had never confided the truth to his older brother Jeff—but he had confided in his doctor, Dr. Skull. Had anyone been interested, he would have discovered an odd lack of record in Dr. Skull's career before that time, for Jeffrey had assumed the guise only that he might gain his brother's confidence. It was six years ago, too, that the Skull Killer had first begun operations with the unsolved murder of three accident policy racketeers.

From that date, Jeffrey Fairchild's interest in crime-fighting had started. Years before, he had graduated at the top of his class from the best medical school in the East; medicine had been his first love. Robert's illness taught him healing must go deeper than he had imagined. Disease can be a moral contagion as well as a physical one—and a man with true physician's ardor for health and normalcy in others must needs find himself pitted against those who stalk by night, maiming and killing the well; against criminals in high places who starve the hungry and poison men's minds so that they turn against their brothers and do them injury; against the unhealthful presence of crime in society from the

outset.

As Dr. Skull, Jeff had cured the poor in his slum neighborhood who suffered in mind or body; as the Skull Killer, he had rooted out malignant growths from the body of the community. It was violent surgery, he knew—but there were times when nothing short of a radical operation could keep the patient alive.

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JEFFREY FAIRCHILD looked up and down Broadway. Traffic was almost at a standstill, and he was in a hurry. Best way to get downtown today was the subway.

Few New Yorkers, he found, shared his opinion. No one else waited for the local at the Fiftieth Station, formerly one of the busiest stations in the City. People were afraid. Not that the streets were any safer than the subway, but out of the general panic induced by the murder wave, had grown a mass claustrophobia; a terror of shut-in spaces.

Either the panic must end soon, Jeffrey thought, or the city would collapse of sheer fear hysteria, if from nothing worse. He had traced the trouble's root so far to a broad source in the New York Sanitation Department. At least one of those innocuous trucks had been manned by devils. But how, and through what means, could the Sanitation Department be used by a demoniac intellect to bring about a mass wave of murder and torture? Was the whole department involved, and did officials know more than they told? How could operations have progressed thus far without arousing the remotest public suspicion?

One man among Jeffrey Fairchild's extensive acquaintances might possibly answer those questions. He was William Hawkins, a former classmate, and at present, assistant deputy commissioner of the Sanitation Department. Yet Bill Hawkins wasn't the man anyone else might have picked as the clue to an endemic horror.

He'd settled down, done well in a secure job, married a Junior League girl with more blue blood than money, and seemed more than contented with his work, his home and his seven-year-old daughter. Nevertheless, Jeffrey expected to learn something from the visit.

There were few enough people in the subway car for him to notice the bare-

headed pair who sat opposite him, talking heatedly of European politics and ancient architecture. Jeffrey Fairchild smiled. By the big blue C on the boy's sweater, by the library stamp on the books under the girl's arm, he knew them. College students, from Morningside.

His mind relaxed from the concepts which had oppressed it so long, and he thought musingly of those happier dead years when he too had walked bare-headed in the sunlight. He remembered a Thanksgiving Day, eleven years ago, when he had stopped the ball carrier in that last decisive touchdown march, with seconds to go...

And then, as though the long-dead-day had come to sudden life, Jeff Fairchild tackled again.

*

IT WASN'T that the tall, bare-headed boy had done anything—yet. It was that even while the young man watched his companion fondly, a weirdly familiar purplish gleam had come into the boy's blue eyes. And the tackle was pure reflex, the instinctive decision of a trained mind and strong body.

He heard the girl scream, realized that the boy had thrown a bottle of chemical into her face, and knew he had at last caught one of the murder-maniacs. A desperate, fighting hope surged in his brain—if he could only keep this one from vanishing!

Things happened quickly after that. There were screams, and the trampling feet of passengers from other cars, and the terrified voice of a conductor shouting, "You're hurt, miss, you're hurt!"

The cry, "Help me hold this fellow!" was torn from Jeff's throat by the impact of a heavy shoe in his face. He reached upward, caught the boy by his trouser-belt, and then he felt himself swept sideward as though caught by the slipstream of an aeroplane propeller. The boy was his connection with that powerful pull; he heard a faint exclamation from the boy's lips...

And then the train door was slamming against his shoulders, threatening to cut him in two. He had lost his grip on the maddened boy, and his arms felt half-ripped from the sockets. With a last desperate jerk of the shoulders, he forced the door wider, and flung himself back into the moving train.

“Clear away!” he roared at the passengers, lurching to his feet.

The white-faced group backed from him, hysteria in their eyes. A woman began to sing a hymn in a loud, crazed voice, and the conductor was working the injured college girl’s arms up and down in a pitiful, ludicrous effort to bring her to.

But it wasn’t bringing to she needed—for she was conscious, horribly and painfully conscious. A choked moan swelled and died again, from the lurid burned gash that was her mouth.

Jeff Fairchild pushed past the conductor and grasped the girl’s shoulders. There was nothing to do, not till they got her to a hospital. He turned to the passengers again, and shouted, “Who opened that door?”

The melee of hysteria answered him, and as the train pulled into another station, a regular stampede for the platform left him alone with the girl. Even the conductor had gone, searching no doubt, for a company guard.

Jeff picked her up, got her into the street, and with the half-sullen, half-despairing glances of pedestrians following him, he hailed a taxi and left her at the nearest hospital.

“Attack?” asked the nurse at the desk. Jeffrey Fairchild nodded.

“That’s Case Nineteen for today,” said the nurse. Her eyes rolled upward at Jeffrey, and she seemed to wince.

It was that way all over. You hated strangers as you hated snakes, because any stranger might kill you. And it didn’t even have to be a stranger. It could be any human being.

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ANOTHER two weeks of this, Jeff thought grimly, and there won’t be any nurses at desks. People won’t dare go to work, there won’t be markets open for food, no policemen keeping order, no doctors to tend the dying...

He saw a garbage truck making its slow way down the hot avenue and finished his thought—there’ll only be the trucks, carting away desolation. And everything

will be—desolation. Unless...

Unless one man stopped it. But how? Of one thing he was sure now. The murder-maniacs hadn't vanished of their own free will. No, that tug through the open subway door hadn't been accomplished by the college boy's muscles, for the boy had been as surprised as anyone. The attackers had not been found for questioning, because—someone was afraid to have them found.

Jeffrey thought of the brand he had found on the palms of two dead men. Could there be some pointed evidence on the persons of the murder—maniacs, something the real criminal was not yet disposed to reveal?

Who had burned a scorpion into the flesh of kill-crazy men?

Jeff brushed off his disarrayed person in the men's room of a nearby hotel before proceeding downtown as he had planned. If Bill Hawkins couldn't clarify the vague conclusions in his mind, who could, and where would he turn next? But that was impossible—the department couldn't hide so great an inner corruption from the notice of its own officials. So Bill must have at least some slight information, unless—unless he refused to give it.

And that refusal would be, in itself information of a kind.

The City of New York houses its Sanitation Department and its Board of Health on Worth Street, in the same building. As he went upstairs to the office of the Assistant Deputy Commissioner of the Sanitation Department, Jeffrey saw bulletins outside the clinics of the Board of Health.

Warn all patients against entering the West Eighties: Murders reach week's peak in West Eighties. Warning to all doctors: Pistol permits will be issued on demand since the death of Dr. Wayne at the hands of a patient's father. Advise housewives to boil all water before using. THE CITY MUST BE SAVED.

Jeffrey Fairchild looked at that futile, hopelessly inspirational bulletin, and suddenly he felt that he either wanted to find something to murder, or else to get very, very drunk. He thought of the City as it had been—raucous, busy, and to one of its natives, beautiful. He thought of the laughter of Michael Timiny, now stilled; he thought of the wise, homely faces of women in the market-places, whose mother-wisdom had not availed against this scourge...

But there was no one to murder, and, Jeffrey did not like to drink. He murmured, “Damn them! Damn them, and help me, God...”

On the third floor, he walked briskly down the corridor, and announced himself to a secretary. “Mr. Hawkins, please. Jeffrey Fairchild calling.”

The girl said wearily, as though she were used to saying it, “Mr. Hawkins isn’t in just now. Do you care to leave a message?”

“I’ll wait,” said Jeffrey Fairchild, his lips a grim, set line.

CHAPTER TWO

The Skull Killer Strikes

WILLIAM HAWKINS, Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Sanitation of the City of New York, had shared a silent breakfast with his wife that morning. Miriam's pretty oval face, usually so vivid and cheerful, was a strained mask. Was she feeling it, too, he wondered in sudden panic. She was looking at Emily with little sidelong glances. It was impossible, of course—but it had come without warning into other homes. Why not into his?

Crazy to think of a thing like that, touching him and Miriam and Emily—but weren't the other cases crazy, too? God, when he thought of the way they'd found his aunt... and it was his uncle who'd done it. The children had sworn to that. And then the friends, people William Hawkins had grown up with, and others, senselessly uncountable in numbers, suddenly turning to insane murder and torture, as though love were turning into poison in people's veins! He winced from the drawn anxiety in Miriam's face, the queer way in which she looked at him, not at all the way a woman should look at her husband. Could it be—? And then William Hawkins realized that she was looking at him in exactly the way he was looking at her!

It was wrong, dead wrong. Husbands mistrusting wives, wives not daring to smile good morning, and both of them worried half-sick over children. A clatter of cans in the street below reminded him that he was late for his desk in the Department, that he had dallied too long in that mockingly sunny breakfast room. Uneasily he kissed his wife good-bye, and left the apartment with seven-year-old Emily, who was starting school that September.

Miriam Hawkins, left alone, dusted her furniture and thought of death. Wednesday was Delia's day off, Miriam's day for setting her little household to rights... The heat, it suddenly occurred to her, was stifling, all-pervading. It seemed to sear her skin under the damp housedress, to choke her lungs. Surely, there had not been a heat wave like this before... Miriam understood, or thought she did, why those people—why those people... Words blurred in her head, she gasped and dropped her duster.

I'm being silly, she thought, as she leaned back in the chair. She could finish

cleaning the house in twenty minutes, and then she would rest. But when she rose, the room about her grew vague again, the street sounds from downstairs were drowned out by a roaring in her ears, and though the great heat still pressed on her from without, her body had gone deathly cold inside.

She stumbled into the kitchen for a glass of water, and had to sit down again on the way. Panic found an easy foothold in her wavering consciousness, and she wished desperately that she were not alone in the house. If she could only reach the blessed water! The blackness rose, drowning her fright and her thirst. Somewhere in her fogged brain, a strong will was screaming, screaming in vain protest.

No, no! She must be dreaming, Miriam thought, though it was a queer and terrible dream in which she could see nothing and hear nothing. Her whole being was given over to the sensation of blind pain. A huge poisonous monster seemed to be whirling her from claw to claw, and she thought she felt its sting injecting a fiery venom into her.

When she tried to struggle, she had lost track of her arms and legs— they hurt her, terribly, but they had gone out of her control. She must wake, even if she woke to death! Unless this were death, and the torment everlasting...

When her senses cleared, she found herself on the kitchen chair, head bowed over a table. Except for a nagging ache about the temples, and a curious fogged feeling when she tried to think, she felt none the worse for that brief faint. After a while, she went from window to window, pulling down shades, to guard against a recurrence of that touch of heat.

The activity annoyed her. If Bill had been any kind of man, he'd have sent her to the mountains, instead of making her slave here in town— But what was she thinking! Loyally, Miriam reminded herself that the pedestrians in the street below, and the drivers of that garbage truck rolling down the Avenue, were probably less comfortable than she... And she hoped they were! She hoped they stewed, all of them! She hated them!

She had never hated anyone before. She didn't know why—everyone was so self-evidently deserving of hatred! Out of an old habit, she continued her housecleaning, and suddenly she realized how she hated that, too. A broom splintered as she snapped it viciously across her knee, and she wondered how it

would sound if a human neck snapped that way. The thought made her laugh, and her own laughter, different from what it had been before, frightened her.

She went to her mirror to see if she were actually still the same person. She wasn't.

The woman named Miriam Hawkins had blue eyes—and the eyes of the woman in the mirror were the eyes of a hunting cat in the dark. She shrieked, and sent her fist through the glass, but one jagged remaining fragment still reflected her jewel-bright, purplish eyes.

*

WILLIAM HAWKINS thought often of his family during that oppressively sweltering morning. There had been no reassurance in his office as to that swift descent of witless murder into the city. It wasn't what people said—it was what they didn't say. Everywhere, William Hawkins saw that strained, tight-lipped look on faces which had been so recently warm and friendly. No one trusted, and no one dared to trust.

He sat at his executive desk in the Sanitation Department, completing the morning routine and hating it. It would be good to finish the damned work, good to call Miriam and hear her cool voice saying that all was well... His phone rang, and with a throbbing sense of premonition, he wondered if anything had happened at home.

It was not his home calling, however. It was the Central City Incineration Plant, and the voice at the other end of the wire was the almost hysterically excited voice of the plant foreman Larry Dugan.

"Mr. Hawkins? This is Dugan, out at the Long Island plant. I swear, it wasn't my fault—please, Mr. Hawkins, for God's sake, will you come out here? If you could tell the boys..."

"What?" Hawkins roared. "What happened? I can't leave everything just because—"

"—just because," Dugan interrupted him frantically, "Benny Taylor hopped into the incinerator! I swear he did it himself—crazy with the heat, he was! And I had to close the hopper, Mr. Hawkins, or the others would have gone too! I—"

William Hawkins uttered a loud oath. "I'll be right over," he said, trembling with shock.

He tried to get hold of himself on the bumpy hot ride out to Queensboro, and half succeeded. The heat, the heat... Everyone was going queer with the heat. If people didn't kill each other, they killed themselves. Still—Dugan had talked of the others—others who would have followed Benny Taylor into that ravenous inferno if Dugan hadn't closed the hopper.

Hawkins shuddered. He didn't like the idea of the men in his own department going crazier than others. In anyone else's department, it would have been a news item. In his own—it was too close. Too darn close!

Dugan did little talking at the plant. One look at the worried Irish face told Hawkins that his foreman had been through hell, and didn't want to talk about it. But the few truck drivers and truck drivers' assistants who still lingered about the hot dump were only too eager to tell Hawkins what had happened.

"It was that yellow boss of ours, Mr. Hawkins. He's so scared, he hadda kill Benny Taylor! But that woman in the furnace..."

"That what in the what?" Hawkins interrupted.

"That woman in the furnace! So help me, Mr. Hawkins, she was there. A real witch, she was, I guess, because you don't have to tell me what the temperature is in there. I know. And there she was, pretty as sin, dancing in the flames, and grinning, and sort of waving to us all. Then Benny, he yells, 'I'm coming!' and before we knew it, he jumps in. Dugan started yelling too, saying that hopper had to be shut before anybody else jumped in after him. Was that right? Burning a man like he was so much garbage? Gosh, Mr. Hawkins, do you think any of us would have gone in after him? Especially with him screaming as soon as he hits the fire, and trying to reach his way out again?"

William Hawkins put one hand to his forehead, and said, "My God." He hardly knew what to think. Accidents happen, he knew—but this accident had too many incredible angles. A woman in the flames, and two workmen attesting her presence! If that were a mirage, it was a damned remarkable mirage. And then, Dugan shutting the boy in to die, horribly, to be burned alive.

He tried to talk to Dugan, but all Dugan could say was, "I did what was right

while I was boss here. If you want me to quit, I'll quit! But you'll be sorry, after!"

"That's all right," Hawkins told the foreman. "You can stay... and I'll try to find out what makes those flames look like a dancing woman?"

He returned in tragic bewilderment to his Manhattan office.

That episode had gone deeper under his skin than he dared admit, even to himself. It wasn't just an accident, or a suspicious accident—it was one more link in the nightmarish chain that seemed hourly tightening around the heat-stricken city.

*

HE PUT in a call to his own home, and received no answer. That didn't mean anything; Miriam might just be out shopping. Or did it mean—No, he couldn't think that way. A man couldn't have everything go from under him at once. His job had become as bewildering as a keeper's job in a madhouse—it couldn't touch his home, too!

"Two gentlemen to see you, sir." It was his secretary. "Mr. Fairchild, and Mr. Devanter."

Hawkins frowned in irritation. Dammit—he'd forgotten that lunch date with Jan Devanter. And in normal times, he'd have been sitting on pins and needles all morning, just waiting for the great man's arrival.

He managed a grin at his own expense, ran nervous fingers through his hair. No matter—if Jeff Fairchild were here, he was seeing Jeff first, and to hell with the department! Cheerful, competent Jeff—it was like a breath of clean air from a dead spring, to think of Jeffrey Fairchild on a morning like this. There was a lad without troubles, he thought, remembering the other's fortune with frank respect. Jeff couldn't have been touched by the spreading menace. He'd be a new man, if he could only take half an hour off to chew the fat with Jeff!

When he saw Jeffrey Fairchild, the smile of anticipation faded on Bill Hawkins' face. Jeffrey Fairchild, though he was cool and impeccable as he'd been the blessed middle of last winter, had obviously not come to chew the fat.

His lean face was no more cheerful than Hamlet's, and instead of helping Bill forget, as he should have done, he said without preamble, "What the hell's wrong with you people in the Department of Sanitation?"

"Wrong? Why—what would be wrong, Jeff?" Why was he lying? His voice quavered in his own ears. He was afraid to admit it even to himself— and here was Jeff, with a face long as the pit of hell, making blatant charges.

"Everything!" Either Jeff didn't see or he disregarded the plea for soft talk in Bill's eyes. "This madness that's ruining the City—I think your workers have more to do with it than anyone else."

Did Jeff know about Benny Taylor? Did other people? Was there a connection between that hideous incident at the dump and the hysteria which had threatened even Miriam and Emily? And would he, Bill Hawkins, be called on to do something about it?

It wasn't what he'd bargained for, he wanted to scream at his visitor. He was only a plain man, with a plain man's attachment for his job, his wife, his kid. Hell, he couldn't save a city! And he knew, with sudden positive clarity, that he didn't want to see Jeff Fairchild, or exchange another sentence with him.

"You're dreaming," he told his former classmate, and he tried to laugh deprecatingly. "And Jeff, it's been swell seeing you again, but there's a man outside, and I can't keep him waiting. You understand."

"I don't understand yet," Jeffrey persisted. He shoved Bill back into his swivel chair with his palm, and sat down again with the air of a man who knows exactly what he wants. "In the first place, you don't look as though nothing were wrong. Your hands shake, and there's a little pulse in your temple that's going a lot faster than normal. You're lying, Bill."

Bill Hawkins ran his finger under his collar. Not exactly comfortable, he thought, having an ex-medical student for a friend. Then suddenly he found himself blurting the whole thing out: Benny Taylor's cremation, the truculence of the men at the plant, his own terrible feeling of helplessness. Jeffrey Fairchild nodded every so often— every word was registering.

Bill grew frightened. It was Department business; he shouldn't have confided it.

“Jeff, it’s nerves. It’s not as bad as it sounds when I tell it. It’s the heat, making me nervous, and then I go to pieces over an unavoidable accident...”

Jeffrey shrugged. “Unavoidable? Accident? I’m not so sure.” He showed no signs of leaving. “Who’s the man you have such an urgent appointment with? Not the stocky gentleman in your waiting room?”

Miserably, Bill nodded. Why couldn’t he be like Jeff? Jeff wouldn’t leave till he’d gotten everything he wanted—some men are made that way. And Bill desperately wanted Jeff to go, for Jeff was rubbing salt into raw wounds in his soul. But Bill wasn’t getting what he wanted.

“Who is he?” Jeff continued inexorably. “What’s his business with you?”

“Why should I tell you?” There—he was acting as a man has a right to, in his own. With some dignity, Bill Hawkins rose, only again to be forcibly reseated.

“All right,” he concluded lamely. “If this means three whoops in hell to you, you’re welcome to it. The man outside is Jan Devanter. He’s from Holland, and he’s come here as a one-man commission to study sanitation methods. I was appointed to do the honors. That’s all.”

Jeffrey was still unsatisfied. “You’ve changed a lot,” he said. “There was a time when you’d have been a bit less anxious about a one-man commission from Holland. What’s his string on you? Did he promise to leave a million dollars to little Emily if you showed him due respect?”

Bill could hardly hear his own voice, and he wasn’t looking at Jeffrey’s face. “The Department needed new equipment, Jeff—and I couldn’t get another apportionment from the City. What was the sense of turning down three new trucks just because an outsider donated them?”

“Especially when you’d already charged them to the Department account, and didn’t have them to produce.”

Bill’s eyes went wide. “That’s true—but how did you find out?”

“You tried to touch me for ten thousand about two months ago.” Jeffrey’s face was stern, and a little damning. “A man doesn’t borrow that much, except to meet a past obligation. But I didn’t know then. I’m sorry—I’d have given you

every cent I had to keep you from taking those trucks.”

Everyone grafts a little in politics. Jeff should have known that. But it wasn't mere graft Jeff was condemning—it was something far worse. Bill said, “Jeff—if there's any connection between what I did and these—these atrocities—I'll do anything to make up for it. If you expose me, it's curtains, but—”

“That won't do any good now,” Jeffrey said. He rose and made an unsmiling departure. Somehow, by this time, Bill didn't want him to go. And somehow, also, he was a little less sure of his eagerness to keep that appointment with Jan Devanter.

Uneasily, he considered that there could be no harm in it, and besides, it would be downright crazy of him to insult the man at this stage; and so he went into the waiting-room with his arms extended, and a cheery forced smile on his face.

*

HALF an hour later, Jeffrey joined a group of school children on their way home to luncheon. He looked among them for Bill Hawkins' daughter. The memory of Jan Devanter's glinting purplish eyes made him anxious. Had the man overheard that telling interview between Jeffrey Fairchild and Bill Hawkins? Or even if he had not heard, could he guess at its trend, and what would become of Bill because of it?

Hawkins himself would not be infected by the murder-mania—his sanity was too important. He was the key to the campaign against the city. But he had one vulnerable point, and if that were touched, he would be too broken for protest over his devil's bargain—his family!

Then he saw a solemn-eyed little girl of seven, and offered to guess her name.

She shook her head. “You can't.”

“You're Emily Hawkins. I've known you a long time. I knew your father and mother. I'm going to see your mother now.”

The child clapped her hands, delighted at being recognized. Shortly, she was walking happily with the kindly young man, her hand clasped in his.

At the threshold, she introduced him. “This is our friend, Mamma. His name is ___”

Miriam Hawkins did not wait to hear. With a fierce hysterical reproach fading on her lips, she reached for the child like a tigress clawing at its prey. Her eyes flashed like garnets.

Emily uttered one terrified cry before Jeff snatched her from her mother. Miriam struggled for a furious second as he thrust a white handkerchief against her mouth, and then, overcome by the chloroform, she lost consciousness.

At that point, Jeff wheeled to face sudden intruders.

*

THIS time, he was better prepared for unexpected visitors. When the ragged trio appeared from Miriam’s kitchen—it was a fresh trio, he noted, wondering how strong his enemy’s band of assassins was numerically—he stood with drawn gun waiting for them.

But no shot invited his return volley. The part of him which hated the taking of life made him stand still, so that when he saw the weapon coming, he barely had time to dodge.

It was a weighted ball, covered with three-inch spikes that buried themselves in the wooden floorboard as though in butter. And it had been aimed at his face.

He emptied his revolver at the trio, but they hadn’t stopped for further fight.

There was no time to follow them, for Emily was sobbing nervously in a corner, and he feared the effects of further delay before she received medical attention. As he lifted the child tenderly and carried her to bed, he thought hard about that spiked ball which had missed him by inches.

Three inches long... deep enough to pierce the brain, if one spike entered an eye. And then what? He’d have been found here dead and mutilated, as so many others had been found, and Emily would say that Mamma had gone away...

And someone would have made out a death certificate for Jeffrey Fairchild, naming his murderer as—Miriam Hawkins. He swore softly. How many of the

supposed murder-maniacs had been actually innocent of lifting a finger?

“What did you say?” Emily asked him, and he apologized to her gravely for the oath. Her eyes closed, and she sank back to the pillows with an expression of startled misery frozen on her tiny features. She moaned, “Mamma...Mamma...”

“Mamma’s not feeling well,” he murmured soothingly. “But she’ll be all right. Now you be a good girl, and drink this.” He poured liquid from a bottle in his pocket medical kit into a small cup, and held it to Emily’s lips. Obediently, she drank. “Now, that didn’t taste bad, did it?” he asked.

“No-o. It was all right. But I—want—my Ma-” The words droned off, and she relaxed into deep sudden slumber.

Jeff rose and looked for a tender second at the small face, now so happily composed. A small fist unclenched seekingly and he put his hand in hers for a second. She seemed to know, for she smiled in her sleep.

He made a swift and thorough survey of the apartment, using his nose for guide. In the kitchen, he opened the dumbwaiter shaft, and finding the dumbwaiter itself exactly on the sixth floor level, he slipped into it a few slivers of chemically treated paper. The paper changed color. That peculiar faint odor had come from a rare saline solid, which when exposed, decomposes rapidly into gas, and in that state, acts as an anaesthetic. He had once toyed with the idea of using the saline in operations, and then discarded it as too dangerous.

But whoever had done this to Miriam—for he knew that he had not found her in a normal state—had had no such qualms. Someone had placed that saline on the dumbwaiter, hoisted the dumbwaiter to a level with the Hawkins apartment, and then, when it was reasonably certain that the gas has penetrated through the cracks in the dumbwaiter shaft, had used the dumbwaiter as a makeshift ascent to get to the unconscious woman. What had been done to her next, he did not know.

His combatants of the previous moment must have arrived via this means—and left by another. That was why the dumbwaiter was still at the sixth floor.

Next, he went to the telephone and dialed police headquarters. “Dr. Skull speaking,” he said into the receiver, “I want to report an attack at 1250 Park Avenue, Hawkins. I’ve treated the victim, a child, but I must leave her, so please

send someone immediately.”

He waited until he surmised the police were well on their way, then carried the unconscious Miriam into the dumbwaiter, fastening the door securely. He made a dignified exit down the elevator and out the front door. Then, unnoticed, he slipped through the service entrance into the basement.

*

HE HAD just had time to lower the dumbwaiter and take Miriam from it, when he heard the service elevator coming to a stop behind him, and he found himself looking into a pair of purple eyes.

There was no time to explain that he didn’t like people who tried to spike his face. Instead, he reached into his pocket for the steel stamp he never left behind him, his left arm described a short sharp arc, and the man dropped, with the Mark of the Skull burned into his forehead.

He had felt no pain. The single stem spike between the eyes of the skull stamp was thin and deep. It penetrated the brain instantly.

“Holy—” exclaimed the man’s companion. But whatever he meant to say was finished in another world. The Skull Killer was showing his teeth. There was a third man—he looked at the branded corpses of his companions, and fled, not waiting to avenge them.

Responsibility for Miriam prevented Jeffrey from following, though he heard the echoes of a heavy-motor turning outside. By the time he had Miriam in a safe place, the garbage truck would be gone, and its trail swallowed in the anonymity of New York traffic.

He delved into the honeycomb of little passages in the basement with Miriam’s limp shape in his strong arms, to emerge a few minutes later from a side street entrance. He hailed a taxi and gave Dr. Skull’s address.

Miriam Hawkins was still unconscious when he placed her on the examination table. He reached for her wrist, and counted the pulse. A little slow, but that was to be expected under anaesthesia. Systematically, carefully, he continued giving her a complete physical examination which revealed primarily that Miriam Hawkins was one of the healthiest young women who had ever been on that

table. There were traces of saline compound in her system, but that also was reasonably accounted for.

Jeffrey pricked her finger, held a glass suction tube to the cut. Then he made various stains with the dram of blood he had taken, and held them to the light. A drop of blood was left in the test tube. He broke the seal of a vial of chemicals, poured its contents onto the blood drop.

A precipitate formed immediately. There was some venomous substance in her blood. He put it aside for further testing.

*

MIRIAM was still asleep, and likely to sleep for a few hours. Jeffrey looked at her with self-satisfaction. She was the first of the homicidal maniacs who had not disappeared immediately after an attack—she had not even completed that attack! Miriam was suffering from nothing worse than shock. His success awed him, gave him that feeling which leads men into temples.

The mood passed quickly into more practical channels. He knew where Jan Devanter was going to be that afternoon—Bill Hawkins had told him. Anxiety for Miriam had kept him from questioning the Dutchman at their first meeting.

But now it was after three, and Jeffrey felt the imperative need of his presence at the incineration plant that afternoon. He did not wish Miriam disturbed in her present state—and he did not wish her unguarded, either. Those from whom he had snatched her would be sure to return.

He smiled. Robert Fairchild, the crippled boy whose life was a saga of bitterness against things in general, had one thing to believe in— and that was Dr. Skull. Robert had chosen to spend one of his rare periods of release from hospitalization in quarters in Skull's building, just to be near the man he admired. It would make Robert happy to be given a task by Dr. Skull—even if it were a task beyond his strength.

But Carol Endicott, the capable girl whom Jeffrey Fairchild had hired as nurse for his brother, could tacitly be relied on to take care of things in Skull's absence. Wonderful girl, Carol—a little rough with her patient sometimes, but Robert needed that kind of roughness, just to keep him sane.

*

IT WAS Carol Endicott, a few moments later, who opened Robert's door to Skull. She was young, lissome, and her clear ivory-toned face was pretty under the neat nurse's cap, but the expression on her features suggested that she had not been looking at pretty things.

"Dr. Skull!" She sounded vehement, as though she had just been scolding someone else, and the scold had not left her voice. "You've got some influence with that pigheaded patient of mine—try to make him see some sense!"

A darkly handsome boy, with pale pain lines under his large brown eyes, wheeled his chair rapidly toward the door.

"Don't listen to her, Doctor," he said with quiet that contrasted to Carol's almost eager irritation. "She just wants to be near Jeff— she's always wanted to be."

Carol turned from the doctor. "And what if I do?" she blazed at Robert. "He's worth being near, that brother of yours—he's a sight better than you, you cross brat!"

Skull took Carol's shoulders in his hands, and gently seated her. "Now let's get this straight," he said. "What's the fight about now?"

"She wants us to go back to Jeff's apartment," Robert answered. "And I told her I'd rather live in a sewer than stay in the same house with that stuffed shirt."

"Jeff's no stuffed shirt!" Carol cried, rising heatedly, and waving away the doctor's palms. "Dr. Skull—he's been talking that way all afternoon. And this place just isn't safe any more for a sick boy. It would be different if he could walk, himself. But suppose I were in another room, and it happened again!"

"Suppose what happened again?" Dr. Skull asked gently.

Carol retired briefly to the kitchen. When she came back, she was holding a small dark object on a piece of paper in front of her.

"There!" she said, "Look for yourself! That's what we found in Robert's wastebasket this morning, after it should have been emptied. It wasn't like this—it was alive. I killed it. He couldn't have—he couldn't even have moved away

from it!” She paused triumphantly, and then went on with her pleading. “You see it, don’t you, Doctor? With all these terrible things happening in the City, everything’s being demoralized. You can’t even trust the people who have business in the building to do their work properly, especially in a poor neighborhood, where the people have to take what they get. If Robert went to his brother’s place, I’m sure he’d be better taken care of.”

Dr. Skull neither agreed nor disagreed with her for a long time. His eyes were fixed on the object in Carol’s hands.

*

IT WAS a scorpion.

They had left it alive, in Robert’s way, and they must have known how much the helpless boy meant to Dr. Skull! He had expected to leave Miriam’s safety in Carol’s hands, thinking that Robert’s presence would give her some minimum of help in the task—but now Robert was threatened, too!

Carol seemed to think the scorpion had been the result of mere carelessness on someone’s part. As yet, she was not frightened badly. Could he trust her to keep her nerve if he told her the truth—and would she have the morale to keep up cheerful appearances in front of Robert?

He said to her, clearly, with a hidden plea in his voice, “I think it wouldn’t be a bad idea for you both to go to Jeff’s—but I need someone to watch this place in my absence. As you say, Carol, even the most reliable people seem to be slipping. I suspect they’re not all above pilfering a doctor’s office. There happens to be something very valuable in my office at present, and I want no one to come in. I don’t even want anyone to come into the building who doesn’t live here. Do you understand?”

Carol’s irritability vanished as though by a magic touch. Her pretty face was grave, she nodded understandingly. “I understand. We’ll stay here.”

“I told you he’d feel that way about it,” Robert cried. “Gosh, I couldn’t stand much more than a visit from Jeff. I couldn’t live with someone who had money and health and brains, and didn’t make anything better of himself than a Park Avenue playboy!”

Carol let the sally go unnoticed. She walked to the door with Skull, and grinned at him in parting. "Don't worry, Doc," she whispered. "If I see a soul coming around, I'll call the whole riot squad. Robert's safe, and whatever you're keeping downstairs is safe." She patted something that lay in the pocket of her uniform, and she did it confidently.

Skull looked hard into Carol's classically lovely face, "Since when do nurses carry guns?" he asked.

She retorted, "Ever since people started trying to kill their patients."

She might not know what was afoot, but she knew enough to be on her guard. And, Dr. Skull, remembering Carol on previous occasions where strong action had been called for, knew that Robert and Miriam would be as safe in her care as human protection could make them.

He proceeded to his garage, half-way down the next block. The home editions of evening papers were on the streets. News-criers, bored with the constant influx of murder-mania stories, were shouting another extra. The extra was about the Skull Killer.

Dr. Skull took his tight-jointed old jalopy from the garage. She looked a high-bodied black sedan, put out by a company which had gone defunct in the early Twenties. Only Dr. Skull and his garage mechanic knew that under the ancient body were the chassis and motor of a racing car of this year's vintage.

Dr. Skull bought a paper, and headed eastward in the van of a dim grey cortege of big garbage trucks returning to the central plant.

CHAPTER THREE

From the lair of the Scorpion

PONDEROUSLY noisily, the big city garbage trucks wound their way eastward, their shadows looming ahead of them. Out of Manhattan they came, tired scavengers bearing a city's refuse to its ultimate destruction. The long day was not yet over for these men; not until that burden was deposited in its peculiar inferno would they be free to go to their homes.

Slowly, each backed his load up to the furnace. Slowly, the weary bodies lined up for evening roll-call as Dugan, the foreman, raced through the list of names. It had been a wearing day, worse than wearing, for him too. But he did not race fast enough for a single man to forget the omittance of Benny Taylor's name from the roll...

It wasn't just that they remembered, and Dugan knew it. It was the way they were remembering, so that he could see in each man's face that same awed hatred which he had noticed when Benny had leaped into the all-devouring flames.

Tonight, of all nights, he'd have let them go—fast. There was an ugly undercurrent about the group that spelled trouble to the Irishman.

And tonight, of all nights, Hawkins had come from the main office with an important visitor. Hawkins must have known better, but he probably couldn't help it. Then an ironic pride came into Dugan's soul. They were all letting him down, but he'd keep up face. Never had his roll-call been more patterned after his army days. And if no smart response from his men carried the similarity further, that was only because you can't make soldiers out of slobs, with only a couple of hours' notice.

Sure, she was a swell plant, the best in the world, and a model to the garbage dumps of the world. That's why you could always count on visitors just when you wanted them least. Dugan saw another man, sort of a stooped old bird, watching the proceedings from a slight distance. He might be important, too, important as all hell. He wasn't wearing important clothes, but then visitors to the dump often didn't wear their best. Nobody knew him, but he had an air about

him. He might be from the Mayor's office, he might even be from Washington. There was no limit to how important a visitor might be when he came at the wrong time, and tonight was the wrongest time that had ever hit the Plant.

Dugan finished the roll and the men straggled out. He sighed under his breath. Almost, he'd expected the worst kind of break before it finished.

And then a voice, almost at his elbow, inquired, "Did you forget me, boss?"

It was Benny Taylor, whom he had seen plunge into the fire twelve hours ago.

For a wild second, Dugan thought he was having a nightmare. He stared at the unburned white-wing, and then stared at Hawkins and the foreign visitor, Devanter, who were both taking it as a matter of course. That was real, all right—because neither of them had ever seen Benny Taylor before.

He started to explain hoarsely to Hawkins, but the words didn't come out. Now Hawkins was looking surprised, and as he wheeled about, Dugan realized that ten of the men had not left. They were closing in on him and his visitors with a look in their eyes that reminded him of the look of a gang of boys, carrying a tin can and a piece of string, as they close in on a homeless cat.

Riot! He recognized it in a second, for he had dealt with men before. Now it didn't matter about his saving face before the visitors—his tough Irish soul was ready for emergency. "Scram!" he shouted at the top of his lungs, and he followed it by sailing into the ten with fists flying.

And then it broke.

He saw the stooped old bird joining in the melee, and in some dim corner of his mind, there was a slight surprise at the old man's agility. He saw Bill Hawkins giving as good as he took, and he saw Bill Hawkins take too much, finally. So now there were three of them left to curb the stampede... No, two! For he could have sworn, as the battle raged perilously close to the furnace, that only one of the remaining visitors was on his side, and he didn't know which. The foreigner was dragging Hawkins' inert body when the old coot popped him on the jaw...

The hopper! The damned fools were chuting down through the open hopper!

Dugan looked to see what they were running away from, and it was the old man.

A fine old man, an erect old man, and three men lay on the ground where he'd dropped them, but others were ganging up on him.

Rage loosed a red cloud in Dugan's brain—he realized that they were all headed for the inferno's red throat, and trying to pull the old man in with them!

Dugan piled into them, tried to get to the old coot and save him. Someone jabbed at him, and he lost his balance. Then he was falling into the hopper himself...

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BEFORE Dugan caught his breath, the sloped floor of the chute seemed to open under him, then dropped in a perpendicular line. It took him almost a second to realize that he wasn't dead—and then another second for him not to be sure even of that. For there were three men sitting on him, and he was in a place that, except for its scented coolness, reminded him pretty thoroughly of Hell.

He sensed an evil almost strong enough to choke him, though the air was clear and moist as the interior of a huge theatre in midsummer. A diffuse lighting made the vast interior misty and glimmering. Luxurious plum-covered carpeting covered the floor, and on the walls there were life-sized nude paintings.

Dugan stared. How the hell had those paintings come to a hide-out under the furnace? He'd seen a thing or two in his time, especially in the army—but it wasn't the voluptuousness of the nudes that moved him—it was their tortuousness. Only a sadist could have painted them, he thought dazedly.

Then, abruptly, one of the pictures screamed!

They weren't pictures at all! They were living women, pinned to the wall in those unholy poses by tiny wire clamps that bit into their flesh, held them motionless within the gilded frames.

Dugan flailed at freedom. He had to get out of here—he almost wished he'd gone straight down the chute into the furnace before he hit this place! But his attempts were curtailed as he was jerked roughly to his feet, to face the most hideous human being he had ever seen.

The man wasn't tall, but it took Dugan seconds to realize it, for a certain arrogant Satanic majesty about him made him seem to be a towering figure. The

figure was shrouded in a dark, swathing cloak, and a black hood covered its hair—but nothing covered the face.

Human? Yes, those were human features. But the birthmark extending from forehead to chin wasn't human. Black, and as clearly outlined as a shadow at noon, that disfigurement was the exact replica of a scorpion!

Dugan recoiled, managed to break loose from the hands that held him. He didn't get far. He was circled by other figures in those unrevealing cloaks and hoods. On the brow of each was stamped a smaller replica of that distinguishing birthmark of their master! Under the sinister, damning mark of the scorpion, their eyes flashed with the purple lights of madness!

The central figure spoke. "Who is this man?" Dugan realized that he himself was being referred to.

"I'm someone you'll be damned sorry to meet, before I'm through here!" Dugan retorted.

He was afraid, yes, but he was a man. And a man couldn't be so frightened he wouldn't fight against whatever had pinned those women to the wall. For a moment he had relaxed—and the grip on his arms had relaxed accordingly. Now, with sudden renewed fury, he pulled loose.

His right fist smashed into the birthmark of the scorpion, but he felt no exultation. The flesh seemed to sting his hand. Even as he fought on, trying to snatch that veiling hood from the man's head, there was a cold certainty of defeat in his heart.

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HIS struggles ended abruptly as a pointed and fiery thing slipped between his shoulders from behind. He couldn't move, though his blood seemed to boil in agony... He stood perfectly still, every muscle paralyzed.

It must be Hell, Dugan thought, and this is the devil I'm facing. But it wasn't the devil. The others referred to the man with the birthmark as the Scorpion. They were explaining something to him, apologizing.

"You had your orders," he declared in an oddly resonant voice. "This heroic fool

isn't the man I wanted. Where's the Skull Killer?"

The Skull Killer! What had he to do with this? Dugan had read about him in the papers—not even criminals knew who he was! The Scorpion— did he know more than the papers, the police, the whole population of New York? And who was the Scorpion?

The men addressed did not answer. The Scorpion looked at them, one by one, the whites of his eyes startling and ugly in that birthmark-blackened face. Then he shrugged. "It wasn't difficult. You were ten against one, even if the Skull Killer was armed. You had him at the brink of the furnace. Yet he isn't here. What happened?"

One of the men nodded his hooded head at Dugan. "He got in the way. There was a shuffle. It was hard to tell."

Dugan didn't remember getting in the way of anyone's trying to pull the Skull Killer down the hopper. He'd only tried to save an old man... Then suddenly he remembered the old man's surprising account of himself in a fight. Was that old man the Skull Killer? That didn't make sense. But other things—this unsuspected hell under the plant he'd worked in for years—didn't make sense, either.

The Skull Killer—if that was the old man's identity—had been on his side in the fight, Dugan remembered. There was a hopeless germ of comfort in the thought... comfort that died as the Scorpion turned to him again.

"You shouldn't have interfered," the Scorpion said slowly. "It was a bad mistake. It was also a mistake to attack me I don't happen to like gestures like that on the part of my guests, especially the uninvited ones. I have already used an efficacious means of stopping your gestures—but its effects are only temporary. I think we'll have to use cruder methods to tame your animal spirits."

Dugan tried to move, but his body failed to obey his will. That sting between the shoulders, that fire in his veins—was it the sting of the Scorpion! He knew now why the men who worked for him seemed to have gone mad—why Benny Taylor had leaped into the furnace-mouth and come out alive. For Benny had never reached the furnace; he had merely dropped into the lair of the Scorpion. And he, Dugan, had tried to fight it out above ground, when he should have had the whole territory of the dump blown up forever. He knew now, and it was too

late— forever after, it would be too late. If only he'd been able to do one iota of damage against this satanic adversary...

“Sooner or later you'll bring me the Skull Killer,” the Scorpion continued to his lieutenants. “What you are about to witness will sharpen your faculties immensely. You, Gordon, you were a veterinary once. I want you to perform an operation on this man Dugan. Take him into the inner room and amputate his legs. Be careful about it—I want him to stay alive and in good appetite. When he comes to, if he requires a fluid diet, offer him broth brewed from his own legs. Nothing else. As soon as he can stand it, take off the arms. Those four chunks of meat should have enough nourishment to last him a week. If he wants something solid, fry him a piece of his own ham.

“I want the rest of you to watch carefully, and I want each of you to consider what may happen to anyone who slacks in the hunt for the Skull Killer.”

The verdict burst in Dugan's brain like exploding shrapnel; it couldn't have been conceived by a human mind! But the Scorpion wasn't human! His eyes rolled toward those women on the walls as he felt his inert body being carted away like so much garbage to the disposal which awaited it. They were going to do it—they were doing it!

*

ABOVE ground, William Hawkins came to, and sobbed like a child. He couldn't help it—that knock-out had snapped the day's tension for him, and now he could only think of Miriam and Emily. No answer to his calls all afternoon, and that ghastly necessity for being good-fellow with Jan Devanter, tearing about town with the man, while every cell in his body screamed for return to his family...

“Don't—you'll be all right,” said a kindly voice.

Hawkins looked up, and saw a man's wrinkled face bending above him in the early moonlight. There seemed no one else at the plant.

“What happened to the others?” Hawkins asked. He tried to rise, but his head throbbed blindingly. “I remember the fight,” he finished feebly, “but they knocked me out before it was over. Cops take 'em away?”

The old man shook his head. “They went down the furnace chute,” he said.

“You’re crazy!” Hawkins declared flatly. He would have shaken his head, but it didn’t feel all of a piece.

“I saw it,” said the old man quietly. There was something in his brown eyes that made Hawkins believe him. He didn’t know what—but then, it was crazy!

He wondered about the story he’d heard that morning. Was there a devil-cult loose among the men, something that made them lust for fire? Or were they insane in a simpler way, and was it that the fight had been about?

He tried to talk, but it hurt him. He looked helplessly at the oldster.

“I’m a doctor, Mr. Hawkins. I think you’d better get to a hospital. If you lean on my arm, we’ll make it to my car.”

Hawkins tried, but he couldn’t get farther than his knees. It made him dizzy again to raise his head. The old man grasped his waist, slung him over one shoulder as easily as though Bill Hawkins were a child. Strange, that an old man should be so strong... and how had the doctor known his name? It didn’t matter—he relaxed gratefully, and then slipped back into blackness.

*

DR. SKULL stretched the Assistant Deputy Commissioner of Sanitation in the back seat of his jalopy, with the uneasy feeling that he was being watched.

He heard Hawkins moan, and knew he had to get to a hospital, fast. There wasn’t time to look for Jan Devanter and have an accounting with him, though the magnificent foreign car was still parked outside the dump. But why had Devanter’s presence inspired the garbage workers to riot, a riot that ended in mass suicide of the most horrible kind— death by burning? He remembered their attempt to drag him down with them. Had they all meant to go, or had some pulled the others? He guessed that the answer was tied up with that larger answer he sought.

Its motor humming, the jalopy headed westward, toward Manhattan.

He was on a side-road leading into Queens Boulevard when the swish of wheels behind him made him look into his rear vision mirror. Coming at him from the left side of the road was Jan Devanter’s foreign car. Its headlights kept him from

seeing the driver, but the car's speed, the swift direct crosswise of its route, warned him to slow down.

It was that precaution which saved his life. As the foreign sedan swerved rightward in his path, he slammed on the brakes, barely avoiding a crash with a telephone pole.

Usually, he was master of his emotions but now his anger was uncontrollable. For himself, he had asked for danger, was prepared to meet it on any byway of his life. But he had a patient in the back seat, and a Mercury rod on his license plate. When people didn't respect that license, he taught them to.

Ahead of him, the foreign car, already fearing reprisal, was leaping up from sixty to seventy.

Two could play that game. He stamped the gas pedal to the floor, and let his racing car motor do the rest.. Sixty... Seventy-five... A hundred... no, he was gaining too fast, and he didn't want to pay them back right now. But there was a spot in the road ahead that might have been built for just such vengeance as he now planned.

He heard the big tonneau ahead of him straining uphill at that terrific speed, and threw his gears into racing high. With dynamo power, the swiftest thing on the road, the old jalopy nosed her fugitive's taillight at the approach to an overpass above the Long Island Railroad lines. Skull's foot trembled upward on the gas, giving the other car a chance to reach the far end of the crossing.

Then, when he was sure of not damaging the railroad tracks, he gave the jalopy full head, saw wide-eyed terror in the other driver's eyes as he himself came at rest and twisted his steering-wheel sharply to the right with a mighty wrench, straightening it again with split-second timing.

The crash had barely scratched his fender—but as he slowed down, a screaming louder than the screaming of the wind rose behind him as the foreign car plunged over the rails.

Head-on, it hit the embankment sloping down to the tracks, and then, with a great grinding of metal into earth, turned on its back.

Some of the fury cooled in Skull's brain. He parked at the roadside, and ran

down to the disabled automobile. He took his medical kit. He was a doctor.

No one in the car needed a doctor. The driver's face was a pulp, all but the wide purplish eyes that were terror-stricken even in death. Four others, Skull perceived, had died almost instantly. He was momentarily puzzled. It was Devanter's car, but none of the men, not even the unidentifiable driver, was Devanter himself. All, however, had died with that inhuman cat's-gleam in their eyes... And in each palm, was the brand of the Scorpion!

Dr. Skull reached into his pocket for a steel stamp. In a moment, the five foreheads of the dead men were stamped with the Mark of the Skull.

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THE City was an unfriendly place that night. Not a street but its noises were punctuated from time to time by the scream of a police siren or the clang of an ambulance bell. It was still summer, but no bare-headed boys and girls loitered in the fresh-smelling parks, for they feared each other now, when even the love of the long-married might turn, without warning, to raw blood-lust.

Some women in the crowded tenement sections, made bold by the desperation of heat, came into narrow doorways for a breath of evening air, but they did not speak to each other as they had done in July.

Traffic wound up and down, at half its accustomed speed. Since a motorist had gone maniac at the wheel, running down three children deliberately, police had cut the speed limit in New York City to fifteen miles an hour.

Only doctors' cars were exempt from the general rule. At nine-forty that evening, Dr. Skull ground to a standstill in front of the Victory Building, and asked two watching internes to help him get William Hawkins out of the car.

Hawkins came to. He blinked hard, looked at Skull. "My wife—please tell my wife! She'll be waiting—she'll worry. Please bring her to me! You'll find her—I think you'll find her—"

"I know where to find her," Skull told him. "And if you don't hear from her at once, you're not to worry. She's safe."

Safe? He hoped so. As he drove back to the modest medical office on the east

side, he kept reminding himself reassuringly of the gun in Carol Endicott's starched white pocket.

Miriam was still asleep, her head pillowed on one round arm, when he returned. That meant Carol and Robert were safe also. He was going to congratulate Carol on that. But not just now, for Miriam was stirring.

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MIRIAM HAWKINS looked about her as though she were trying to focus. Her eyes were fevered, and when the light hit them, they were far too bright. Maniac eyes, burning eyes...

"My head hurts," she complained dully. Slowly, she touched her forehead. Her fingers lingered about the temples, slipped slowly down her cheek. Waking consciousness brought a look of perplexity to her face. If she had been an infant, growing to know its own body for the first time, she could not have looked more perplexed as her fingers groped over her own face.

The perplexity vanished. She was glaring back into Skull's intent face. "Stop it! Stop staring at me—there's nothing wrong with me!" Her voice grew shriller—she was shrieking, her breath came sharply after each word, and the veins stood out in her neck. She reared up and her white, manicured hands struck at him like talons.

He caught both of them in one of his, put a hard palm over her mouth. She struggled and writhed, but she was a little woman and he was a strong man. "You're not to act like this," he told her. "Do you hear? You're to be quiet."

She twisted her head from side to side trying to loose his fingers from her chin. She tried to rise, and he forced her back, insisting in that firm monotone that he wanted her to be quiet. It was the way a doctor is supposed to talk to violent mental cases—but Skull, remembering pretty little Miriam Hawkins as she had once been, felt his heart sink.

At last, wearied of fighting against him, she slumped back against the examination table, panting but relaxed, only her eyes still alive with hatred.

Miriam, the girl his classmate had married, was hopelessly mad. She had tried to kill her daughter. She would kill him now if she were able. She would kill

anything that crossed her path. There was no known cure for the purple-eyed madness but death. The doctor knew that one of his colleagues would have sent her to an institution for the criminally insane. But he had differed with his colleagues before on points of practice.

“If I let go your hands and mouth,” he offered, “will you be quiet? I want you to be—I don’t want to keep forcing you. I want you to obey, for your own good.”

She writhed over onto her side in a fresh effort. Skull kept her jaw and hands pinned down. Suddenly the glint died in her eyes. She grew still. She looked at him pleadingly, and nodded.

He released her. She tried a half-smile, and then with a suddenness that almost fooled him, her hand grasped for a small scalpel on his table. He caught her wrist in mid-air.

“Let go of me—let go, let go! Oh God, let go of me—” her fresh shriek ended in hysterical, tearless sobbing.

Was it any use? Again he pinned her down. It seemed hours that he talked to her. He glanced upward at his wall clock, and saw that it actually was hours. He felt weary in body and mind. His voice, with its forced monotone calm, sounded in his own ears like the slow dripping of water against stone. But he kept it up. It was after ten when Miriam grew exhausted again, and fell asleep.

He dropped into a chair beside her and lit a cigarette. What would she be like when she woke? All that talk he might as well have saved for a stone wall, for all its visible effect. It was killing work—and he had to stay awake, watching her.

The cigarettes were making him sick; it was food he needed. He went to his kitchen, came back with a glass of milk and some sandwiches.

Miriam lifted her head. She had slept two hours, and there was a dewy look about her. She smiled. Jeffrey Fairchild, as a guest in the Hawkins home, had often seen Miriam smile, but never a smile like that. It was innocent, beautiful. It made him smile back at her, in spite of his utter fatigue and growing hopelessness.

She pointed to the sandwiches. “For me?”

He nodded, gave her the plate and the glass of milk. She took a deep breath, and began to wolf. He stared at her, dumbfounded. When this distraction was over, would she revert to that shrieking hysteria of hate? Had she smiled at him only for the sandwiches? That was ridiculous. She couldn't have feigned a smile like that—it was the purest smile he had ever seen on an adult's face.

She pushed the empty plate and glass away from her, stretched, and took a deep sigh. Then she looked at Skull, and smiled again. It was too good to be true. Had that wearing talk really had some effect, an effect imperceptible until she'd slept off the other mood?

“Miriam.” There was a prayer in his voice, but she didn't know it. “Why were you so angry before you fell asleep? What did you feel like?”

Her forehead wrinkled, as though she couldn't think of the answer, and her mouth was like a little girl's. Her eyes were brown, mild. Then she said, “Was I angry? What did I do?”

“You—” He stopped short.

It came to him suddenly, the whole explanation, and it was so simple that he found it hard to realize that it accounted for the grisliest chain of events which had ever happened to the largest city in the world.

That mad passion, those tearless sobs, the utter abandonment to fury. The deep sleep, the uninhibited hunger on waking. Yes, and that smile... He had seen them all before, a thousand times. He had seen them in a hospital nursery—in infants two weeks old!

She was a woman, with a grown woman's physical and mental capacities— but every inhibition which had been placed on her instincts, from the time of her birth on, was gone!

He had seen one or two cases of the prostration of the mental habits of a lifetime, but never a case as complete as Miriam's. The name of the condition was adult infantilism—it came as the result of some harrowing shock caused by intense suffering.

What had been done to Miriam? He remembered the physical examination he had made earlier, and shook his head. She had been in good shape, without a

scratch on her—and if there were any secret thing physically wrong with her, she would not be smiling now. The answer lay in that dram of blood he had taken from her veins, and which had formed a precipitate.

But he did not yet know what the answer was.

He knew the treatment, and the touch of his finger on a button in the wall brought another girl into the room within five minutes.

Carol Endicott's hair lay in glossy disorder against her clear face, and her bathrobe had been pulled on hastily over a blue silk nightgown, but it was a bathrobe that bulked and sagged at the left pocket. Carol had come prepared for anything.

"You rang, Doctor."

"Yes. This is Mrs. Hawkins. I want you to take good care of her." He indicated Miriam, who was staring wide-eyed at the nurse. "See that she's comfortable and happy, and that she has no visitors."

Miriam was listening intently—and she understood English as well as he did. Would Carol understand what he was about to say. "If Mrs. Hawkins should seem displeased with you, hold her hands until she falls asleep. She may urge you not to bother, but spare no pains. Do you understand, Carol? Hold her hands as though you meant it."

"As though my life depended on it," Carol answered. A light undertone of laughter ran through her words, laughter that Miriam echoed. The nurse walked over to Miriam, tucked the blanket closer around her. She said warmly, "We're going to be great friends, aren't we, Mrs. Hawkins?"

"Oh yes," Miriam rejoined happily.

Carol turned her face briefly to the doctor. The light smile had been wiped from her face. She nodded, very gravely. When she looked at Miriam again, a second later, she was smiling.

"Come on," she said. "I'm taking you upstairs to a real bed. Will the north room be all right, Doctor?"

Skull nodded. He helped Miriam off the table, and the two women left, Miriam leaning sleepily on Carol's arm. The north room was equipped with grilled windows and solid wooden furniture. It contained no sharp or pointed objects. Six years ago, it had been Robert's room, when his tragedy was still fresh on him, and he saw no reason why he should have gone on living.

CHAPTER FOUR

Legions of Red Madness

SKULL was awakened by the blinking of a wall-lamp into his eyes. On and off, insistently, it warned him soundlessly of danger above. He sprang from the cot, glanced at his alarm clock, and went up the back stairs three steps at a time.

Already, before he entered his office, he heard the muffled shrieks of a woman in unbearable pain. He thought with split-second agony of Carol and Miriam.

But the woman stretched on the floor of his office was unidentifiable. He had a swift vision of a white-and-scarlet figure bleeding on the carpet, and then he tore into the half dozen men who were bending over her.

They melted before him like shadows, not stopping to return a blow... and though his rage would have carried him to the ends of the earth after them, the gurgled scream, "Dr. Skull!" recalled him hastily to the woman who was bleeding her life out on his carpet.

That scream would be the last coherent phrase to come from her mouth. The nude figure was split from crotch to navel, and the upper torso was stilettoed into crimson ribbons of flesh. Twenty suppurating clots of blood welled where the finger and toe-nails had been torn out, and the face was a ravished horror, with its cheeks cut out, and tiny steel slivers nailing the eyelids to the eyeballs.

There was just enough left of her for Skull to know that Kitty Timiny had come back.

"Mrs. Timiny..." his voice broke as she gurgled a fresh complaint. There were tiny black circles beneath his eyes, born of unutterable compassion. She could not live an hour, for that split in the lower torso had halved her spine, torn half the arteries and organs of her system...

Dr. Skull forced himself to look at her outraged face as he plunged the needle, with its merciful dose of morphine, into her arm. She quivered, and was still.

The streets were a dark grey, for it was not yet five o'clock. As he threw his

windows wide, Skull saw a garbage truck parked boldly before his door.

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HE HURDLED through the window sill, into the street. The garbage truck started moving. Skull's jalopy had been parked just behind, he leaped in.

The truck motor roared like an aeroplane's. No regulation city garbage truck could have gone that fast. The jalopy's racing-motor was equal to the chase, could have been a hard victor.

Suddenly, Skull didn't want that. Suppose he caught up, came alongside—what then? He knew his car was proof against ordinary collisions—but the truck was far heavier. In an argument, the truck would have the better of it far too quickly, simply by turning head-on, making for the body of the old jalopy and turning it upside down. Before he, Skull, had procured a crew of mechanics to remedy the situation, hours would have passed, the sun would be up, and the infernal truck would have gone—where?

Where? That was exactly what he meant to find out. Through dark streets, the moving shadow ahead of him discernible only by its taillight, he followed. Uptown, westward—there were other trucks on Amsterdam Avenue, big food trucks coming in from the country. The grey scavenging monster cut in and out between them, the jalopy still behind it.

At Cathedral Parkway, the trail headed toward the rising morning, and then it swung northward, twisting by hair's-breadths through the dark shadows of the El pillars. In and out the anonymous little alleys of Harlem, Skull followed it—they were trying to shake him now, and he didn't want to be shaken.

It would be a hot day, but not bright. Already a dank mist obscured the sunrise.

Far uptown, on Convent Avenue, the grey truck vanished in the grey mist, and even the telling roar of its motor was still.

Then, into his fog-limited range of vision, Skull saw three sedans closing in on him from three intersections. A shot dented his hood—he ducked as another hissed over his head. They'd played with him, made him believe they were trying to shake him—and they had led him into an ambush.

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THE jalopy plunged forward, hot lead nicking at her steely plates. A grey shape came into the range of vision—it was the truck, parked now, with its passengers taking part in the gunplay. Skull fired as he caromed alongside, braked abruptly. With a gun in each hand, he leaped into the cab of the truck. There was a flesh wound bleeding on his cheek and a killer's instinct in his heart. He fired full into the faces of the truck's surprised occupants, and then crashed both weapons over their heads.

The sedans had followed him. He stood erect, straddling the corpses he had made in the truck's cab. Dr. Skull's invaluable old car was close to the protection of the larger vehicle. If he could keep his assailants clear of himself, he could keep them clear of his car. They were only moving targets in a grey mist—but his marksmanship was equal to the heavy odds. He stood there, with six armed men against him, and he laughed.

Not an old man's laugh—but the exultant fighting laugh of a man of thirty. His enemies heard that laugh, and they saw him, and for a moment, their firing ceased, as though they were awed.

In the brief respite between his battle with the truck-drivers and the pursuit of the sedans, Jeffrey had wiped off his make-up. The change had been swift, but profound—his very personality felt different. These men had inveigled Dr. Skull, healer of bodies arid minds, away from a patient, thinking that a scholarly old doctor would be easy to kill—and now they faced a black-haired man with a laugh on his lips and blood on his hands.

Not Jeffrey Fairchild—for Jeffrey, thoughtful, kindly, well-dressed Jeffrey, would not have laughed like that as he took men's lives. The man in the cab of the garbage truck was the Skull Killer, dealer of vengeance.

Police saw him as they wound in a shrill file of cars to the noisy corner. They saw an agile young figure leap triumphantly to the pavement, they saw him stooping briefly over the prostrate figures of dead men, one by one. He waved at them before he drove off in an old wreck of a car that was startlingly black in the greyness; but it was too early and too misty to see his face or distinguish his license number.

*

THOUGH police could not know it, the Skull Killer had also vanished from Jeffrey Fairchild's heart. He drove recklessly back toward Skull's offices, anxiety torturing him. The whole thing had been planted—and he'd fallen for it.

But at the other end—had they fared better? He had been lured from Miriam and Robert and Carol—he had been led a good five miles from them. Anything could happen while he traveled the five miles there and the five miles back, especially when his absence was known.

The vehicle that drove away from his door just as he pulled up did nothing to reassure him. It was a patrol wagon, clanging as it went. A silent crowd of slum dwellers was dispersing.

A white-faced little figure in a nurse's uniform flew into Jeffrey as he entered. At the sight of him, Carol's stony tenseness broke. Her face moved as though she were about to weep, she caught at his torn shirt, and sobbed, "You, Jeff—thank God it's you! Thank God!"

His own voice was sharp and harsh, so that he hardly knew it. He seized her shoulders. "Carol, what happened? Is Robert—?"

"Your brother's all right." For the first time, she noticed that he was in shirtsleeves, that there was blood on his face and on his left arm. "Jeff, you're hurt! I'll get Doctor—No, I can't! I can't find him!"

"I don't want Dr. Skull or any other doctor," Jeff said.

Not even Carol knew that Robert's doctor and Robert's brother were the same man. She had been looking for Dr. Skull before either she or Dr. Skull might ordinarily have risen for the day. Why?

"I'm all right," he insisted, as she kept looking at him with an agonized softness in her eyes. "You're not... Carol, tell me."

She took a crumpled note from her pocket, flattened it and handed it to him. "The police had this," she said tonelessly. "They brought it to see if Skull could identify the handwriting. I tried to argue—I couldn't. I'd have used a gun against something else—but you can't shoot up the police force."

Jeffrey scanned the page. It was written in a large crooked hand.

To the Captain, Tenth Precinct:

You have looked vainly during the past two months for hundreds of escaped murderers. This is in decided contrast to the previous record of the department. Doesn't it suggest to you that someone whom you may hitherto have held above suspicion may be harboring the criminals?

No doubt, the case of Emily Hawkins has been reported to you. The child's mother, who made the attack, will be found on premises owned by one Dr. Skull.

With best wishes for your continued success,

I am,

The Scorpion.

If Miriam got into police custody, they would send her either to prison or to an insane asylum, and in her present amorphous mental state, there she might really learn to be a fiend! But that hadn't been the Scorpion's only reason for turning the one victim who had escaped him over to the authorities!

In his anguish, Jeff barely heard Carol explaining, "The police thought it was just a crank note—but they came and woke us at four this morning anyway. And they found—Jeff, it was ghastly! There was a murdered woman in Dr. Skull's office—and Miriam Hawkins upstairs. That cinched it for them. They took her away."

That was the scheme—the Scorpion's scheme for getting Miriam back! It would be easier for him to snatch her from an already harried and demoralized police force than from the careful watch of Dr. Skull! Kitty Timiny had not been saved from him—and Jeff knew too well what the Scorpion had done to Kitty Timiny!

Carol's fingers tightened on his shoulder at the door. "Jeff—tell me where you're going."

"I'm going to see about this."

"But you don't even know the woman—it was my job, Jeff, mine and Dr. Skull's! Not yours! You'll be hurt—there's something rotten underneath all this that'll kill you—Jeff! Jeff, don't leave me..."

But he had already left.

*

THE precinct headquarters was on East Twenty-Fourth Street. Jeffrey, giving Dr. Skull's old jalopy its head, pulled abreast of the Maria as it turned its last corner. He had an instinctive knowledge that to do things the usual way, to enter the precinct and plead that Miriam be released to him on bail, wouldn't serve this time. Every second was pregnant with menace even the seconds that would elapse until the patrol wagon pulled up, braked, and the officers led their prisoner inside.

He gave the wagon ten feet for a stop, sailed ahead, and then turned his vehicle sharply crosswise, directly in the wagon's path. The screeching of brakes, his own and the Maria's, was suddenly, vastly, drowned out. The time—stained erect facade of the station house, oldest and stablest building in that venerable neighborhood, curved like a kneeling woman. The explosion's roar echoed and re-echoed thunderously to the sounds of crumbling plaster, the dropping of heavy stone.

For minutes, the foggy morning was saturated with stone-dust, and for minutes, the shrieks of men trapped in the debris interspersed with the less frequent toppling of stone from stone.

It was only the front of the station-house—but that had been damage enough. Men flew from the blasted interior, some of them in uniform. Some of them were unhurt, and these came with guns drawn, and there were others who came blind and stumbling because their arms were gone, or their eyes.

And then a fleet of sedans was advancing down Twenty-Fourth Street from the opposite corner, with machine guns trained on the half-finished shambles. Only a high-bodied old jalopy standing crosswise in the gutter rose between the massacre-fleet and what was left of the precinct men—but in that jalopy was the Skull Killer.

Jeffrey saw the brand of the Scorpion on the foreheads of the advancing horde. This demoniac slaughter had been arranged solely for the recapture of Miriam! He was sure of that.

Men in uniform were dropping right and left, mowed down by that incessant fire

against which their police automatics were no more effective than toys. Behind the comparatively feeble steel barricade of the black jalopy was the patrol wagon with Miriam in it.

Jeffrey ducked behind the door, out of range. Only the point of his gun peered over the lower edge of his car window. The high body of his car gave him a vantage-point in sighting, that the newer sedans lacked.

*

TENSING himself against the sounds of death and the deadening cough of the Tommies, he waited till each massacre-car was near enough for him to pick off its passengers, one by one. He aimed at the mark of the Scorpion on their brows, and he knew he was taking toll, and as long as the seconds lasted, he would be an instrument of death between Miriam and those who sought to get at her.

Eight... ten... He had killed a dozen men. The machine guns were not so loud now, for there were fewer men to use them. By inches, the cordon of sedans was closing in. A death song in lead rattled through the jalopy's frame, but her sturdy body held. Suddenly the sedans were making time.

Jeffrey fired twice at the front wheels of the foremost vehicle. There was an almost ludicrous report of pneumatic tires in a double blow-out. The car pitched drunkenly forward and to the left and its driver grappled with his steering-wheel—but only for a second. Then he flung both hands over his head, and slumped with a bullet in his throat.

The disabled car skidded into the one next to it, ran it up on the sidewalk, into a fire hydrant. And then the Skull Killer finished his job. Fourteen... Eighteen.... The tally was high, but it was higher on the other side. Hundreds maimed, tortured, killed, by the murder-maniacs.

Suddenly Jeffrey realized that he could hear his own shots. There was no roaring to drown them out—which meant the machine guns were quiet. Only then did the breath tighten in his throat, and the hot sweat cloy in his palms. He was alive—and it was a little hard to believe!

He leaped out of the jalopy. Men with their bodies ripped open were shrieking in pain, and the street was cluttered sickeningly with them, as they lay in their blood on the scattered stones of the blasted station house. There were no men in

the patrol wagon parked behind him. They had streamed out to join in the pitiful defense, and they had either escaped or died on the street.

But Miriam was there—Miriam in a little cold, huddled shape.

She was unhurt. Between her and the line of sawing death had been the Skull Killer. She had fainted. Jeffrey picked her up and carried her to the jalopy. He left her there as he completed his swift business among the men he had killed.

An armored police department car came down the street minutes later, but there was no more need for an armored car. From a cordon of sedans at the far end of the block, police claimed for evidence twenty-one sawed-off machine guns and twenty-one corpses with the Mark of the Skull between their eyes. Of an extremely battered automobile, vintage of 1922, they saw no trace, nor would it remotely occur to them to seek any trace of it.

*

MIRIAM was breathing more normally now. She sat beside him, eyes shut head tilted back. Jeffrey remembered Carol's loyal anxiety about her. He had promised to bring her back to Skull's offices—but now that was out of the question. Miriam was a fugitive, not so much from justice, for the forces of justice were being hourly undermined, as from devilry. She had been spotted at Skull's offices already.

He stopped in front of a proud stone building that reared itself out of the mist like a tall ship. Park Avenue was still asleep and it might be hours before Park Avenue realized that New York was practically in a state of siege!

In the dim light of the misty morning he managed to reach unobserved the basement of the house with Miriam. There was no one at the controls of the service elevator at this hour. He took the car up, himself.

*

IT WAS a large apartment, Jeffrey's penthouse, but there were people in the set Jeffrey Fairchild had been born to who called it modest. The rooms were large, but there were only seven of them, and Jeffrey kept only one servant, who reported that his employer made few demands on him.

The apartment had once been leased in the name of Jeffrey's father, and every article in it, even to the ashtrays, had been left in exactly the place his mother had arranged it before she died. There was the ghost of a home in those seven rooms, a home that had shattered with Robert's accident, a home that would stay unaltered.

He took Miriam into a bedroom which had been unoccupied for a long time. She moaned a little as he tucked a warm spread about her, opened her eyes once, and then fell asleep again.

Jeff's manservant had prepared the breakfast, and he found it hot and savory, with the morning paper folded next to it, on his dining-room table. The smell of scrambled eggs was distasteful that morning, and he was too tense to stop for food. He did a rare thing then, and rang for his servant. He had nothing against the man, but disliked seeing him—for Wexler was a recent acquisition, and had nothing to do with the reason Jeffrey lived here at all.

"There's a young lady in the large room," he told Wexler. "Don't disturb her—but if she wakes up, fix her something to eat. When Miss Endicott and my brother come, they'll take care of her. Don't let anyone else in."

Wexler nodded. He was short and good-natured, he had red hair, and he liked to cook. His attitude toward Jeffrey was benign, almost fatherly. "Better eat, Mr. Fairchild. You look dead tired. You should come home nights and get some sleep."

Jeffrey pushed the plate away from him. He phoned Carol, told her merely that he had found Miriam and brought her back to his own apartment.

"I want you to come here, too," he said. "Bring Robert—don't stop to pack, but take anything you're likely to need. You may be staying here a long time."

"Will you be home, Jeff?" she asked.

"Not right away—I'm going out now. See you for lunch."

He hung up, his brain trying to knit together the strands of reason he had been able to glean in the midst of violence. The Scorpion had been driven out into the open—that dawn massacre, bloody and arrogant though it was, had been rushed. Jeffrey doubted that the common enemy would have attempted so bold a coup

until a later stage in the City's disintegration, if he had not been afraid that Miriam Hawkins, his solitary escaped victim, might not give a still-vigorous community some clue that would lead to the destruction of his plans.

Having played his hand this far, he would be forced to proceed. His violent display of power must necessarily meet with drastic reprisal— and unless he crushed that reprisal before it crushed him, he was lost.

What would be the next stage? Jeffrey remembered the last sentence of an article which Dr. Skull had not sent to the American Medical Journal: "By dint of incredible and impoverishing taxes, terrorized peoples have sometimes bought off self-claimed leaders of the purple eyes, who many insist have been the same person, living through centuries."

*

IT WAS a little after nine when Jeffrey, freshly dressed, went out again. He walked a few blocks east and joined one of those curious little groups of people that was clustered about a corner traffic stanchion, reading a notice.

Important!

Emergency Announcement to

Citizens of New York!

In order to curb the spreading wave of homicide among us, it is urged that you patronize only such food stores and restaurants as display the blue label which is a seal of approval from the Board of Health.

By co-operating, you will protect yourself and your city against this menace to life and happiness.

Commissioner of Health, City of New York.

Jeffrey edged out of the crowd. From the nearest phone booth, he called the Health Commissioner, announcing himself as that respected medico, Dr. Skull. Without preamble, he suggested that the honorable commissioner had gone crazy.

“You mean—those bulletins? They’re not ours. We don’t know a damned thing about them—but maybe somebody else does! Maybe this is the way out!”

Jeffrey slammed the receiver. He still wasn’t hungry, but he went into a sandwich shop, noting the new blue label was displayed prominently in its window.

Someone was arguing with the cashier. Two men had stopped drinking coffee at the counter. Someone said, “You’re crazy. Nobody pays paper money for toast. You’ll take two-bits and like it.”

“I’ll like it,” said the cashier dryly. She was young and pinched-looking. “I don’t give a damn, but you won’t like it. It’s the Blue Label tax. You’d be smart to pay it.”

Jeffrey saw the customer pay, with a dollar bill for which there was no change.

He crossed to the back of the shop, pushed open a door marked Private. A frail, stringy man with white hair rose from a desk.

“You’re the proprietor?” Jeff stated.

“I am.”

“Who’s collecting this phony tax?”

The man’s wisp of a mouth grew obdurate. Jeffrey produced a revolver and repeated his question.

The frail man snorted. “I don’t know. I found a blue label on my desk this morning when I opened up, and orders written with it. The letter said I’d get more orders. I’ve got a wife and a couple of youngsters. I don’t want my store wrecked—or anything else to happen. I did what I was told.”

“I see,” said Jeffrey. “Suppose you walk in front of me, and stop at your cashier’s desk.” He steadied the revolver.

The man’s eyes widened. “Is this a holdup?” he asked hoarsely. “Or are you the guy who’s giving orders?”

“Both,” snapped Jeffrey. “Walk.” They walked.

At the counter, Jeffrey ordered a cup of coffee, and then followed the proprietor to the cashier’s desk. “Ring up a nickel,” he told the girl. “And give me change of a dollar.”

The girl looked at her employer questioningly. Jeffrey’s gun nosed his vest. “It’s a hold-up,” he snapped. “Give him his change. We’re not responsible. He’s bringing this on himself.”

“That’s right,” Jeffrey agreed. He pocketed his change, and his gun. Then he walked into the foggy street.

As he walked, it seemed to him that the City had come awake with a start only in the past half hour. People came and went as usual, but the streets were more filled with men than ever before. He walked more rapidly, took to a usually quiet residential side-street. And that was crowded, too.

Suddenly he muttered an exclamation, his eyes narrowing. For he realized that it was the same crowd, and growing by the minute. Everyone on the street was looking at him, and following him. In whatever direction he looked, fixed purple-glinting eyes returned his stare. The legions of the mad had been mobilized against him!

CHAPTER FIVE

A Command From the Fiery Pit

THE crowd's mood changed. As Jeffrey tried to shoulder through them, they packed about him more tightly, and a purposive murmur ran among them. "He refused the tax—hold him."

This was the reprisal he'd expected—but had not realized it would come so swiftly. His hand darted downward, then flattened against his pocket. This was no case for the Skull Killer!

A woman jostled against him. He knew her, she was Evelyn Rossi, a widow who lived in Dr. Skull's neighborhood. A self-made widow! He remembered the way John Rossi died, and that Evelyn hadn't been seen since.

His patients, then, were among the crowd! They were the victims of the Scorpion's mind—destroying technique; the soul-sick hordes of whom no trace had been found had at last returned! He braced himself against their collective momentum, and the crowd halted irresolutely. Thirty people, unarmed, with no hint of violence about them save that menacing purple glint, and that crazy dogged collectiveness. Housewives, businessmen—he should be able to control a crowd like that!

Peering over their heads, he glimpsed other little groups gathered at odd points down the street. The nucleus of each, he guessed, was a rebel like himself, who had refused to pay the food tax.

The crowd was growing ugly. Jeff felt hands laid roughly on him; saw clutching fingers reaching. He struck out with his right arm, and his clenched fist dropped a maniac citizen with a knock-out blow to the chin. From behind, the others pressed closer; even in his attack, he was swept forward.

A police whistle sounded at the crowd's edge. Jeff cried, "Round 'em up! You've been looking for—"

But the officer was looking for something else. He snapped, "Break it up! No food riots in this town!"

The crowd thinned, and the officer ran toward another of the little groups. His voice was harried; he'd seen violence, and he didn't give a damn about pulling Jeff in for starting a street battle, all he wanted was to stop the disorder before it got worse.

Jeff ran after him. The crowd followed, caught up with him, surged about him again like an inexorable tide.

He laid about him, swearing at them. "You damned fools! Can't you see I don't want to hurt you?"

They didn't see. If they saw anything, it was through that evil purple haze. Jeff felt something heavy and hard crashing against his head, and the last thing he saw was a sedan pulling up to the curb...

*

HE COULDN'T have been out more than seconds. When he came to, he was in the tonneau of a sedan that streamed smoothly westward. A man in a grey topcoat and a man in a blue topcoat, with fedora brims pulled down to shade the scorpion shapes on their foreheads, were bending over him. His ankles were trussed, and they were twisting his arms behind his back.

Jeffrey drew up his knees and sent his feet crashing into one intent face. He clasped his hands behind the other man's neck and pulled him head-first to the sedan's floor. A man riding beside the chauffeur turned at the sound, and fired at the spot Jeffrey had just ceased to occupy. The chauffeur's branded face showed taut astonishment in the rear-vision mirror. Before his foot found the brake, Jeff's revolver-butt dropped heavily against his skull.

The car caromed perilously crosswise and cut across a corner on the sidewalk. In the tonneau, Jeffrey thrust a sharp shining object between the eyes of the man in the blue topcoat. It was the fatal bite of the Skull Killer. Crouching behind the front seat, he fired into the nape of the passenger in front before the man regained balance.

The man in the grey topcoat had seen the Mark of the Skull, with its single mortal wound, on the forehead of his companion. He yelled, "The Skull Killer!"

He dove at Jeffrey with more excitement than precision. He died plunging, with

the Mark of the Skull overlapping the Scorpion brand on his face.

It had taken three minutes at the most. The sedan had just begun to slow down and Jeffrey shoved the chauffeur's limp body aside, hurdled the back of the seat, and took the wheel.

Far to the west, he found a deserted side-street, where he parked while he rifled the pockets of the men he had killed. He discovered four automatics, to which he helped himself, and some assorted papers.

The chauffeur's license gave the name of Paul Nolte. On all the men, he found business cards of the Allied Manufacturing Company at 1 Bleeker Street.

Jeffrey studied the face of the man in the blue topcoat. It was dark, clear-featured, oval, similar to his own in a broad, general way. He changed clothes with the corpse, keeping the contents of his own pockets. Among these was the identity of Dr. Skull, compressed into thin tubes of theatrical make-up. But this occasion did not call for Dr. Skull. Jeffrey's eyes on the rear-vision mirror, began to work on his face.

A NEWS broadcast was coming over the car's radio. Jeffrey's face showed no interest—it showed only transition from one personality to another. But as his fingers plied his cheeks, he listened intently.

Flash!!! Police early today succeeded at last in tracing one of the murder-maniacs, only to lose her during the greatest gunfight in police history—to the Skull Killer!

The Twenty-Fourth Street Precinct has been destroyed by dynamite, and only two who survived the ensuing machine-gun battle are expected to recover.

The prisoner, Miriam Hawkins, has not been found. Twenty-one corpses were found afterward by a relief crew with the Mark of the Skull on their faces. Telegrams and phone calls have been pouring into the police department, demanding that the hunt for the Skull Killer be turned over to the Federal government. Police are working on an undisclosed clue, but your reporter has been told that the escaped prisoner was harbored by one Dr. Skull.

That hint about Dr. Skull—well, it had come up before. This time, as on other occasions, it would be justly pointed out that an idealistic sixty-year-old

physician was hardly capable of murdering fifty known criminals single-handed, during a period of a half-dozen years.

Skull had not been found for questioning, and he would not be found, Jeffrey decided, for quite a while.

The broadcast continued its rapid-fire announcement, describing riots over the new food tax, fresh outbreaks of murder-hysteria, and an ominous trend toward looting the dead. “Police have issued warning that they will shoot ghouls on sight.”

Jeffrey’s shoulders shivered, just a little. Orders like that had gone out in 1906, in a city on the West Coast that had been almost utterly demolished by earthquake and fire. Was New York as far gone as Old San Francisco? It didn’t show as much—yet. But when the legions of the Scorpion descended on all New York as they had descended on the police precinct—an earthquake would be more merciful. How many hours before that would become a grim, terrifying reality?

Jeffrey shoved the corpse he had changed clothes with from the sedan door, drove to another quiet spot, and began work to bring Paul Nolte to consciousness.

Fearfully, the chauffeur’s eyes rested on the two corpses in the back seat. He touched his head, and groaned. “The Skull Killer! We didn’t count on him!”

No, Jeffrey thought, they hadn’t counted on the Skull Killer. And they had paid for their oversight with their lives. The chauffeur was sitting there, his face white.

He said, “How did we get off? When I felt the whole damned world dropping on my head, and him in the car, I guessed I’d never wake up. What happened to you?”

Jeffrey murmured something to the effect that the Skull Killer had run off at the sight of an approaching police officer.

The chauffeur chuckled. “Saps! If they only knew—Well, Grauber, we’ll have to get going, won’t we?”

Jeffrey nodded, and the sedan started.

“There’ll be hell to pay over them,” chauffeur suggested, jerking his head backward toward the slumped figures in the tonneau.

“There’s just one bright spot, Grauber, we’re coming back with the description of the Skull Killer. Why, I could spot him in the dark!”

“Could you?” Jeffrey asked.

“Sure. Dark hair, brown eyes, about thirty—he looks a little like you, Grauber.”

Jeffrey stared sharply—but the man was beaming at him.

“Shouldn’t be surprised,” the chauffeur prophesied, “if we got medals for it. That description’s worth a lot at headquarters. Almost as much as the Skull Killer himself.”

Jeffrey didn’t answer. He kept his eyes turned a little sideways. Far downtown, they pulled up in front of a time-stained brown factory building, with a sign over its door reading, “Allied Manufacturing Company.” Other cars were pulling up too, of all makes and colors. Men came from them, carrying large bundles, like salesmen with samples of some heavy article, and went into the building. Even from the curb, Jeffrey could hear the humming of some powerful machinery.

His hand touched the door-knob, and he started to turn it. It was a full ninety seconds before he had the heavy door opened. At the end of those ninety seconds, he felt the chauffeur’s gun in his ribs, heard the man’s sneering voice, now no longer friendly: “This is as far as you go, Grauber—unless you can explain why the Skull Killer left you without a scratch.”

*

HE HAD started speaking with his finger on a trigger. But when he finished, he was clutching his forehead, where a small, bloody hole punctured the smooth outline of a human skull. Jeffrey had learned before this time the similarity of a threat to a lion’s roar. Both paralyze the victim with fear in the only second that remains for flight or defense. Jeffrey had simply utilized the second... And the other man was dead.

He stepped out. No one had noticed the smooth swift vengeance of the Skull Killer. He pulled Grauber's hat brim low over the forehead of Jeffrey Fairchild, and turned up his coat collar, as he saw others doing who entered the building.

He was a spy in enemy territory, and if he were discovered, he had a spy's negligible chance of coming out alive.

He loitered there, among men who would have killed him on sight had they known his identity, his eyes fixed on those unending bundles. And then he saw one of the bundles move of itself. In movement, there was no doubt of it—the contents of the bundles were human beings!

He started toward the entrance, his shoulders hunched for desperate rescue, when a short well-dressed figure blocked his path. The man carried no bundles, and there was an air of authority about him. His pinched cheeks were dark with the Scorpion mark... and Jeffrey was ready to stain them with another mark, his own, when the man spoke.

"Grauber, you're late," the man snapped. "We almost started without you." Then he turned, as though he expected Jeffrey to follow him.

The men with branded faces must be the higher-ups—those whose business was the manual labor of spreading the plague carried the Scorpion mark in a less conspicuous place.

The men with bundles went through doors leading from a corridor on the first floor of the building. While the doors were open, the hum of machinery was louder. Jeffrey restrained himself from following—he had to sit in on that council meeting first! It would be the prelude to his most formidable blow—it might betray the enemy's next move to him.

Upstairs, Jeffrey accompanied the stranger into a long bare-looking room, cleaner than the corridor outside, but otherwise, no more ornate. Seated at an oblong table in heavy directors' chairs were ten men. Half of them were in black cloaks, their heads hooded—the other five wore business suits. All were branded on the face with the evil sign of their sinister master.

*

THE chairman, grim and lean-cheeked in the black hood, rose and beckoned the

newcomers to be seated. Jeffrey looked about the bare, windowless room. Its only touch of color was a red-and-white plaque on the wall that began, “In case of fire...”

These couldn’t be the Scorpion’s headquarters—it must be only his machine-shop. It was a miserable enough set-up—draughty, unbeautiful, and inconvenient.

The chairman’s first words corroborated his theory. “To you gentlemen of the Allied Manufacturing Company who have decided to cast in your lot with ours, our thanks for your gracious donation of this plant.

“At this first meeting of the New Department of Health for the City of the Scorpion, it is my pleasure to report that the Blue Label tax has afforded us both funds and material. Those who refused to pay, have been brought here as experimental subjects for our new machinery.

“The machinery is ready. After these preliminary tests, we can install it. Last week, we had three trucks making rounds in the City, equipped with four brain rotors each. Even with that meager equipment, we were able to bring several score new subjects a day to the Scorpion. Now, we have fifty trucks ready to start as soon as the new rotors are put in. Six of them will be equipped with one multiple brain rotor capable of transforming twice as many subjects as the old-type engine, in one-tenth the time.

“The end, as I see it, is inevitable. We have two major branches of the municipal government even now partially under our control. Through one, we work from below, penetrating everywhere. We learn everyone’s secrets through what he throws away. We enter into his home, his life. In the other, we gain edict power over the very health of the City.

“Our machines, rotating in alternate current six hundred times a second, are ready to terrorize the population with fresh legions of those whom they dub the murder-maniacs. Besides all this, we have worked so discreetly through the cover of the city administration itself, that this progress has been almost completely secret. Gentlemen, within two days’ time, the City of New York, with its millions in wealth, industry and resources, will be on its knees—and then we shall see an abject population begging for the City of the Scorpion to rise, all-powerful, from its ruins!”

He paused, and a sinister satisfaction crossed some of his hearers' faces. In that grim-visaged audience, Jeffrey's uncontrollable look of bitter hatred passed unnoticed.

"A few words," the chairman continued, "from the gentleman who first conceived the idea of the Blue Label tax as an activity of this committee. Mr. Grauber."

*

JEFFREY rose. This was the self-styled Department of Health of the City of the Scorpion—and he was a doctor, licensed under entirely opposed laws of health. As he suspected, certain members of the Health Department had sold out to the enemy—soon every department would be represented. Working through innocent-seeming debris, using it as their textbook of ruin, these devils had discovered every man's weak point, as they had discovered the embezzlement of Bill Hawkins. And they would find other men in high places who had their price...

"Your notes, Mr. Grauber," the chairman cut in impatiently. "Haven't you prepared your notes?" His voice was acid, tinged with suspicion.

"Yes," said Jeffrey slowly. He reached into his pocket, seeming to fumble. "Here they are." He drew his revolver, and shot at the chairman's eyes.

Panic rose like a tidal wave. The heavy chairs fell over backward, as screaming men darted from them in rage or fear.

Two hooded figures bore down on Jeffrey, one holding a heavy chair high over his head. Jeffrey was forced to shoot first at the man with the gun. His right leg flew upward, met the chair's descending bludgeoning force and sped it backward against the man who wielded it. He lost his balance, crashed into the heavy center table and overturned it. The chamber was a chaos of smoke and sound.

Bullets added new punctuation to that little red-and-white plaque that began. "In case of fire." None of the bullets were Jeffrey's; he hadn't ammunition to waste on the walls. Something nicked his side, and when he squeezed the fingers of his free hand against it, he felt the warm ooze of blood.

There were five men still against him, five men who were beginning to recover

from the confusion of that surprise attack, a confusion which had enabled Jeffrey to make as good a stand as he had.

His finger moved, and there was a sickening click that ended in no report... He was out of cartridges, and his knees felt unsteady under him. The blood dropped very slowly from his side, and made a thin red line under his feet.

Swift triumph showed in the eyes of the five. Jeff remembered the other weapons on his person, filched from the corpse in the sedan, and he hurled his empty automatic into the face of his foremost attacker, then darted for the door. He could no longer trust his own hands and eyes to exterminate what was left of the corruption in that room—that odd sensation of faintness might betray him too soon.

It was allies he needed, and one ally existed who would tear down that infernal building like an irresistible Goliath.

Jeffrey raced down the crazy staircase, with the shouts and bullet-cracks of pursuit hot after him. He burst through one of the doors in the downstairs corridor, slamming the door behind him.

He had a swift vision of the machine room. Here the hum of the motors was loud, almost deafening. It drowned out the pleas of the girl who was being fed, head-first, into the maw of what looked like a giant harvester operated by an incredibly swift rotor. It drowned out the fumbling struggles of the score of persons—men, women and children—who lay in neat stacks and bound, like raw inanimate material, at the foot of the monstrous machine.

It even drowned out the sounds of death, as Jeffrey leaped among the fiendish mechanics, the tooth of the Skull poised in his hand like the thunderbolt of an ancient god, striking vengeance.

Swiftly, he cut the bonds of his fellow rebels against the Blue Label tax. He shouted at them, above the machinery's roar, "Spill those oil-cans—spill 'em over everything! And then run for the street!"

They helped him with a mad, joyous destructiveness. Jeffrey, his eyes on the entrance, saw one of the five, who had pursued him from upstairs, just opening the door. A boy of eighteen, one of those Jeffrey had just rescued, was directly in line of fire of the fiend's revolver. Jeffrey tackled the boy, skidded with him out

of range. His hand found a heavy blunt steel cog, lying a short distance from one of the machines. He hurled it and it crashed into the gunner's skull.

Now the huge machine room was acrid with the smell of oil. Jeffrey's hand closed around a match-book. While the refugees dashed to freedom, he guarded the doorway.

That wound in his side smarted like a constant bite, and he had to force his eyes to focus. He was on the last lap of his strength. Now was the time for him to summon that mighty Goliath to aid him in thwarting the Scorpion. Upstairs, the Scorpion's lieutenants had planned the perfection of an already-accomplished coup, which would have dealt the City a blow in one of its most vital departments—the administration of the public health.

Already the opening blow had been struck with the Blue Label tax, and the frightful punishment which had so nearly been meted out to all rebels against it.

Jeffrey was only one man. Against that mighty machinery, he was helpless. He struck the match in his hand, applied it to the oil-soaked flooring. And then Jeffrey's giant ally began his scavenging task.

*

THE men of Hook and Ladder Company Number One, called to a roaring blaze at 1 Bleeker Street, knew at a glance that the fire was of incendiary origin. They even knew who the incendiary was. Boldest of arsonists, he seemed to fly through the flames ahead or behind them, a slim graceful figure that fumbled only a little where the smoke was thickest.

As fast as they succeeded in cutting the fire off from one part of the building, that part burst out in red destructive fury.

From an unaccountable pack of hysterical fugitives fleeing from the building in torn, oil-soaked clothing, the firemen learned that the elusive arsonist was none other than the Skull Killer. They had seen him kill a man, they said, with a shining instrument, and when the man dropped, he wore the Mark of the Skull as a death-sign. They could give little other description of him, save that he was young and blood-spattered; and in their hysteria, many of them swore that he had come with a flaming sword, like Gabriel, to set them free.

Some of them said he was clever, and others repeated with a kind of awe what the hysterical refugees told them, modifying it only in the supernatural origin of the Skull Killer. He had come from another place than heaven, they said, if he knew his way so well about the flames.

Jeffrey Fairchild, his palms smoke-black and charred, his lungs tortured by soot, with that faintness from his wound only downed by some indomitable portion of his will, knew what the Hook and Ladder Company lads would be thinking. They knew that one more dark question mark would be added to the Skull Killer's reputed crimes for the day.

He saw a policeman on a far corner, watching the distant blaze curiously. He caught at the navy blue sleeve, gasping, "Get me home!"

The policeman stared at him for a moment, and then exclaimed, "Mr. Fairchild! How ever did you get so smeared up?" Jeff, a close friend of the Police Commissioner's, was also a friend to many men on the force.

"Got caught—in the damned fire," he explained, trying to grin. "If you'd just call me a cab, and let me get away from questions... I couldn't take 'em now."

"Should think not," the officer grumbled concernedly. He got young Mr. Fairchild into a taxi as the Commissioner would have wanted him to do.

*

JEFF relaxed in the cab, and took accounting with himself. He had thwarted the Scorpion's gigantic plans for expansion, and the destruction of those machines had saved untold numbers of New Yorkers from a terrible fate.

But the Scorpion himself—arch-director of the war against millions of humanity—had not been touched by the blaze. As Jeffrey had surmised, those dingy swiftly-mobilized quarters were not for the Commander-in- Chief. Somewhere, in arrogant magnificence, he would be making new plans with impunity.

That there would be new plans, Jeffrey was certain. He himself had dealt a deathblow to that threatened corruption of the Board of Health, but the City had other departments, and these must shortly fall prey to the invader unless the invader himself were routed out.

Jeffrey had failed to find the Scorpion himself—he had failed to discover the man’s whereabouts. He had succeeded only in further isolating the Skull Killer from the approbation of his kind.

He sighed, almost bitterly. He felt divorced from all that rich, warm human life he sought so ardently to protect. He had saved little Emily Hawkins and her mother for each other, he would save a thousand counterparts of Miriam and Emily, that they might continue the lives interrupted by this plague.

Then he thought of Carol!

Jeffrey hadn’t known her then, but he believed it. She had been calm and she had known faith. She had been too pretty for the slum neighborhood she was born to, and there had been men who tried to tell her so. Once she had killed a man for trying, and it was after that that Jeffrey met her, cleared her, and offered her a job.

*

IT WAS like her to accept unquestioningly her dual role as private nurse to rich young Robert Fairchild and general assistant to Dr. Skull of the slums. But she didn’t know of Jeffrey Fairchild’s analogous dual role, and Jeffrey didn’t want her to know, for it was not safe knowledge for her to have—but she alone would have accepted that knowledge as she accepted everything, with a minimum of bother.

Maybe she understood the man Jeffrey Fairchild had become after Robert’s “accident.” Maybe not. But she gave him something that no one else was capable of giving—a feeling of fellowship for someone whom circumstances had isolated from her fellow-creatures as much as they had isolated him.

He would sleep when he got home, he thought, and when he woke, the moodiness he seldom indulged in would be gone with his fatigue.

Red-headed Wexler met him at the door, and if he thought Jeffrey’s appearance strange, he did not say so. Jeffrey, through the almost intolerable foggiess which rose before his vision, thought that Wexler looked strange, too.

“Mr. Hawkins—she’s all right?”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Fairchild. She took a good breakfast, and she’s resting.”

“What time did my brother get here?” he asked.

“About two hours ago, Mr. Fairchild. He’s sort of resting, too.”

Rest, rest... What were they resting from? And where was Carol? Wexler was still looking at him in that troubled fatherly way—he shoved past the man, staggered into Robert’s room.

The boy was propped up in bed, paler than usual, staring straight ahead. There was a great bruise on his forehead, and scratches on his chin. When he saw Jeffrey, his mouth tightened, and he said, simply, but with a world of hatred, “You damned fool!”

“What are you talking about? Where’s Carol?”

Robert told him, his words sharp as knives. “You wanted us here, so we’d be safe. Well, I’m safe. I’d have been safe with Dr. Skull, too. So would Carol. But she isn’t safe now—maybe she isn’t alive.”

“Robert!” He was thrusting cruel fingers into the boy’s shoulders, but he didn’t know it. “What happened?”

The boy tried to shrug away from Jeffrey’s grasping fingers, from the terrible questioning in Jeffrey’s eyes. But he could lose neither the grasp nor the stare. His own voice was duller, less acid, as he went on. “We were just leaving Dr. Skull’s place. I was in my chair, and Carol was pushing it. She hailed a taxi. Then a lot of people—I swear, Jeff, they looked normal enough—closed around us. It was like having strangers go crazy right around you in the street; they pushed and pulled, and they got Carol away from me. I tried to follow, but I couldn’t...

“Jeff, they’ve killed her! And it was your fault, making us leave! Damn you!”

*

HE STUMBLED from Robert’s room, trying to think. And even in agony, his brain yielded no more than the same hazy, exhausted reasoning he had known since his escape from the burning building.

The chairman of that hellish committee... he had said something. Had he said, at least, that all those who had been kidnapped by those little crowds were on the premises? If that was it, Jeffrey knew Carol might be alive, for she hadn't been in that building among the others. Or she might be dead, too; might have been in some secret room, a prisoner; might have died in a fire of Jeffrey Fairchild's setting...

No, that wasn't it. She hadn't been there. The victims of that experiment had all been taken to the machine room. There had been no other use for them.

Something else the man had said... he put one charred palm to his eye, ground it in, in a desperate effort to recall.

"Have you had breakfast anywhere, Mr. Fairchild?" That was Wexler, anxious and restrained.

"No," Jeffrey said dully, slightly impatient.

Then he remembered! The chairman had said, "We work from below." And then an utterly inexplicable riddle solved itself sudden in Jeffrey's mind.

He remembered the mass suicide he had witnessed the previous afternoon—garbage-men diving into the mouth of a furnace.

*

CAROL was Dr. Skull's nurse. Of course she would be given special treatment, taken to the real headquarters of the enemy! The Scorpion had discovered the Skull Killer's private identity by identifying the corpses the Skull Killer had left in his wake. They were men sent to silence that obstinate Dr. Skull from making out unsatisfactory death certificates for the victims of murder-maniacs. Scorpion, unlike New York's regularly constituted authorities, knew that the Skull Killer was the one man who stood between the City and its ruin.

Those headquarters? Everything pointed to the same conclusion: The mass suicides, the enemy's control of the Sanitation Department. And where could a thousand people be hidden from an alert police force that was seeking them out?

There was only one answer, and that was the most improbable haven for living persons that New York afforded.

It was the roaring mammoth furnace at the City's new Incineration Plant in Queens!

CHAPTER SIX

The Devil's School Room

JEFFREY FAIRCHILD'S sedan, at first glance, seemed as dissimilar from Dr. Skull's old jalopy as night is from day. But under their hoods, they were identical; the only two of their kind in use in New York. Like the jalopy, the bright new sedan was equipped with a powerful Diesel motor which Jeffrey had designed and installed himself. And also like the jalopy, its smooth painted sides were of heavy plated steel.

It was a little after one in the afternoon when Jeffrey headed toward Queens. He was tired and bruised and his eyes had to strain to see anything at all—but he didn't realize his weariness. There was a tiny package wrapped in cotton-wool, and sewed into the lining of his hip pocket. It was a small package, but there were few men who would have risked carrying it, even insulated as it was against jolting.

He parked his car outside the wire gate at the dump. Things had changed here too, in the past twenty-four hours. The sign at the entrance which said "No Admittance," had always been there, but now there was an armed sentinel in a garbageman's white ducks.

Jeffrey took it in from a slight distance, not arousing the guard's attention. Then he made for a point in the wire gate that was shielded from notice from inside by the rambling parking shed for trucks.

A human form turned abruptly as Jeff thudded to earth, on the other side, and gun-metal gleamed in the sun-streaked fog. Savagely, his powerful surgeon's fingers gripped the guard's wind-pipe before a shot was fired. Jeffrey saw the purplish eyes pop, and felt the man's body limp in his grasp, before he let it sag to the damp ground.

He peered from behind the shed. A huge truck stood in the open yard, and a muffled hum of machinery issued from it, its back sloped toward the hopper of the roaring furnace. But it wasn't refuse the truck deposited in that crematorium. One by one, limp human figures dropped into the hopper!

There were men directing the flowing stream. That these figures were alive, Jeffrey gathered from their faint moans.

The brain rotors discussed at the meeting he had broken up by fire and death had been no fantasia! For inside that truck, humming at incredible speed, was a mechanism designed to alter completely a living human body.

He thought of Miriam Hawkins. She had been anaesthetized, he reasoned, and then her apartment had been entered by the Scorpion's workers, who carried her down to a waiting truck. She had been subjected to that incredible experience—whose shock had been sufficient to erase everything from her memory.

When she had come to, back in her apartment, she had no memory of the outrage—but every one of her body cells must have been violently affected! She had been in a condition where she was ready to murder her daughter...

If his reasoning was correct, those who were dropped into the hopper would not be burned alive—they would be detoured into some secret hide-out. How else account for the mass disappearance of the murder-maniacs, followed by their abrupt return this morning?

He knew then, that he must join the human stream flowing into the hopper. If his theory was wrong—well, men have died before because they made mistakes.

First he had to deal with those who tended the truck. He sighted the busiest of them from behind the shed, and fired.

*

TWO men were dead before the others left their work and advanced. He had taken his first toll as swiftly as possible.

He stayed behind the shed wall, picking them off as they came, and their line of march was strewn with the fallen.

He could handle them, Jeffrey thought; he could leap into the hopper with no one left behind him to give alarm... But he was reckoning without that terrible fatigue which he had ignored earlier.

A stray bullet knocked the gun from his hand. He reached for another weapon,

but not swiftly enough. Then, suddenly, they were upon him. He would remember, later, the frenzy that greeted his crashing bare-handed defense. He would remember the crazy hopelessness of it, wondering a little at himself...

Then he saw a familiar face, twisted in amusement. The man was Jan Devanter.

Jeffrey reached out toward him, and then a pistol-barrel crashed against his head. He went to his knees, not in surrender, but because his knees suddenly stopped obeying him—and in a half-dream, he heard Devanter saying, “He’s wanted—alive!”

When the dream cleared somewhat, he was bound hand and foot, and they were tossing his body over the hopper’s edge. Tongues of fire reached up thirstily for him at the other end of the chute. They shoved him, and he dropped toward the flame.

He never reached it. The detour he had expected opened under him, and he dropped like a plummet.

Other bodies landed about him—his captors had leaped down with him. Jeffrey found himself in a cool, huge chamber, dim as a cathedral where devils chant a black mass. They cleared away from him and left him lying there on the floor. Echoing from wall to wall of the vast chamber there was still a muffled hum of not-too-distant machinery.

This was the Scorpion’s headquarters—and Jeffrey perceived at once that he had been right when he guessed that the building that had gone up in flames that morning was a humbler thing. Here all was magnificence. Here the air was faintly scented, all the carpets thick. And on the walls were curious tapestries...

Living tapestries. Jeffrey cried aloud in real despair when he saw living women fastened to the wall in too-natural poses, framed there as though they were portraits... Was Carol one of them?

“You like my art collection?” inquired a voice that resounded through the room.

Looking up, Jeffrey saw a shrouded, erect figure in a black robe. Under a black hood, two startlingly clear eyes glared at him—startling, because of the hideous black birthmark that spread over the small vicious face. The birthmark of the Scorpion!

The Scorpion laughed, not pleasantly.

“This is a pleasant meeting,” he said to Jeffrey. “Pleasant for me, at any rate. I think you’ll find the place suited to the occasion. No one suspected the detour in the chute. When these simple garbage workers first saw my men leaping, to all appearances into the heart of the flames, only to turn up alive later, they were tremendously impressed. So impressed that when they found out how it was done, they all wanted to learn the same trick. The trusting fellows still think there’s some kind of black magic to it, and it gives them a great feeling of power and importance to be working for me.”

Jeffrey writhed. His body, forced at last to motionlessness, ached in every cell. They searched his pockets, and took his guns and ammunition. They took the Tooth of the Skull, and gave it to the Scorpion, who held the shining thing with a kind of adoration in his dark palm.

“Thank you,” he said to Jeffrey, “for the trophy. They’ll be surprised, after this, to find the Mark of the Skull on the corpses of Jeffrey Fairchild’s friends!”

*

JEFFREY pressed his bound hands close against one another, in agony. “Damned fool,” he called himself. It had all gone for nothing then, all the suffering and carnage of the past two days.

“You destroyed my plant,” the Scorpion continued, “but I don’t hold it against you, for it happens that we are equipped to continue the same work here. At most, you delayed us a day or so. I surmise you’ve already gathered the general theory of our machinery; any doctor would. What you might like, though, would be personal inspection of our little school down here.”

He motioned to the men in Sanitation Department uniforms who had escorted Jeffrey down here, and they carried him the length of the long hall, down three stone steps, and through a massive door.

The Scorpion followed with his guards and lieutenants. The massive door closed behind them all.

This was the reserve machine room of the Scorpion. There was nothing luxurious about it—here the throbbing machines roared aloud, here the dank stone

walls retained a chill moisture in spite of the heat of the engines. The chamber, Jeffrey guessed, had been cut out of bedrock, was inaccessible save through the outer door. But more gruesome than the big machines were the inhabitants of the machine room.

Row on row, chained to the stone as though in an ancient dungeon, were men and women who did not chafe overmuch at their chains. Their faces were vacuous of anything save petulance—they tugged peevishly as children might, and from time to time, they whimpered.

They had been through the machines, Jeffrey guessed, and now they had no way of realizing what horror was reserved for them. They were conscious only of restraint and discomfort, and as for fear, it had been wiped from their brains with all other acquired instincts. They would have to learn it all over again—and Jeffrey had no doubt that they would.

“You’re protesting very little, Mr. Fairchild,” the Scorpion observed, as his guards held Jeffrey to the wall by the throat and wrists, among the lost souls. “I can understand that. You’re a guest—we expect to treat you as a guest. As one man of science to another, I invite you to a laboratory display never before shown to an outsider—the tutelage of the Scorpion!”

As though by signal, the guards began to pass among the chained victims. They slapped their victims across the ribs and knuckles with their heavy gun-butts, and then, when the excited subject attempted reprisal, they danced just out of reach of the chained arms.

They pulled the women’s hair, tickled them till their mad laughter was edged with futile murderousness. And Jeffrey heard his own voice joined with the others, pleading with the guards to stop.

Then he heard his own name shrilled by a familiar voice. From an aisle of humming machinery, guards had led a woman who struggled more than the others. She wore a white dress, smudged now, and creased. Her little nurse’s cap was gone, and her dark hair was wild. Her bare arms were streaked with long red gashes.

It was Carol.

His eyes met hers, and she called him again. “Jeff, please, Jeff! Don’t let them!”

“As you see,” the Scorpion addressed Jeffrey, “Miss Endicott’s psychological make-up has been untampered with. That was necessary. Shall we see what happens when we loose these childish patients of mine on her? It will be interesting to note how easily they transfer their rage from its causative agent, to someone who wasn’t even in the room when they first grew angry!”

*

AFTER that, Jeffrey was clearly aware of only one thing. He knew, dimly, that he was chained to the wall; he heard the hellish monotone, that the voice of the Scorpion was still posing some abstruse scientific abomination, that the guards were keeping their maddened charges in a crude surging circle by circumventing them with drawn guns. He knew that a few who tried to break the circle were shot down as casually as a man would slap a fly to death, but these seemed minor things, background in a nightmare whose real subject was horribly, poignantly real.

It was Carol’s voice that rang in his ears—Carol begging him to help her.

He stopped thinking in words, and remembered pictures flashed through his brain. He again saw the torn mutilated bodies left in the wake of the murder-maniacs, bodies he had been called in to attend when they were past any doctor’s attention.

*

HE WAS doing something about it, he knew, in the sick black misery that enveloped him. He didn’t know how—he would never know how. There were suddenly three guards trying to pin his hands back to the wall where he had the chains open at a suture in the links.

His wrists were torn almost to the bone from the frantic tug, and there were heavy manacles about them from which hung a few links. He lifted his hands above his head, brought the manacles crashing down into the face of the man before him.

Before the guard fell, Jeffrey snatched the gun from his hand, and fired at the others.

“Jeff—”

She was still alive, though he could not see her through that howling pack. She was still alive, if she could call on him... There was a steel band around his throat, with a chain fastened to it, and at the other end of the chain was a staple in a stone wall.

At another time, he wouldn't have called it taking a long chance. He'd have called it suicide. Now, he didn't stop to call it anything.

He raised the revolver to the metal suture in his neck-chain and fired. For a second, he thought the bullet had deflected upward into his brain, and that the involuntary forward jerking of his body was a last reflex before death—and then he realized that he had only jolted his shoulder. Dangling at the end of its chain, the heavy collar gaped open from the wall, the suture sprung by Jeff's desperate bullet.

He was free.

The gun in his hand began a staccato of death among the guards. He leaped among them, seizing their loaded weapon.

Their attention distracted from that surging mad circle, the guards welled around Jeffrey. The circle broke, and clawing maniacs passed its bounds with impunity. Some of them turned on each other—some on the guards. It was murder, wholesale and witless, stark, and bestial.

Somewhere in the heart of the melee, he found a still little form in the shreds of a white uniform. When he picked Carol up, she sagged like a bag of broken bones. He crooked her weight into one arm, shot and clubbed a way through the chaos which had been the Scorpion's laboratory.

Dimly now, he heard the voice of the leader. "Beat the crazy fools off! Not that way!"

Which way? Far off, through the aisle of machinery, Jeffrey saw a patch of light. Toward that patch of light, oblivious to the blows that fell about them, the maniacs were beginning to stream with increasing purposiveness. Even when a guard barred the way, they fled there, and nothing stopped them but bullets through the heart...

Only one thing would have drawn even madmen that way—freedom.

He joined the surge, but not as blindly as did the others. His gun beat out a clear path of flight, and soon he was at the head of the fugitive pack. Yelling, they sprinted after him, with the somber, hungry machines rising on either side.

At the end of the aisle, Jeffrey found a stone wall—but a stone wall with wooden blocks, step-high, driven into it. Above him the rock ceiling gave way to a steel grating, barred from the underside, and there were bars of sunlight on the floor.

Sunlight! He clambered upward, unbolted the grate, and a blast of heat struck his face on the ground above, a massive black object rose directly before him. It was the furnace. Underground, he had traveled the length of it, and now he was coming out on the other side.

That machine room cut into the solid rock must have been constructed originally as a sort of air vent to the furnace. The Scorpion had laid claim to it, and then, by burrowing farther into solid rock, had constructed that magnificent central room that could be reached through a hole in the furnace chute.

The chute had served as an entrance, and this grating as an exit. Jeffrey waited at the edge of the descent, Carol still in his arms, while the liberated mad things streamed out past him.

He had not long to wait. The scorpion-branded face of the first pursuer looked up at him from the first wooden step. Jeffrey ripped the tiny package from the lining of his hip-pocket, tore off its cotton wool padding, and hurled it downward.

*

HE HAD not run more than a few yards when a thunderous rocking of the earth threw him flat. For almost a minute, the plant rumbled and shook—and then with a blast of hot metal, the side of the furnace itself burst out!

Jeffrey threw his own body across Carol's, in desperate protectiveness, but none of the flying metal hit him. Only half-covered now, the flames that were never permitted to go out, shot upward toward the sun.

Jeffrey came to his feet, half-ran, half-staggered away from that scorching heat, carrying the girl.

When he glanced backward, he saw that the exit had caved in, in the explosion, and the Scorpion's men were trapped in that hell of their own digging. The chambers of the Scorpion had been a deathtrap.

A clangor was sounding outside the dump; the day had been foggy, but now it was sunset, and the air was clear. Beyond the gate, Jeffrey saw squads of policemen.

They had come, but why? That didn't matter much—he realized that they were taking charge of the survivors, and trying to make some sense out of the hysterical stories that were being told them.

Scraps of metal, scattered by the explosion, lay everywhere. Suddenly Jeffrey pounced on something that gleamed in the light of a dying sun, and stared at it almost unbelievably. It was the lost stamp of the Skull Killer!

A man came toward him as he stood there, with the girl's body in his arms. Jeffrey recognized an old friend, Tom Wiley, the Commissioner of Police.

"Jeff Fairchild! What in the name of hell are you doing here?"

Jeffrey said, "The same to you!"

"Something came up that made us to decide to investigate—and it looks like we should have! But I'll be damned if I know what broke loose here, and why!" His eyes fell on the burden in Jeffrey's arm. He said, "Beat it. I'll ask my questions some other time. If you leave town, I'll know you're guilty!"

*

JEFF nodded. He could barely see the man's face in front of him. Somehow, he got out, and found his own sedan parked among the police cars and got in.

For a long time, he couldn't do anything but sit there, with Carol's face very cold and white and pillowed in his elbow. He was too tired to feel triumph; too tired to be anything but vaguely glad.

Carol's eyes opened.

She said, "Jeff, am I going to die?"

“No, Carol.” He was doctor enough to be sure of that. She shivered, and shut her eyes again.

They were getting the maniacs under control, he noted, and some time tonight, authorities would know how to deal with them. He would phone police headquarters himself as Dr. Skull, and describe his successful treatment of Miriam Hawkins. Within a few days he was sure, that mad purple glint would fade, and the victims would be as they had been before.

And within a few days, the District Attorney would launch a drive to clear the City administration of those corrupt elements which had sold out to the common enemy. And he would have the tact not to mention that Jeffrey Fairchild was the source of his information.

The City would be as it had been before—except for a thousand empty places that had been filled before these two days of horror. How long would it be that way? No man could have survived who remained below ground during that terrific explosion—but was the Scorpion a man, and no more? For the leader of the Purple Eyes could not die, the old legend had stated—and everything else in the legend had proven true.

Jeffrey touched the stamp of the Skull Killer in his pocket. If the City were attacked some time in the future, that was the only answer he knew.

A clear voice, half-mocking, half-affectionate, roused him. “Got a cigarette?”

“Of course not,” he told her. “Besides, you don’t want one.”

Her pretty face smiled up at him from the crook of his elbow. He shifted her into a more comfortable posture, and motioned to the nearest policeman...

THE END