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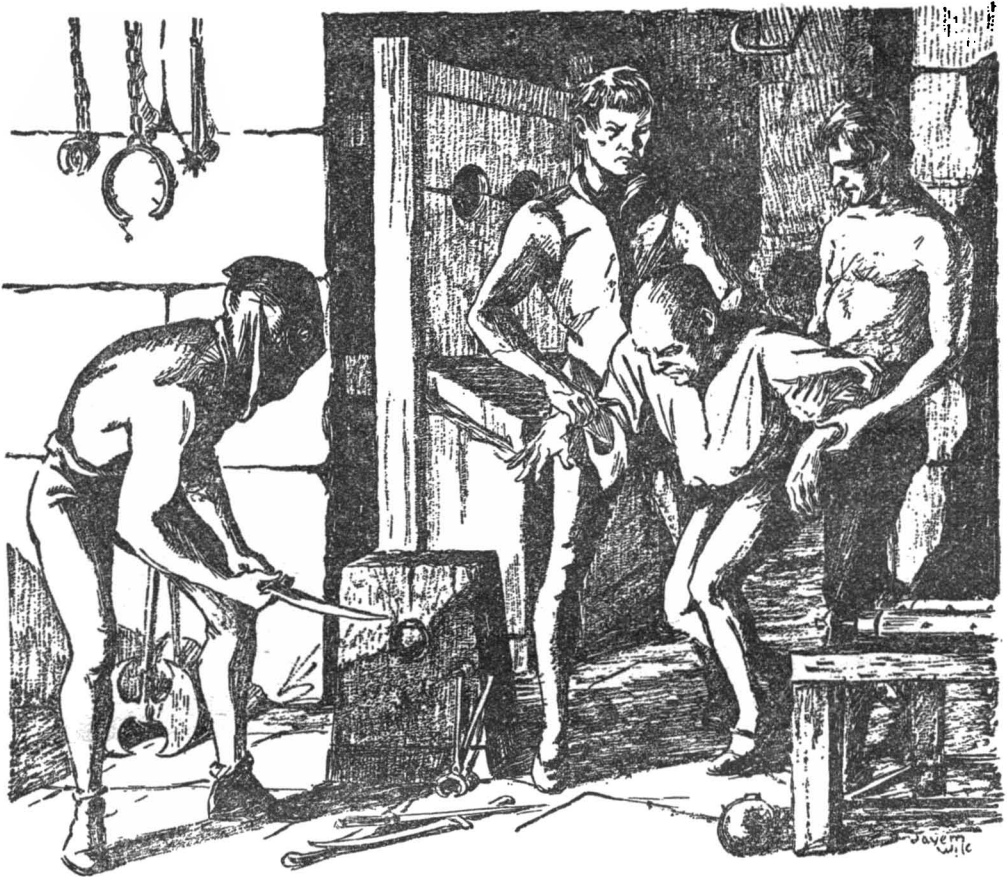
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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"The executioner picked from the floor a heavy, carved knife."



The G lenched Hand

By STUART STRAUSS

An unusual story of a bronze fist and the weird train of circumstances surrounding a mysterious murder in a New Orleans artist's studio

BUT, Cliff, I tell you I saw it: creeping almost on all fours with all hell written on its face—creeping closer and closer like a gray shadow out of the corner. I can't drive it out of my mind. It was a year ago, but so horribly vivid, it might have been last night."

This outburst was Myrna's only greeting as I stepped into her studio. I found

her pacing back and forth anxiously awaiting me. I was equally desirous of seeing her. A phone call in a highly strained voice, actually pleading to see me, had sent me almost on the run for her studio on Royale Street.

Myrna Williams and I were old friends, at one time I had fancied we were even more. I had not seen her for nearly a year, and her phone call was the first

knowledge I had that she was even in New Orleans. I was shocked at the change in her: a gay laughing girl had become a white-faced, nervous woman.

Without being asked, I drew a chair before the fire and sat watching her as she walked, twisting a handkerchief between her fingers.

Abruptly she paused before me. "Cliff, I had to tell some one, had to have some one here tonight, at least until after nine—some one to help me hold on to what little sanity I have left.

"You are wondering why I called you. Look here!" Walking hurriedly to a table, she picked up a limp black book, unmistakably a diary, and held it toward me. "See this," said Myrna; "it's Winifred Hudson's diary."

I was startled. The murder of Winifred Hudson, a year ago, had stirred New Orleans, for her reputation as an artist was well known. No one had solved the murder, no one had been tried for the crime. A dead dwarf in Winifred Hudson's studio bore the same strange death markings as did she. The dwarf had been employed as her model: nothing else was known.

"You'll understand why I phoned, why I needed you, after I have read you a part of this diary. It tells things that even I did not know, for I saw only its beginning that afternoon in the shop on Chartres Street and the ending that night in her studio.

"A year ago tonight Winifred came to me, asking me to stay with her. She was terrified, though she made a brave pretense of not believing the story she told me. She took me back to her studio—took me to a horror the memory of which is driving me mad.

"How I escaped the death that came to her at nine that night, I don't know.

For me, perhaps death would have been better than what I suffer now."

Then Myrna snapped back the book's heavy silver clasp and began to read:

"Oct. 22. I have solved two perplexing problems: I have found both the long-sought ornament for my table and the perfect model as well. The peculiar part is that I found them both in the same place.

"Myrna and I had been just idling about, rather straying from our beaten paths. Between two old houses, both fallen in with age and decay, we saw a little shop with a single dust-encrusted window. As soon as we had peered in, I knew that the long-sought was found. Lying there in the midst of the worst junk imaginable was the cast of a hand done in bronze and clenched into a fist. Age had placed upon it that lovely gray-green patina that only bronze obtains. It was truly a marvelous bit of craftsmanship, almost unholy in its perfection. It was as if it took tremendous strength to keep those long fingers tightly closed. Each vein and tendon stood out rigid in the power of the clasp. There appeared to be a ceaseless, never-ending struggle to unclench the fingers.

"**W**E OPENED the shop door and heard in the distance the faint tinkle of a bell. From back in the dingy recesses of the shop limped a little old man so crippled and twisted that he appeared to stand but inches above the floor. His immense head was covered with a shock of white hair and his eyes were a peculiar pale green, bulbous and protruding; eyes that gave me a queer sense of horror and yet at the same time a sense of pity also.

"He made a little, jerking bow and said, 'What is it that madame desires?'

"I noticed that he talked with difficulty,

appearing to open his mouth with effort.

"How much is the bronze hand in the window?" I asked.

"I was much surprized at his answer: 'I am sorry, madame, but the hand is not for sale. I have other bronzes and bits of metal work I would be glad to show.'

"'No,' I replied, 'I am only interested in the hand. Come, name your price.'

"Again he shook his head. 'The hand is not for sale.'

"I suppose that ordinarily I would have left the shop, but instead, to Myrna's amusement, I continued trying to purchase the hand. Somehow I felt I must have it. Even through the shop window the bronze fascinated me in a way that I can hardly explain; a morbid desire to possess such a peculiar sort of ornament.

"I kept raising my price. Suddenly in the midst of my talking, the old man turned his back on me and without a word hobbled into the curtained rear of his shop. I closed his door none too gently as we left."

Myrna ceased to read; she looked at me for a moment before speaking.

"That was the first time I ever saw Henri or the clenched hand," she said. "Henri sounds frightful, doesn't he? That is his picture above the fire—a horrible creature as he appears there, but he looked even more hideous toward the end. The end was one he tried so hard to make her realize."

So far I could see no reason for Myrna reading me these entries, save perhaps to acquaint me with the two characters that were, I was certain, to play the leading rôles in the tragedy that was to leave Myrna with such scars.

She was still for such a long time that I had begun to move restlessly in my chair. With a shrug, as though dismissing unpleasant memories, she once more began to read:

"*Oct. 23.* I had a most unexpected visitor this morning. On answering a knock, I found my old shopkeeper of yesterday standing on the threshold. He appeared to have great trouble with his speech. Almost wordlessly he handed me a paper-wrapped bundle. 'Here is the hand. I will take the price you offered.'

"I was surprized, on taking the package, at its light weight. I would never have thought the hand would weigh so little. Perhaps it was not the same one. Examination proved me wrong, and seeing it before me, I fell more under its spell than ever.

"He had turned to go when an idea seized me. I asked him if he would become my model. After some hesitation, he agreed.

"*Later:* The hand is as I thought, the perfect object for my room. It gives that added note of the sinister for which I had searched.

"*Oct. 30.* It is good to be back at work. I go to bed so tired that I do not feel like writing. Henri, the old man from the shop, is the perfect model. He never tires, and he learns a pose, even to a facial expression, with ease.

"After several false starts I am off on the final idea. I have Henri wrapped in a black cloak. Seated on a small stool, he is staring vacantly at the floor. The whole impression is that of futility and despair. It is all to be in somber shadows with the highlights on his twisted face and gnarled hands.

"*Nov. 6.* Henri is becoming much more friendly. Even though he has increasing difficulty with his speech, he talks a great deal—early days in Paris—New Orleans at a time when Royale Street was brilliant with the lights of gambling-houses and the quadrooms at the balls were watched by the white aristocrats—when carriages lined the streets and Ramos

near the old Saint Charles mixed his famous fizzes for the great of all the world.

"*Nov. 11.* Henri, poor chap, is becoming an even more ghastly caricature of a man. The skin upon his face is tensing. His lips are being drawn down at the corners, giving him an evil, leering look. And his eyes have a more terrifying protuberance.

"He is constantly mumbling, apparently to himself, for I can not hear his remarks. He is evidently obsessed by the bronze hand. It seems to me that he can hardly tear his eyes from it. Since he has become so friendly, I have asked him many times how he ever gained possession of such a treasure, but he keeps to a very vague and careful story concerning it—says it has been in his family for countless years and he parted with it only because he needed money desperately.

"*Nov. 19.* My model has been seriously ill. I have been to see him and my worst fears are realized. He lives in a little room behind his shop. The stench of old books, old leather, and general decay is overpowering.

"I have placed Henri in a hospital. While there, I had the tightness of his face and jaws examined. Save that it is caused by an increasing rigidity of the muscles, the doctors could find no reason for such a peculiar malady. However, they said that his present illness was caused by near-starvation. I can not understand this, for I paid him well for the hand and enough as a model to purchase food at least. The doctor tells me that Henri's peculiar ailment of the facial muscles is unique in medical annals.

"*Nov. 20.* I had a queer experience today. I was making a plaster cast of the bronze hand. As I picked it up, I thought I noticed that the clenching of the fist did not appear as tense as usual, but of

course my imagination, which often runs away, is up to its usual tricks.

"*Nov. 23.* Henri is now out of the hospital and ready to work, so I am beginning a new picture. This time, instead of using somber browns and blacks, I have chosen flame-red as my color motif. Henri, nude to the waist, with a red turban and blue breech-clout, bears on a silver salver a hand severed at the wrist. For this I am using my precious bit of bronze. For some reason Henri appears to be afraid of the cast and is reluctant even to touch it."

MYRNA paused in her reading and looked up at the picture above the fire. "And," she said, "she never finished it. I found it among her things when I returned. I did not know until then that she had left everything to me. I wonder if it would have been a better picture if she had ever placed on it the finishing touches she had planned. I hate the thing. I don't know what caused me to hang it. Perhaps we will burn it later tonight. But now I want to continue with the diary:

"*Nov. 24.* I have examined the bronze hand closely. Its lack of weight still mystifies me. At first I thought it must be a hollow shell, but when I strike it sharply there is no bell-like sound; so it must be a solid piece.

"*Nov. 29.* I am glad to be home. I find that I miss all that is here even after a few days' absence. Henri, whom I left in charge, has kept the place spotless, and he seemed pathetically glad to see me. I imagine he thinks I have adopted him permanently.

"*Nov. 30.* Upon my return I find that the hand is more of a puzzle than ever. I wrote, I think, that when I first purchased the hand I was struck by the rigidity of the pose, how all the veins and

muscles stood out in high relief. Now I am positive—unless my eyes are deceiving me—there is almost a smoothness of the surface. The intense strain of the clasp looks greatly lessened. Of course, this is either from poor eyes or a too vivid imagination.

"Dec. 1. Since I have been gone, even in such a short time, Henri's appearance has become more terrifying. Myrna seems afraid of him and avoids him whenever she can. I do not blame her, for he is certainly repugnant to look at. The skin on his face has tightened further and he is beginning to lose his shock of white hair. However, I need him, and his devotion knows no end. He will stand motionless for as long as I wish, holding the tray on which rests the bronze hand. More and more am I convinced that it has some secret significance to him. His utterly unconscious expression of horror is perfect for my picture. I am, I think, cruel to him, but I drive myself just as hard.

"Dec. 4. All day I have been pursued by thoughts of what occurred last night. Sometime during the night or early morning, I was awakened by a veritable pandemonium breaking out in my living-room. I heard a chair overturn with a crash, and afterward a sort of dragging, bumping sound; then the noise ended as suddenly as it had started, with an even louder crash. I lay shivering in the dark, picturing hold-up men, cutthroats, and other sorts of undesirables. But as the noise did not continue, I managed somehow, on shaking legs, to reach the living-room and turn on the lights.

"The place was in confusion. Chairs were overturned, a table pushed from its usual place; one pane in the skylight was broken and the glass was scattered over the floor. I can not imagine why any one who would break in would make such a

racket. In all my reading, thieves were noted for their ability to enter a place quietly.

"When Henri came this morning, I told him about last night's affair. Never have I seen any one show such stark terror. All day long he has mumbled and muttered to himself, but I can get nothing out of him. Why, I wonder, is he so terrified?

"Dec. 4. The same nerve-racking noises have continued for the last two nights. First the bumping and thumping, followed by the crash of overturned furniture, and then the usual silence. But last night some one must have tried to take my bronze fist, for I found it the next morning on a chair across the room from its usual place on my table.

"Dec. 5. I have had to change my picture again, for Henri has become so horrible that he is even a better study than formerly. He is now entirely bald, and his face is like that of some old mummy, save for his bulging eyes. I think for some reason he is living in a daze of constant fear, but I am unable to learn why. He has lost all his old friendliness and daily grows more and more uncommunicative. Only his eyes seem alive, and they follow my every movement. I would get rid of the man were it not that I still have need of him.

"Dec. 7. There were no noises last night; so I imagine whoever the prowler was must have become disappointed in his search for valuables. However, here is a possible explanation for the sudden ceasing of the noises. Opening my front door early this morning, I found Henri asleep across the sill. He merely shook his head when I pressed him for an explanation.

"Dec. 12. Yesterday I told Henri I would have no use for him for a while, but this morning I found him as usual

on my doorstep. The man's condition is pitiful. He is so agitated that he can hardly walk. He spoke this morning for the first time in over a week. It was dreadful to see the difficulty he had in articulation.

"He begged—no, *pleaded* is the better word—for the bronze fist. He even became threatening.

"'You are in danger, madame,' he said, 'grave danger. Do please give me back the hand. You must!'

"I questioned him at once as to what danger my refusal might bring, but he would not answer save to mumble about danger, death, and the fingers of de Reville or the devil or some such name. What I can not understand is why, once having parted with the bronze, he is so anxious to get it back. Undoubtedly he has had some dazzling offer for it. Knowing how I prize it, he is merely trying to frighten me into giving it to him.

"Just as soon as my work is finished, I must get rid of the man. He is becoming an obsession with me. I pity him, and yet he frightens me. He is, I am sure, actually shrinking in size every day.

"*Dec. 13.* Today Henri tried to steal my bronze cast. I caught him hiding it beneath his coat just as he was ready to leave. He made no explanatory excuses, but, placing the hand back on the table, dragged himself from the room. I would never have thought he would steal. There must indeed be some pressing reason for his desire to regain the thing.

"To me the bronze hand has a sinister fascination. I find myself watching it every time I am in the room. I am afraid to admit it, but I think the hand is changing shape. But this is madness, for it is only a thing of metal—a bronze cast. Madness or not, to me the fingers of the fist seem now only lightly closed.

"*Dec. 14.* I am not mad! The hand

has changed shape! But how? and why? To a chance visit from Myrna I owe my sanity. While here she was examining the hand. Suddenly she picked it up and turned to me.

"'Where is the old hand and where did you get this companion piece?'

"'How do you know it is not the same?' I asked.

"'Well, see here,' she replied, 'there is not the same tenseness of the muscles; the fingers are only loosely closed. Did you get this from Henri? I had no idea that he had two.'

"I did not disillusion her, for there was no reason for alarming her with such an unexplainable and fantastic occurrence. I changed the subject to other matters. But I know now that there is nothing wrong with either my imagination or my eyes."

MYRNA looked up from the diary. "If only she had told me, then I might have helped her. I noticed at the time that she seemed reluctant to discuss what I supposed was a new purchase. But I put it down to any other cause than the real one. I hated that hand, Cliff, from the very first! It was cold and cruel and like no honest metal I had ever touched. However, it was beautifully done and fascinating even to me, for all its horror. I think I can understand in a way why Win would never, not understanding his reason, give it to Henri. Oh, if she had only believed his story a little earlier!"

I sat back in my chair. I sensed fully that some fear had hung over Winifred Hudson, something that the woman had felt herself. She must have been brave but stubborn to have kept the hand. Or again, she was perhaps unable to escape the thing that waited for her. My musings were cut short as Myrna once more began her reading:

"*Dec. 17.* The noises in my living-room have started once more—the same noise of overturned furniture accompanied by the extraordinary scraping, shuffling noise I always hear. As usual, nothing was taken, and, save for furniture, nothing disturbed. I have locked the hand away in a closet, to which I alone have the key.

"More than ever I believe that it is Henri, trying by these disturbances to frighten me into giving up the bronze. Thank heaven, in a few days, if all goes well, I will finish with the picture and Henri at the same time. The man continues to terrify me. His voice is now almost completely gone, and in place of speaking, he croaks like some ancient frog. The skin on his face has cracked under the strain of tightening flesh and now is covered by tiny red lines that slowly seep blood.

"He does nothing but beg for the hand and is constantly croaking of danger, grave danger, and death that is threatening me. But of course he will not tell me from where or from whom this will come. I accused him of making the noises in the night. He denied this vehemently. But he must be the author of these nocturnal disturbances.

"*Dec. 23.* A strange thing has happened to me. Last night I had a most frightful dream. Everything was in darkness. I could see or hear nothing. Then suddenly a hand grabbed my throat. It was cold and clammy, but oh, so strong! It must have been huge, for I sensed the fingers almost meeting around my neck. The pressure was gradually increased until my breath came in short gulping sobs. I was just losing consciousness in the dream when I awoke, screaming with fright.

"All day today my throat has been sore, though I can find no signs of inflamma-

tion. I suppose that my awakening screams must have strained it.

"For some reason, perhaps because he was watching me so intently, I told Henri of my dream. He was so terrified that for a moment I thought he was going to faint. I can not understand why he should be so frightened. If I were not sure the whole episode was a dream, I would think he had a guilty conscience. Somehow he gained control of himself, but made no comment on either his action or my dream. On his departure he again begged me to give him the hand.

"*Dec. 24.* The same dream again last night, and this morning I am croaking almost as badly as Henri. In addition to my hoarseness, there are several red welts like finger prints on my neck. I know that it was a dream, but I can not explain this strange disfigurement. It is impossible for me to work. I simply can not paint while in this condition.

"Henri, this picture, and all the strange things that have happened are turning me into a nervous wreck. I wonder why I do not destroy the canvas, give the bronze hand to Henri, and forget the whole matter. But stubbornness and a sense of hating to give way to pressure make me go on.

"**T**HIS is Christmas Eve. Never before have I had so little holiday spirit. However, Myrna is giving a party. I must go or she will be hurt. I have seen so little of her lately. I have felt so bad that I have seen no one save Henri. If things get worse, I must talk to Myrna. She, I know, can help, or at least advise me.

"*Dec. 26.* Today Henri again threatened me with death and disaster, but was again refused the bronze, and without another word he shuffled away. When he had gone, I unlocked the closet in

which I have secreted the hand. At what I saw, I was horror-stricken. I can scarcely write about it even now. The hand was lying palm up, the fingers almost open; for I could see the palm clearly and the fingers almost to the tips. They were like huge, clutching talons. On the palm was burned some design, just what, I could not tell, but a brand of some sort undoubtedly.

"Dec. 27. Henri this morning without a word handed me a curious document. At first I thought it old and yellowed paper, but on closer inspection I found it parchment. This document was written in an ancient French, of which, fortunately, I have more than a passable knowledge. It was one of those long-winded legal papers, so I will not try to set it down verbatim. The parchment was dated December 30, 1531, and was addressed to the governor of His Majesty's prison in Paris. It informed that dignitary that at nine o'clock of that night he must put to death by torture one Armand de Reville, and before doing so, must strike off his right hand, on which is branded the fleur-de-lis. Then came a listing of the man's crimes, and these were set down at length, being treason, sorcery, witchcraft, and the strangling of some seven women.

"Watching me closely, as soon as I had finished this curious order, Henri handed me another sheet of parchment. This, a letter, was dated the same as the one I had just read and bore the signature of Armand de Reville. However, the penmanship was so poor and the writing so blurred by time that I could not read it. I shook my head and handed it back to Henri. At once, in his horrible croak, he began to read. No, read is not the word, for he did not look at the writing. Evidently he had memorized the bit of parchment:

"I, Armand de Reville, Compte de Banrebas, Sieur des Isles de la Mer, who am about to die, write this to my heirs, living, and to those who will come in the future. It has been decreed that my hand, which has clasped that of the Prince of Darkness, is to be stricken off. Now I, your father, who has sat beside the Evil One himself, command you. Arrangements have been made so that this proud hand of mine will be returned to you. First to Raoul de Reville, my eldest son, and then from son to son for time to come.

"As long as it is in the possession of a de Reville, all will be well. But should it become the property of another, wo betide him who loses the hand and wo betide whoever shall own it. And after four centuries from this day, at nine o' night, I shall return to claim mine own. For four centuries must I make payment for my deeds. But afterward my Master has work for me to do.'

"Henri ceased his reading.

"'Explain all this gibberish,' I said. 'Don't try to frighten me with curses four centuries old.'

"Croaking and mumbling, he made answer: 'This Armand was a bad, wicked man, but an ancestor of mine. He was a demon, a sorcerer, a devil, a fiend on earth. He was a man of noble blood, but he held communion with evil things. Powerful he was, at a court that did not mind wickedness, but in a fit of rage he strangled the king's favorite and paid for his anger with his life.

"'For all these centuries my family has kept the pledge and his hand, waiting, waiting for him to return and claim it. Once we were rich, proud, and haughty; now I am the last of my family.

"'I did not intend to sell the hand when I placed it in the window to attract people into my little shop. But when you were willing to pay the price,

I, being desperate for money, parted with it. Since then I have tried to regain it many times—by fright, by threats, even by stealing, by offering you all I had; for you have been most kind, and I want no harm to come to you. For myself, I care little, for in a short time I shall die anyway.

"Bring out the bronze hand. You, too, can see that the coming is close. Already the hand has lost its death grip, ready to be put in place. Please, please give me back that devil's fist, or evil will befall us both."

"*Later:* Of course I refused, and now Henri is gone. The man certainly is a wonderful actor. For some reason he wants the bronze and went to all this rigmartole to obtain it. However, I am puzzled; the documents certainly have the appearance of genuineness, and in truth the hand has changed in contour. Now, as I look at it, the brand is clearly discernible. It is a dark but glowing red against the deep brown of the bronze. I see that I can still say bronze. Should I echo Henri and talk of long-dead flesh? No! Flesh it can not be. It is metal! Bronze. I must keep repeating that to myself. Bronze. Bronze. Bronze. But I can not explain to myself these devilish occurrences. I must force myself not to think of flesh and cursing ghosts in connection with my cast. It is bronze, I say, an insensate piece of metal made by some craftsman with a great but diabolic genius.

"I wish I were able to talk this over with Myrna. She might advise me what course to take. But such a consultation is impossible. I do not want her to think me a silly woman frightened by a cripple's scheming mad-brained fairy-tales.

"*Dec. 28.* I covered several pages yesterday but I wanted to set down in their entirety all the strange things that happened that day. They still continue to

haunt me. Last night I had the most terrible dream of all the many that I have had:

"I WAS standing in a huge room, dimly lit by smoking torches. Somehow it seemed far underground. The room was carved from solid rock. Huge pillars of rough granite towered above me, from which hung rusty iron chains, and queer cross-shaped bars were studded into each post. Around the gray stone walls were other chains, and stacked in corners were piles of knives and pincers. In one corner a fireplace threw out the only heat, and over this a huge spit slowly turned. At one side of the fireplace was a wooden frame that to my eyes looked like a crude bedstead with ropes running from rings at head and foot to a windlass near by. But this I knew was the rack on which victims were torn limb from limb.

"Still nearer the fire was a wooden block some two feet high, dyed a dark red. Standing beside it was the lone figure in this room of horrors, a man naked to the waist, but whose head and shoulders were covered by a black hood. He was motionless, leaning on a great double-bladed ax. Spread on the floor about him were knives with heavy blades, a big pair of shears, and many curious instruments of which I knew nothing.

"Breaking a silence that made me wish to scream, a door clanged hollowly somewhere far above me. Then down a flight of steep steps, lighting their way with flaming torches, appeared a group of men, four of whom were dragging a prisoner loaded down with chains. As I watched, I was struck by something familiar about this man, something vaguely and dimly familiar about the shuffling walk, the twisted body, and the mummy-like bald head. I looked again. It was Henri!

"The executioner picked from the floor a heavy curved knife. The two guards lifted the prisoner's arm, and, despite his struggles, held it in a rigid grip. I could hear the swish of the steel as the headsmen swung his knife, and then I awoke.

"Dec. 29. Today Henri came to me with a most astounding proposal. It is that I marry him. He wants, so he swears, only to save me from danger. After the time of awaiting was past he would go away, never to return. If we were married, the hand would still be in the family and old Armand de Reville's curse and vengeance could not then affect us.

"Ordinarily I would have been amused. But so much has happened to me that I am afraid I have lost my sense of humor.

"After I had thanked him and declined, he would not go, but merely sat staring at the wall with a hopeless expression. For the first time I am forced to think he actually believes in the ancient curse of his ancestor. Beyond any doubt his disease has driven him mad.

"Tomorrow is the time appointed; at nine o'clock tomorrow night I shall know that either Henri is a liar and insane or—cheerful thought!—I shall be dead. Henri assured me of the certainty of this latter fact only a short time ago.

"Dec. 30. This is the fatal night, the time for the solving of the mystery. Myrna is with me, for after all, I could not stand to face it alone. I went to her studio about an hour ago and poured out to her the whole story in all its ghastly detail. I only wish now that I had confided in her earlier. She agreed to stay with me and suggested that we bring some man, both as an added witness and as protection if Henri's mania should become dangerous. This I refused. I want no other witness to my foolishness.

"In front of me as I write lies the hand, now absolutely open. No matter

how much I desire to do so, I can not disbelieve my own eyes, but I am certain even now that there must be some logical and reasonable meaning in this. None the less, the hand is open, lying palm down, and the fingers appear to be tapping with impatience on the table. Near it stands a clock ticking off the minutes. Hand and clock—clock and hand—I find myself glancing first at one and then at the other. The clock ticks silently away, and the hand, to my ears, taps a devil's tattoo on the thin wood of the table.

"Now it is five minutes to nine. Henri, seated near me, mumbles, 'Five minutes to live, five minutes to live.'

"I will not let myself become too frightened, even though my feet are like ice and I have to exert all my will to keep my hands from shaking.

"Henri is pacing the floor like some caged animal. He has ceased to plead for the hand, and he, too, is waiting. The stillness, broken only by the tick of the clock and the soft pad-pad of Henri's footfalls, is deathly. There is something awesome, something savage, in this death watch.

"I wish Myrna would speak, but she only watches me as I write. I think she, too, almost believes.

"I am saying to myself that nothing will happen, nothing *can* happen. But I am fast losing control of my nerves.

"The minute indicator of the clock is almost at nine. From somewhere far away a clock booms out: one—a pause; two—a pause; three—another pause; and so on up until the ninth stroke. Nine o'clock has come; in but a moment it will be past and I shall be released for ever from this dread fear.

"Henri gives a croaking cry and points into a distant corner. I am afraid to look, but I must. What is it? A shadow from the lamp?—No! no!—it is taking shape

—a gray formless thing. It becomes—oh God, let me write this down!—a man—a little, gray old man, who waggles a handless stump before him. As he crawls toward us, Henri slithers to meet him. They join in the center of the room. I can not see—yes! yes! Oh! Henri is being——”

MYRNA'S voice trailed off into silence at that last broken and unfinished sentence. It was all terribly real to me as she finished. This woman sitting beside me here in this quiet room before the cheerful fire had seen it all; no, not all, but only the last dreadful scene. It was no wonder that she had aged and that there were lines bitten deep into her once lovely face. I was brought back to the present by Myrna's next remark.

“Do you wonder now, Cliff, that I am afraid I am really crazed?—as mad as poor Winifred thought herself? There we sat and watched Henri struggling with that other so like himself that it might have been a man struggling with his reflection in a dim mirror—saw the thing grasp Henri's throat with its one hand, lift him clear of the floor and then throw him like a broken, grotesque doll into a corner; saw him then come creeping on, creeping toward the two of us, sitting there paralyzed by terror. I wanted to scream but could not make a sound.

“Closer and closer he came, as silently and as gray as drifting smoke, yet somehow firm-bodied and very evil. Even now I can remember the smell of him that permeated the whole room, as if we had been too long shut away from warmth and sunlight. Now he was nearer, almost to the table, and yet I could not scream. Winifred, across the table, looking—no, I can't talk about that—I don't even want to think about that look!

“Then I saw a claw reach across the

table and take the hand. This man, if man is what I can call the thing, stood there beside us and stretched, now, *two* hands out toward Winifred and began to sidle closer to her. He was smiling a beastly, triumphant, slimy smile. Inch by inch, inch by inch, he dragged himself toward her. She never moved to avoid him—never lost that frozen look as she watched him with those powerful twisted arms and the two hands with writhing fingers. I saw him, Cliff, grasp her by the throat! Then I fainted.

“What happened afterward has never been quite clear. I have only one vivid memory amid a whirl of gray impressions—a memory vivid only because——”

Here Myrna hesitated for a moment. “No, I'll tell you about that shortly. I remember being lifted from my chair, of a burning sensation on my arm, a memory of an evil, chuckling laugh close to my ear. The pain in my arm increased so that I wanted to scream, but I could not make a sound. I had the impression of stairs and the night wind cold in the courtyard; next, the opening of a door; then more pain as I was thrown on the floor; and from a distance again that evil laugh.

“I must have struck my head as I fell, for later I found myself lying next this fireplace near one of the andirons. Near me on the floor was this book.

“My arm was burned so badly that at first I was afraid I had been thrown on a live coal. Oh, if it had only been that!—but it wasn't. Look! See this, and then can you wonder if sometimes I think that madness awaits me?”

She pulled up one of the sleeves of her dress. About her arm, above the elbow, was etched the fiery print of a hand, each finger distinct, and in the center in a deeper tone was the clear-cut impression of a fleur-de-lis!