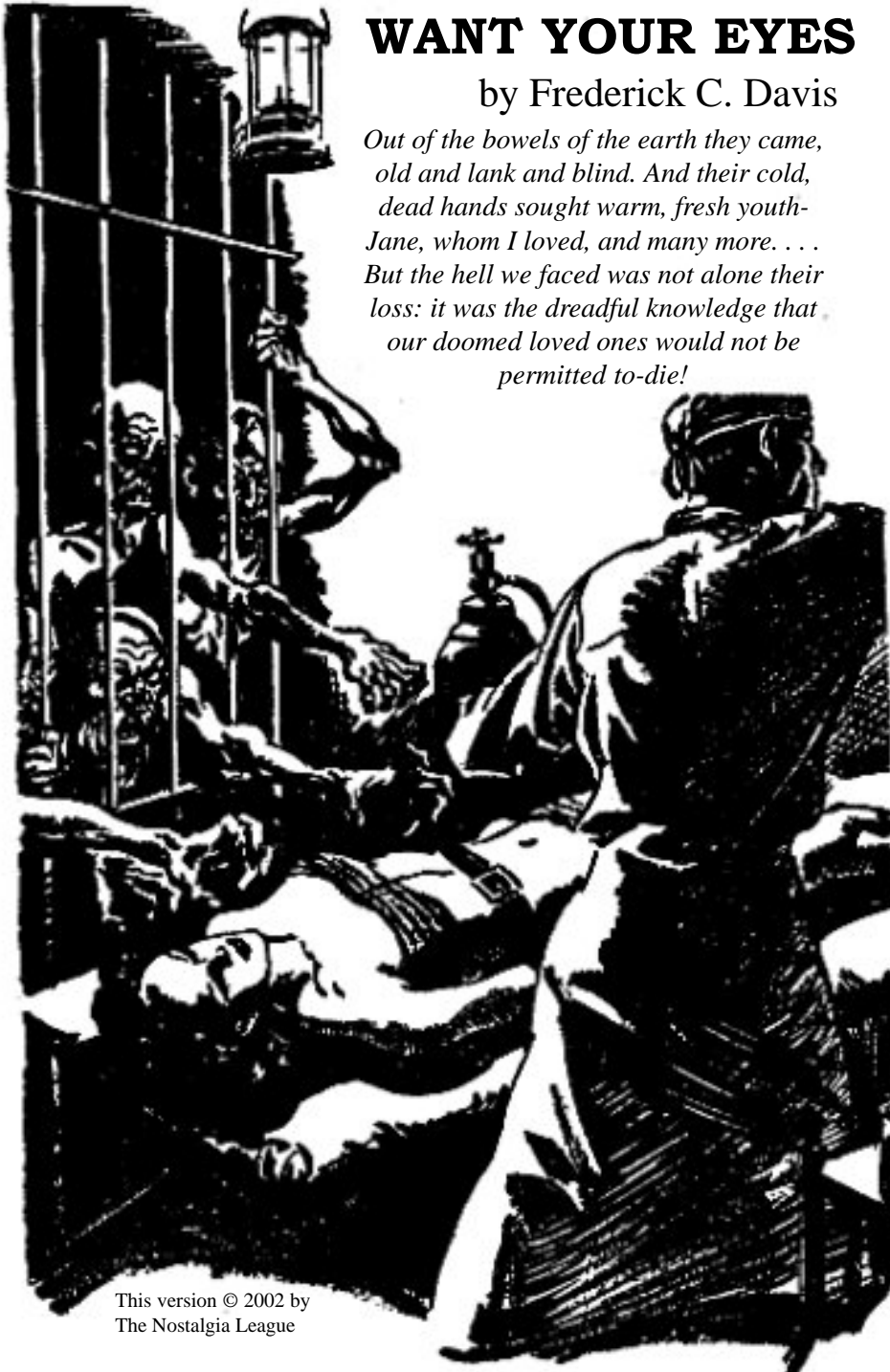


THE MOLE MEN WANT YOUR EYES

by Frederick C. Davis

*Out of the bowels of the earth they came,
old and lank and blind. And their cold,
dead hands sought warm, fresh youth-
Jane, whom I loved, and many more. . . .
But the hell we faced was not alone their
loss: it was the dreadful knowledge that
our doomed loved ones would not be
permitted to die!*



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CHAPTER ONE Doom at Midnight

It was a strange mission that had taken us out into the night; and our search had led us into a region that seemed ominously desolate under the dim glow of the moon.

We were silent as we followed a cinder path that wound down into a hollow among the hills. Jane's hand clung

to my arm while we groped our way. I could feel her fingers pressing tightly and more tightly. Her steps began to lag; she seemed more and more unwilling to go on.

"It isn't much farther, Jane," I said, trying to reassure her. "If he isn't here, I don't know where else to hunt for him.

**A Feature-Length Novel of the
Macabre Beings Who Dwell in
Eternal Darkness!**

We'll take a quick look around the old mine, and then, if we don't find him there, we'll have to turn back."

We were searching for Dr. Walter Lockwood, one of our neighbors in West-haven. More than an hour had passed since Jane and I had set out to find him. We had gone to his home, not long after dinner, thinking he would like the company of sympathetic friends on such a trying night as this; but we had not found him there.

His house was all lighted, but our knock had gone unanswered. Going in, looking through the empty rooms, then scouting among the gardens, we had called his name repeatedly; but there" had been no response. His absence had worried us,

"We'd better keep looking for him, Jane," I had said. "He's gone off by himself somewhere, probably half out of his mind with grief. We've got to find him."

We had worked our way farther and farther from the village, following dark paths through the hills—haunted every step of the way by the thought that Walter Lockwood's brother must forfeit his life to the State promptly upon the stroke of the new day—that our friend's brother was doomed to die in the electric chair at midnight tonight.

"Walter was always crazy about that brother of his," I'd added, as we penetrated deeper into the valley. "With the time set for Carl's execution coming closer and closer—well, Walter has taken it terribly hard. Distraught as he is, there's no telling what he might do."

We had found no sign of Dr. Walter Lockwood. But we had persisted in our search, keenly aware that the time set for the execution of Walter's brother was inexorably approaching. Now, at last, not knowing where else to look, we were descending into a valley where the darkness was pooled deep—a place that was shunned by the villagers even in broad daylight—where an unnerved man might find, in truth, complete solitude.

"One quick look around, Jane," I repeated. "Then, if we don't find him—" Abruptly Jane halted. "Phil, I—I'm afraid," she said.

IF it had been any other girl, I might — have laughed at her—might have tried to dispel her fear with ridicule. But I couldn't laugh at

Jane Vincent. Though she was fine and delicate, with sensitive blue eyes and a soft mouth that reflected her every change of emotion, she had courage. She was a skilled airplane pilot. Flying solo, she had established several new speed records. Day after day, when she soared into the zenith, her wings dared death. . . As she stood there on the bleak path, gazing at me with her round clear eyes, I remembered this; and I could not take her obvious fear lightly.

"But why?" I said. "We know every foot of these hills. Remember, when we were kids, how we used to tramp through them all day long, and hide in the caves? It was great fun. Well, the hills are just the same now. There's still nothing to be afraid of, Jane."

Jane shook her head; and I could see in the shine of my flashlight, that she was pale. "They're not the same, Phil," she answered. "They've changed. I know it's silly of me to be timid, but this valley has seemed different ever since—since—"

She was looking down into the dark depths of the great hollow. Down there, the glow of the moon dimly revealed a group of squat black buildings. Behind them were huge dark mounds of slag, A high wire fence surrounded this property, barricading it from every approach. Over it hung an atmosphere of decay, for it had been abandoned several years ago; but a grimy sign, still hanging askew on the locked gate, read

BLACK LODGE COMPANY—KEEP OUT

Everyone in Westhaven could remember, with a shudder, the day when misfortune had descended upon the Black Lode coal mine.

The first warning of it had come as the shrill howl of a siren. The metallic cry had swelled out from the confines of the County Asylum for the Insane, which sat several miles to the north of the village. At the wailing sound, frightened children had run indoors; fearful mothers had turned the keys in the locks. It meant terror, that penetrating signal, for it warned that some mad inmate had broken loose.

Soon word had spread through the village like the wind—news

even more terrifying than we had at first thought. For it was not only one madman who had escaped—almost a score of them had fought their way out. With insane cunning, they had made a desperate, concerted break; then they had fled like wild animals into the hills. Suddenly, with the deranged fugitives lurking in the shadows, every road and path had become dangerous—but that was not the worst.

Every one of the escaped madmen, we learned, had been imprisoned

...the horde that had broken loose upon us were all the most ruthless type of degenerate!

for having committed revolting sex crimes—the horde that had broken loose upon us were all the most ruthless type of degenerate!

Fear had chilled every heart while the asylum guards searched. The wily fugitives had retreated before an advancing line of armed men and baying hounds. Suddenly, with the same animal-like cunning, the degenerates had swarmed down upon the Black Lode mine. It was after dark, and the mining operations had been suspended. The madmen, overwhelming the night watchmen, had scurried into a tunnel, and there they had barricaded themselves. The guards had gone down after them, and their capture had seemed certain—until the explosion came.

Was the dynamite set off by accident, or did the madmen deliberately ignite it in a crazy attempt to fight off the guards? No one knows.

The force of the explosion shook the hills. A terrific subterranean avalanche spilled down, choking the tunnel and trapping the fugitives. We wondered, as the smoke cleared away—were they dead or alive? It was impossible to tell; but the mine crew began its back-breaking work of rescue.

After days of labor, the exhausted men had reported, "It'll take another week to get through, maybe longer than that. If any of them was left alive by the explosion, they've certainly died since. If we keep on digging, we're sure we'll find nothing but corpses. Let 'em lie where they are, we say. Good riddance!"

Officially, the decision was made to abandon the attempt. We who lived in the village drew breaths of relief. Our wives and daughters and sweethearts were no longer in danger of falling prey to the lust of the madmen. We had gone back to the normal routine of our lives; but that hour had marked the beginning of the decline of the Black lode.

First, several superstitious miners had laid down their tools, refusing to work in the breasts which they declared were accursed by the evil souls of the trapped madmen. Soon greater labor troubles developed; for a time, a strike paralyzed the mine. Then, while operations went on sporadically, serious dissention grew among the owners. Finally it became certain that the Black Lode could no longer be worked profitably; and it had closed down.

That day, trooping out of the manway for the last time, the crew had looked grimly resigned, "It's because of the damned lunatics in there," the men had growled. "They put a bad spell on the mine, damn their ugly souls to hell—and we ain't seen the last of it yet."

So the valley, once a hive of activity, had been transformed into a deserted, desolate hollow—a place avoided by the villagers, as if the very soil had become defiled by the undying corpses of the mad-men still walled in under the ground.

IREMEMBERED this as Jane stood beside me on the path that led to the Black Lode, her face pale in the shine of my torch, her hand clenched on my arm.

She recovered herself with an effort. "It's silly of me to be frightened, just because of the tales that are going around," she said with a smile. "I hope noticing has happened to Walter. Come on, Phil—we've got to find him."

I felt her trembling a little as we went on, but she was too game to falter again. I was forced to confess to myself that the brooding darkness of the valley was doing something to my own nerves. Having been a newspaper man, before I turned to writing fact articles for the magazines, I'd become hardened to all ordinary stresses; but now I was getting jumpy. When Jane and I reached the fence of the

Black Lode, in the blackest depths of the hollow, we began to hurry.

Suddenly she stopped—stopped short, and stood stock still, A little gasp broke from her lips as she gazed transfixed into the profoundest darkness of the Black Lode.

"Jane!" I exclaimed. "What's the matter, darling?"

She spoke in a whisper. "I saw—a face."

"A face?"

I swung my flashlight through the fence. The beam wiped away the shadows. I saw only grit and weeds; and, beyond the light, nothing. "But there's no one there, Jane," I said, "I saw a face," she said again, "It was —right there," She pointed to the very spot where my light was shining through the empty air. "It was a horrible face, Phil—ghastly."

"Nonsense, honey!" I said. "It was your imagination."

She shook her head, "I saw it. It was lean—so lean, it was almost like the head of a skeleton—and it had white skin— skin that looked bleached and—and slimy. I saw a long beard, and eyes looking at me—but the eyes were all white, like a blind man's. I—I *did* see it, Phil!"

Realizing I could not dissuade her, I took her arm. "Then let's hurry along," I said. "As soon as we get around to the other side of the fence, we'll go straight back. Unless you'd rather turn back right here,"

"No," she said, shaking her head again, resolutely. "The right thing to do is to face the things you're afraid of. Let's go on."

She kept close beside me as we hastened along the fence. In spite of myself, I grew more and more uneasy. The distance around the mine seemed interminable. I wondered—had Jane actually seen the face? And if so, was it possible— possible that those madmen, after all these months, had somehow finally— I quenched the thought. Our steps quickened—not only because we were anxious to find Dr. Walter Lockwood, but because the Black Lode was thrusting an uncanny fear into our hearts, in spite of our will to keep it out. Somewhere below us, I kept thinking— somewhere deep beneath the very ground we were walking on—were the moldering skeletons

of those madmen whose malignant spirits had put a curse on the mine. Unless....

A cry broke from Jane's lips. It was not merely a gasp of fright this time—it was a full-throated scream of terror,

Suddenly she was no longer at my side. She was gone from the glow of my light so quickly that she seemed to have been snatched away. Her hand had clutched my arm, before it tore off; and the jerk caused me to drop the flashlight. It struck the ground—and went out!

I groped for it, suddenly full of a fiery fear. And Jane screamed again—screamed while the sounds of a struggle came from the fence.

WHEN, after an age, my fingers found the light, I snatched it up and sprang toward the sounds. The first flash of the torch revealed Jane huddled on the ground, paralyzed with terror, trying to push herself away from the fence. I swung the beam—but I saw nothing that could account for what had happened. I caught Jane up; and she flung her arms around me, to cling like a frightened child.

"Take me away, Phil!" she begged breathlessly. "Take me away!"

I half carried her along the path, until the Black Lode was well behind us. We ran up a steep slope; and at the crest of a hill we paused for breath. Jane's whole body trembled, even though she strove to control herself, as she gazed down into the black valley.

"What was it, Jane?" I asked quickly. "What happened?"

"Someone—someone reached through the fence and grabbed my hand."

"But that isn't possible, darling," I said, "There's no one on that property. Not a soul has stepped foot on it since it closed down. You stumbled—that's all."

Her clear blue eyes begged me to believe her. "I felt the hand grasp mine, Phil," she insisted. "It was damp, and cold. It pulled me against the fence—as if it was trying to carry me away, as if it wanted me for—for something. Then didn't you hear footfalls—something running away?"

"You're over-wrought, darling. We'd better go back home and—"

"Look, Phil!"

She pulled up the sleeve of her coat. I turned my light upon her wrist. A crawling coldness covered me as I gazed at the marks,

...the impressions of bony fingers...wet as if with sticky slime!

They were red with the blood that vicious pressure had brought to the surface of the skin. They seemed to be the impressions of bony fingers, and they were wet— wet as if with sticky slime!

Sight of them struck all doubt from my mind, filled me with a numb conviction that the tales being whispered about the village were true—that something—some thing lurking in the night was—was *hungry*....

Hastily, hoping to conceal my anxiety, I wiped Jane's wrist with my handkerchief.

"It was probably a hobo, honey," I said, keeping my voice easy. "Some tramp hiding oil the mine property, who wanted to touch us for a dime."

But I couldn't help noticing, as I tucked the handkerchief back into my pocket, that an odor rose from it—a nauseating, fetid stench....

"I don't know why I hadn't thought of it before," I added, "but Walter Lock-wood has probably gone to Sam Eustace's place. Let's go over and see."

"Yes, let's," Jane said, managing a smile. "I'm all right now, Phil." "Good girl!"

We swung along the path side by side, the light flashing in front of us, trying to forget our fear. I counted myself lucky that I would soon be married to a girl as plucky as Jane. We'd known each other ever since we were toddling kids; and I'm sure I'd loved her as long. I was glad that she had found reassurance in me tonight. We felt steadier as the first houses of the village came into sight.

Then, with startling unexpectedness, we heard a scream—a sharp, tortured, ringing shriek that tore from a throat clutched with terror.

"Phil!" Jane exclaimed, halting and gripping my arm. "What was that?"

"Listen!" I warned. "It came from over there. Do you hear those

noises? It sounded like—like an animal crawling through the bushes."

Leaves were rustling and twigs were crackling under movements in the darkness that we could not see. The voice that had screamed was now lowered to a whimpering moan. It was a continual crying, expressing unbearable agony and dread. It seemed to be pleading desperately, hopelessly for help.

"I've got to see what that is," I said. "Stay right beside me, Jane."

WE LEFT the path quickly. My light shot ahead into the tangle of weeds and bushes. The groaning and the fluttering of leaves led us across a rough slope. For a few moments we caught no glimpse of the crying thing.

Then we saw a white figure stumble out of a shadow. It was a girl—a naked girl. Her back was turned to us; her head was lowered, and her arms were extended in front of her. Her bare feet faltered over the rough rocks as she felt for each step. I called out, but she seemed not to hear. Still crying in agony, she groped on, while Jane and I ran toward her.

Blindly she walked against a low limb of a tree; and the shock threw her down to the ground, a white, trembling heap.

She was sobbing when I dropped to my knees beside her. Then, seeming to hear me through her racking pain, she raised her face.

It was a ghastly face, a thing of horror! Her cheeks were streaked and smeared with wet blood. The running lines of it trailed down across her breasts and her quivering abdomen. And this frightful visage looked at me—without eyes! She had no eyes! Instead, there were gaping sockets, raw and empty!

Jane's voice struck my eardrums—a hollow terrified sound. "Phil, it—it's Lydia!"

Lydia! Lydia Hartley! Impossible! Lydia, one of Jane's closest friends, was the most beautiful girl in Westhaven. Lovely, vivacious, delectable—such a girl as one rarely meets. Could this pitiful, bloody creature be the Lydia we knew—the Lydia of the quick, merry laugh and the dancing eyes? Her eyes! That was why I had not recognized this tortured being huddled naked before me! Instead of limpid, blue

beauty, the eyes of Lydia Hartley were now a bleeding horror!

"Quick, Jane!" I gasped.

I pulled the bare, quivering body of the girl into my arms. She clung to me as I ran along the path. Jane, taking my light, hastened ahead. We fought our way through a nightmare of darkness, until we reached the home of Samuel Eustace, which was the nearest. I slammed my way into it, and lowered Lydia to the couch in the library. Lydia writhed in exquisite pain,

"Call an ambulance, Jane!" Sam Eustace was in the room, but I was unaware of it. Jane snatched up the telephone and put through the call, but I did not hear her voice. Bending over the suffering girl, I tried to determine the extent of her terrible injuries. And the things I saw twisted my stomach with nausea, filled me with a paralyzing fear.

For the eyes of Lydia Hartley had not been gouged out or torn out. The incisions I saw revealed that her eyes had actually been *cut from her head!*

And on her breasts and her thighs— all over her beautiful body—were scratches and bruises made by clutching hands. The marks of claws that had left a sticky slime upon her skin—the same stinking stuff that I had wiped from Jane Vincent's wrist!

CHAPTER TWO

Hour of the Condemned

THE ambulance swung away from the door of Samuel Eustace's house and sped toward the hospital in Greenfield, ten miles away. Lydia Hartley was lying inside it, quiet now, under the influence of an opiate which the attendants had given her. I had answered their questions, and Sam Eustace's, as best I could; but I was still numb with shock. We were grimly silent as we watched the ambulance disappear in the night.

Jane, admirably controlling herself, though she was profoundly shaken, was the first to speak. "I called Lydia's home, Phil—but I can't get any answer."

It was horrible to think that Lydia Hartley's father and mother were

not yet aware of what had happened to her.

"I'll drive over right away," I said. "God, it's a terrible thing to have to tell them!"

Then I looked at Sam Eustace. "Sam, I can't help thinking—"

He was, I felt sure, stunned by the same appalling thought. A dogged, phlegmatic man, he was not easily upset; but now he was more agitated than I had ever seen him. His sparse grey hair was ruffled, making him look a bit wild, and he kept pulling nervously at his thin grey goatee. He waited tensely for me to go on.

"Lydia's eyes were cut out," I said, "*Cut out*—do you understand? Walter Lockwood is missing—and Walter is an ophthalmologist—an eye specialist,"

Sam Eustace started, "Walter is missing?" he blurted.

"He is," I said grimly. "I'd hate to think there really is a connection between Walter and what happened to Lydia, but—we can't find him, Jane and I went to his house. All lights were on, but he wasn't there. A cigarette was still burning in an ashtray when we went in, and his car's still in the garage. Have you any idea—"

"I haven't seen him, Phil," Eustace broke in. "I can't believe he had anything to do with this. After all, it's perfectly natural that he should go off somewhere alone—tonight."

Eustace glanced anxiously over his shoulder, at the clock on the wall. It was an electric timepiece with a huge dial. Its red second hand was swinging; and I saw with a start that it was just one minute to twelve midnight. I hadn't realized it was so late.

Sam Eustace stroked his goatee and said nervously, "In less than three minutes now—"

At two minutes past twelve o'clock, according to the grim custom of the death house in the state prison, Walter Lockwood's brother Carl must die in the electric chair.

The swift frightfulness that had swept over us had made us forget even that for a time.

"There's no way of saving Carl now," Sam Eustace said in a brittle tone. "Walter and I exhausted the last hope long ago." He was peering at the big clock. "Only two minutes and a half left. I've been

watching that damned clock all evening, going crazy because there's nothing more I can do. But Walter Lockwood will never stop trying to clear his brother's name, Phil Ross—he'll never stop."

I took Eustace's arm. "Listen, Sam. Do you believe Walter's brother is innocent? I've a damned good reason for asking that question, and I want a straight answer."

Sam Eustace peered at me. He had figured prominently in the trial of Carl Lockwood. Walter Lockwood had appealed to him for help, as a criminologist with an international reputation. Sam Eustace's work had advanced scientific crime detection, and he had solved many baffling cases; Walter had hoped that Sam could save Carl. When Sam Eustace had taken the stand, in defense of Walter's brother, he had enjoyed an enviable renown; but the case had done him irreparable damage,

In defending Walter's brother, Sam Eustace had resorted to a technique of building up evidence that was met with the greatest incredulity. In the face of a withering cross-examination by the prosecution, he had doggedly insisted upon his fantastic testimony. I remember now, with a chill, that it had had something to do with the image registered after death by the murder victim's eyes. . . .

The upshot of Sam Eustace's attempt was that he had been thoroughly discredited. In fact, he had been laughed out of Court. The world-wide publicity, colored with ridicule, had completed his downfall. Since that disastrous day, when Sam Eustace's professional status had crumbled about him, he had become a brooding recluse.

He had taken to puttering all day in his laboratory, as if striving to hit upon some new discovery that would restore his shattered reputation. It was natural that he should feel strongly about the case of Carl Lockwood. He glared at me, after I asked my question, while long seconds twirled off the electric clock—seconds that were bringing closer the doom of the man whom I had tried to save.

"Was Walter's brother really innocent?" he repeated. "Phil, I want to believe that he is, but I don't know. I did my best, but my self-confidence is so undermined now—I don't know. Naturally, Walter swears that Carl didn't kill the girl. It's become an obsession with

Walter, I'm afraid. He'll never stop trying to prove it, even after Carl is dead—no matter how many years it may take."

The clock proclaimed grimly that only a minute and a halt must pass before Walter's brother would die.

Die innocently and unjustly? Or die rightfully, as the rapacious murderer of a beautiful girl who had been placed under his professional care?

CARL LOCKWOOD, a physician like his older brother, had been a member of the staff of the County Asylum for the Insane—the same institution from which the madmen had escaped years before. Young, excitable, almost as much a prisoner as the inmates, it was understandable that he might be strongly attracted to a beautiful girl, a patient only mildly deranged. But to have yielded to his desire, to have forced himself upon the girl, to have left her ravished body lying lifeless on her bed—had he actually committed that ghastly crime?

Evidence had been found to indict him for it. Even stronger evidence had convicted him. Whether innocent or guilty, he was doomed—and I wondered if we would never learn the truth.

"Sam," I said, "I believe, somehow, that Carl Lockwood actually did it. If he did, it means he was a bit deranged himself. And such traits—mental afflictions—run in the blood. There might be a flaw in Walter Lockwood's mentality too—a flaw that's been working toward the surface all these years—and tonight, with his brother due to die in the electric chair—"

Sam Eustace was staring at the clock. "Thirty seconds!" he whispered.

Only half a minute until the wheel would be spun, until the

***...the destroying current would flash
through the condemned man's body...***

destroying current would flash through the condemned man's body, I felt urged to hurry to Lydia Hartley's father and mother, to tell them

of the horrible thing that had happened to her; but Jane and I stood there, silent, watching the swinging red second hand of the clock.

Inexorably, the red pointer swung to the zero mark. The hands closed like scissors snipping off the thread of life of a human soul. We knew, as the silence continued, that in the death house of the state prison, so many miles away, Walter Lockwood's brother had paid the supreme forfeit. . . .

Sam Eustace said, "It's too late—too late now. Walter's brother is dead. . . ."

Each mention, each thought of Dr. Walter Lockwood, the eye specialist, brought to my mind, with ghastly vividness, a memory of the raw red sockets in Lydia Hartley's face. . . .

I took Jane's hand. We hurried from Sam Eustace's home. As we hastened along the road, we saw Sam Eustace also leaving the house—no doubt to continue the search for the missing specialist. Jane and I went to my car, and we started for the Hartley place. Jane sat tensely beside me, and I drove swiftly along the road that led into Westhaven center.

Abruptly I pressed the brakes. In the shine of the headlamps, another car had appeared ahead of us. It was sitting off the side of the road. We recognized it at once. It was Lydia Hartley's little roadster.

And not far away, over the hill from where it sat, lay the accursed Black Lode mine!

"Lydia must have been coming from Greenfield," Jane said. "She must have been on her way home. I wonder—I wonder what it was that made her stop here? Look—the door of her car is open. She must have left it in a hurry—or maybe—maybe she was pulled out of it, Phil!"

CLOSING my hand over Jane's, I said, "Lydia will be able to tell us exactly what happened. Don't worry—whoever did that to her will suffer for it. The whole village will see to that. You'd better drive her car back, Jane. I'll follow you."

Not without fear, though she tried not to show it, Jane climbed into Lydia's roadster. Finding the ignition key in the lock, she swung it

back onto the pavement. I rolled along close beside her. Being skilled at manipulating the complex controls of an airplane, Jane drove expertly. We speeded up, wishing to put distance between us and the black morass of the abandoned mine.

But abruptly Jane slowed; and I slammed on the brakes to avoid bumping the roadster. At once I jumped out and ran up to her. Her hands were gripping the wheel; in the glow of the dashboard her face was white; and she was staring fearfully into the darkness shrouding the hills.

"Phil, did you see those—those things?" she asked quickly. I had seen nothing. "They looked like men—lean men, with long beards—and they were naked, Phil. They were crouching over there on the slope, a crowd of them—ten or twelve. They started coming toward me. One of them was leading the others. Then, when they caught sight of your car following right behind me, they shrank back and disappeared. . . . Don't try to tell me I imagined it, Phil! I know I really saw them!"

"But they're gone now," I said. "Yes, they're gone," Jane admitted. "But I have a feeling they're still somewhere near, hiding—watching me. They—they'll come back, Phil!"

"If they do," I said, attempting a bantering tone which sounded hollow to my own ears, "they won't find us here. Step on it, Jane. It's only a short way now to the Hartley place."

I ran back to my car, Jane started up—accelerated at a wild speed. I pressed my car to keep up with her. She sped toward the village at an almost desperate rate—driven, I well knew, by the same lash of fear that was stinging my own heart.

My anxiety throbbed in my brain, so that I couldn't think straight—couldn't reason my way out of this enfolding terror. I knew only that something horrible seemed to be closing in on *us*, relentlessly, inexorably, with an evil force that was overwhelming. I was glad when the lights of the village brightened around us. Then, as we neared the Hartley place, on the opposite side of Westhaven, we encountered another heart-shaking surprise,

A crowd had collected in the street around the Hartley home. A

blue car was drawn up in front of it—one of the machines of the state police. Two troopers, clad in blue uniforms, were at the door. One was pounding on it with his fists, and the other was shouldering against it. Jane and I ran into the yard in time to hear one of them say:

"No use trying to get any answer. We've got to break the door down."

They threw themselves against the panels. As I hurried to help them, I noticed that all the blinds of the house had been pulled. The house was full of a strange hush. The only sound was the splintering of wood as the two troopers and I smashed against the door. Suddenly the bolt snapped,

We stumbled in, only to bring ourselves up short, staring.

A man and a woman were huddled together on the opposite side of the room. They were Mr. and Mrs. Hartley, Lydia's father and mother; and their eyes were gleaming with desperate fright. Hartley's hands were gripped upon a rifle; his finger was curled on the trigger, and he was aiming it straight at us,

Then a sob broke from his lips, and he dropped the weapon. "Thank God!" Hartley blurted, "It's the police, Mary—it's friends." To us he muttered, "We thought—thought you were—"

HIS voice failed him. Mrs. Hartley was too frozen with lingering fright to speak. I asked them quickly what had happened, but they could not answer. While one trooper guarded the broken door, the other and I made a quick circuit of the house. What we saw amazed us.

Most of the rooms had been ransacked. Every drawer had been rifled. The silver-ware was gone; Mrs. Hartley's and Lydia's jewelry cases were emptied; the safe in Mr. Hartley's study had been broken open. The entire house had been looted.

"It's that damned gang again," Trooper McGurney growled. "This is the way they tear into every house they break into. They don't leave a damned thing that's worth carrying off. And how the hell can we catch them, when they come and go like a gang of ghosts?"

This was, I knew, the fifth or sixth house that had been raided in almost as many nights. The predatory gang of thieves had swept down upon Westhaven suddenly, bent upon a staggering campaign of robbery. The state police had been endeavoring their utmost to round them up, but had been able to find no trace of the vandals.

Where they came from, where they fled to, was a baffling enigma. Unless...

Again stifling the chilling thought that persistently thrust itself into my mind, I hurried back to the living room. Jane was attempting to calm Mrs. Hartley. Lydia's father was trying to give a coherent account of what had happened.

"Mary and I were upstairs," he said brokenly. "We thought we heard somebody prowling around the house. I started to go downstairs, to look around, but I couldn't get out of the bedroom. Neither Mary nor I had locked the door—but it *was* locked. Then I

...their bodies gleamed, as if they were covered with slime.

realized it was the gang of robbers—that they were already inside the place, ransacking it." Hartley drew a quavering breath. "One of them had sneaked into the upper hall, without our suspecting it, and locked us in tile bedroom. Tile others were tearing the place apart. I couldn't call the police, because the telephone, is down here. I could hear them prowling about, in every other room. Then they seemed to be leaving. I looked out the window— and saw them."

Mary Hartley burst out, "I saw them too! They were horrible creatures! They looked as thin as skeletons, and they had beards. They were naked, and their bodies gleamed as if they were covered with slime. I saw their horrible faces—and their eyes were white as marble. They were blind men, most of them, but there were one or two who could see, and they were leading the others. . . . Don't look at me as if I were crazy! I tell you it's true!"

The troopers were peering at Mrs. Hartley skeptically, for this was the first time anyone had glimpsed the phantom thieves. But I did not

doubt Mary Hartley's story. I *knew*, as Jane *knew*, that it was true; and it was with a trying effort that I kept my stinging eyes from Jane's.

"I know what they are and where they came from!" Mary Hartley insisted, her voice breaking with hysteria. "They came from the Black Lode. They came swarming up from that ugly hole in the ground, and now they've run back into it, like filthy human moles. They're the madmen—the madmen!"

For a moment we could not speak. The skeptical troopers began making notes of the missing valuables, and Jane and I tried to allay the dread of Mr. and Mrs. Hartley—while our own hearts were full of fear. The moment came, at last, when I had to tell them of what had happened to Lydia. It was an ordeal that had to be met. Stunned as they were, Mr. and Mrs. Hartley could scarcely comprehend. In a daze, while the troopers remained at the house, they hurried to their car and sped off to the hospital, grief-stricken,

Hurried to their only daughter, who must grope through the rest of her years in eyeless blindness. . . .

JANE'S hand clenched on mine as we went back to my car. We found a man waiting beside it. His name was Porter Larkin. He was a newcomer to the village, and a man of strange aspect. Taciturn, secretive, we didn't know quite what to make of him. Though he had no apparent means of support, he lived well; and he seemed to have behind him some secret purpose.

"Evening, Ross; Miss Vincent," he said, nodding. "This is a damned strange business, isn't it? I heard what Mrs. Hartley said. It isn't the first time I've heard tales about the Black Lode. You know, I think she's right,"

"It happened long before you came to the village, Larkin," I said reprovingly. "The madmen who escaped from the asylum were trapped in the mine several years ago. They were given up for dead. How could these robbers be the same band?"

"Suppose," Porter Larkin said, "that the explosion opened crevices that permitted air to flow from other tunnels into the breast where the

madmen were imprisoned. That would keep them from dying of suffocation. As for water, there's always some of it trickling along the gangways, you know, from underground springs. As far as food goes—well, desperate men take desperate measures. There are certain edible fungi that grow in the dark. And there are always rats in a mine—and earthworms. Don't shudder. You'd eat things like that, if you had to, to keep alive." He was convincing—only too convincing, for I had already been thinking of this—but I tried to seem skeptical, because I didn't want the story to spread and breed fear.

"Perhaps for a time the madmen might have existed in such a way," I said, "but surely not for more than two years."

"Why not?" he retorted. "Every day they lived, they could try to dig their way out. Breaking into a new opening would automatically increase their field of sustenance. Have you thought, Ross, that after all this time underground, those men would look exactly like Mrs. Hartley described the band of marauders?"

I had thought exactly that; but I felt Jane's hand trembling in mine, and I said nothing,

"Their clothing would have worn and rotted away by this time," Larkin said. "Their skins would be bleached dead white, due to lack of sunlight. They would be covered with sticky moisture, and they would have long beards. What's more, because they'd lived so long in complete darkness, they'd be blind as moles."

This too I had thought of; but I remained silent.

"Animals who inhabit caves are born with normal eyes which in time become blind, you know," Larkin went on. "After generation upon generation of blindness, the eyes shrivel away, and soon the young are born eyeless—like the fish in Mammoth Cave. Most of those madmen have lost their sight, but a few can still see a little, at night, when the light isn't bright—and those who can see are the leaders of the band."

I said suddenly, "Why the devil are you so interested in this, Larkin? You have no sister or wife or sweetheart who might be in danger from those damnable maniacs," Larkin shrugged. "I was

merely wondering. Three separate developments tonight seem to tie together somehow. First, Walter Lockwood missing. Second, the thing that happened to Lydia Hartley. Third, that band of naked apparitions—"

"How do you know," I demanded, "that Walter Lockwood is missing?"

He smiled dourly, "Don't be so suspicious, Ross. Sam Eustace told me. He was out looking for Walter Lockwood, and I happened to meet him. Lydia Hartley's eyes were cut out, I understand— a job that needs a surgeon's skill. Suppose, Ross—" Larkin's tone lowered. "Suppose Dr. Lockwood was able to restore a blind man's sight by transplanting a pair of healthy eyes and—" "Impossible!" I blurted. "Is it?" Larkin returned quietly. "Every day modern medical science is doing things that were thought impossible just a short time ago. It's a fact that in some cases the dead can be restored to life. It's a fact that a dog's severed head was kept alive for days. In Russia it's now the practice to drain the blood from those who have died accidentally, to preserve it in a refrigerator for weeks and months and even years, then use it to transfuse into a living human being. Impossible to graft new eyes into a blind man's sockets? It's merely a matter of fusing four small muscles and one nerve. And Dr. Walter Lockwood—until his brother's crime broke him down—was one of the most skilled eye surgeons in the world."

"Look here, Larkin!" I snapped; for Jane was cringing at my side. "What the devil are you driving at?"

Larkin's manner became intense. "I'm sure those mad degenerates finally succeeded in digging their way out of the mine. Suppose they kidnaped Walter Lockwood? Suppose they took him down into the Black Lode and held him prisoner. Suppose they forced him to restore their sight by grafting someone's good eyes in place of their blind ones. Suppose they went about stealing everything they can get their hands on, in order to repay him. It accounts for everything, doesn't it? But—" Larkin straightened. "But perhaps it's no use trying to convince you."

He turned quietly, and walked away into the darkness—leaving us

chilled, staring after him. I turned to gaze at Jane— and suddenly glacial dread gripped me. I looked into her eyes—into her clear, strong eyes. She was a pilot. She had passed every test with the highest rating. Her eyesight had been declared by the examiners to be absolutely perfect. Beautiful and perfect!

Hers were eyes that the mad mole-men would covet! I remembered

*...I pictured Jane's face streaming
blood..her eye-sockets empty and raw...*

the red, stinking marks left on her wrist by the claw that gripped her hand out of the gloom of the Black Lode. "As if it was trying to carry me away, as if it wanted me!" Jane had gasped. And: "They're still somewhere near, hiding, watching me—and they'll come back!"

In spite of the strongest effort of my will, I pictured Jane's face streaming with blood, like Lydia Hartley's—her eye-sockets empty and raw—her lovely body clawed and ravished by the craven lust of a mad fiend—and in a spasm of terrified revulsion, I swept her into my arms. . . .

CHAPTER THREE The Eyes of the Idiot

I WAS alone at home, the next night, pacing the floor in my anxiety, when a sharp knock sounded at my door.

The day had been a nightmare of futility. Dr. Walter Lockwood was still missing, Absolutely no sign of him had been found. Several state troopers had searched the Black Lode property, but even there they had discovered no trace of him—or of the midnight marauders.

Walter Lockwood could not know definitely, then, that the death penalty had been executed upon his brother Carl promptly at two minutes past midnight. The morning papers had carried a sensational story concerning the execution. Just before being strapped in the chair, Carl Lockwood had confessed. He had actually raped and murdered; and he had died justly.

"He really didn't!" I'd kept thinking during the day. "He must have

been mad to do a thing like that. Mad! And what about Walter? Has Walter that same terrible defect in his brain? And if he had, could this, and this alone, explain the horror that poor Lydia Hartley had suffered?"

I had gone to the hospital to see Lydia. She was still so shaken that she had been unable to give any coherent account of what had happened to her. It was impossible to decide whether or not the tale she told was the wild flight of her hysteria. She spoke of having been stopped on the lonely road by a horde of unearthly beings with opaque eyes; of being seized and dragged from her car; but after that she could remember nothing until she had found herself groping through utter darkness, consumed with agony.

God! what an abomination had struck upon us. And when—every one of us wondered, our flesh crawling at the thought—when would it strike again? Was there no way that we could save our loved ones from this unspeakable danger?

Cautioning Jane to remain at home with her father and mother and younger sister, I had tried to think it out in solitude. My brain was seething with bafflement when the knock sounded at my door. I strode to it, opened it, looked out.

Porter Larkin was on the step. He came in quietly, eyeing me.

"Well, Ross?" he said. "You've had a chance to think over what I said last night. How do you feel about it now?"

"I'm damned sure of one thing," I answered. "We've got to find the truth. Somehow we've got to put a stop to this devilish thing,"

"Just how do you propose to go about it?" Larkin inquired, slyly I thought. "I'm going to get the facts about Walter Lockwood," I declared, "from the man who knows him best."

Turning, I took up the telephone. I called the Vincent place and got Jane on the wire, "In case you should want me for anything," I told her, "I'm going over to Sam Eustace's house." Then I snatched up my hat and went out.

Porter Larkin calmly followed me. He climbed into my car, without an invitation, as I backed from the garage. All the way to Sam Eustace's home, he sat silent. He went at my side to Eustace's door.

We found the criminologist in his laboratory, a room cluttered with the strange instruments of a scientific investigator, its walls hung with charts and huge photographic enlargements of fingerprints and bullets, I wasted no time in tackling Sam Eustace.

"You've got to tell me the truth now, Sam," I insisted. "I'm in no mood for evasions—not at a time like this, with Jane in danger, as well as every other woman in the village. If you don't tell me what I want to know, by God, I'll beat it out of you,"

Sam Eustace pulled his grey goatee, "You don't have to threaten me," he said in rebuke. "Of course I'll help. I'm trying my best, in my own way, to get at the bottom of this thing. What is it you want to know?"

"When you took the witness stand, to testify in the defense of Walter's brother," I reminded him, "you advanced some theory about eyes. Tell me everything you know about it."

Sam Eustace winced at the recollection. "I was working on what I considered a sound premise," he said. "It's an old one; it was abandoned for a long time, but recently I began research on it again. If it had only worked out, it would have been a milestone in criminology and the administration of justice—but it failed." He stroked his goatee again. "It dealt with the image left on the retina of a corpse at the moment of death." "Precisely what do you mean?" I insisted.

THE retina," Sam Eustace explained, "registers the image projected upon it by the lens of the eye, just as a sensitized plate registers the image thrown upon it by the lens of the camera. The difference between the retina and the photographic plate is that the retina is alive. The circulation of the blood continually resensitizes it, I believed that at the moment of death, when the blood ceases to circulate, the last image would remain on the retina—and I believed it could be developed by certain chemicals, exactly like a photographic plate."

"In the Lockwood murder case, then," I said, "you removed the eyes of the girl who'd been killed by Carl Lockwood, and you attempted

to develop the impressions on the retinas."

Sam Eustace nodded gravely. "I did. I tried to prove in that way that Carl Lockwood had not been present at the moment of the girl's death. Unfortunately, the enlargements of the image on the dead girl's retinas were not clear enough." The criminologist ruefully wagged his head, "But don't you see what a tremendous thing it would have been? Why, it would have become a greater aid than fingerprints to the proper and speedy administration of justice. It would have revolutionized—"

"Did Dr. Walter Lockwood believe in that theory?" I cut in sharply.

Sam Eustace gazed at me a moment. "It was Walter who excised the dead girl's eyes for the purpose," he said. "Yes, he had a fast belief in it."

"And has he still?" I demanded. "Is that what you meant when you said he would never stop trying to prove Carl's innocence?"

Sam Eustace stiffened. "Please remember," he said, "that Walter is my friend, I prefer to let him speak for himself." "You'll tell me right now," I declared. "Listen. I know that Walter was almost out of his mind with grief over Carl, He's still missing. He probably doesn't know that Carl confessed at the last moment. In that case, he still thinks Carl is innocent, and he's still trying to prove it. And if he's attempting to prove it by showing that your technique is reliable after all, *he needs eyes!*"

Sam Eustace jerked to his feet. "What are you saying!" he exclaimed.

I faced him. "Walter's only hope of vindicating Carl lies in a demonstration that the image left on a dead retina constitutes sound

...by cutting out the eyes of a living person!

evidence. For that purpose, he must have human eyes—good eyes—eyes that have just ceased to live. He could get them by removing the eyes from a freshly dead body. Or he might get them—in even better condition for such an experiment— *by cutting*

out the eyes of a living person!"

Sam Eustace stood stock still, staring at me. Then he folded slowly into his chair. His fingers drummed during a long moment of quiet. I did not speak, knowing he was struggling to make a vital decision. At last he looked up, with fierce determination.

"I can't keep quiet any longer—I realize that now. I must tell you something— something I'd hoped I'd never have to reveal." "Go on," I urged, Porter Larkin took a step closer, listening intently, as Sam Eustace hesitated.

"Immediately after Carl Lockwood was convicted," Sam Eustace said, "Walter came to me. He asked me to teach him my technique of developing the image on a dead retina. He said that with his surgical skill, combined with my knowledge, he was sure he could get better results. I told him, reluctantly. I was afraid, in his zeal to save Carl, he might undertake a daring experiment. He—unfortunately, I believe he did."

"Believe?" I said. "Aren't you sure?"

"Not positively sure, but reasonably so," Sam Eustace said solemnly. "You remember Danny Gans, of course—Danny, the poor simple-minded lad who used to hang around the village center. Well— Danny's been missing for several months now,"

"But everybody knows what happened to Danny Gans," I said. "He was of such low mentality, everybody was afraid he might become dangerous. He'd taken to stealing, and molesting girls, and it seemed likely he'd turn into a sexual degenerate. We made plans to have him placed in the County Asylum for the Insane, Danny got wind of it, and ran away—that's all."

Sam Eustace wagged his head. "That's what everybody believes," he said. "But perhaps Danny Gans didn't run away, Perhaps there's some other reason for his disappearance."

IGRIPPED Sam Eustace's arm, "Are — you implying that Walter Lockwood got hold of him, to use in an experiment on his eyes?"

"Danny has never been seen since the day he vanished, dead or

alive," Sam Eustace said. "I believe I was the last to catch a glimpse of him—though I haven't even hinted it until this minute. I saw him going into Walter Lockwood's house, and no one has seen him since." Sam Eustace straightened. "I'll say no more than that, Phil Ross—not one word more."

And as I stood there staring at him, stunned by the implication that a mad surgeon was even then seeking more victims for his devilish experiments, the telephone rang. Sam Eustace caught it up, "Yes?" he said over the line. "Yes, Phil Ross is here. Why, what—what's wrong? Is that you, Jane? Good Heavens, what—"

Whipped by fear, I snatched the instrument from Sam Eustace's hands. The sound of my voice had scarcely gone over the wire before Jane's terrified message rushed into my ear,

"Phil, they—they're breaking in! They're all around the house! We can't keep them out! The madmen—the blind things! They're inside the house now! *They're coming for me!*"

Her last words were a choking cry. Her voice was stifled, as if by a hand clapped over her mouth—a slimy, stinking claw. A loud thump drummed through my brain—the sound of a frantic struggle. Then—silence.

CHAPTER FOUR Raid of the Mole-Men

STARK desperation propelled me from Sam Eustace's laboratory. In feverish haste I sprang into my car and sent it streaking over the road. The distance to the Vincent home was not far, actually; but tonight, in my abysmal, dread, it seemed immeasurable. Wildly intent upon reaching Jane at the soonest possible second, I was not even aware that Porter Larkin was in the car with me.

A sob broke from my throat as I sped around the last bend and caught sight of Jane's home, for I saw them, scurrying through the light—the abominable mole-men!

They were ghostly white shapes darting about in the shine of the

windows. Some of them were groping off into the darkness, their lean arms burdened by valuables they had stolen. Led by some who could see in the night, they were uncannily agile. The evil swarm of them were already completing their predatory raid.

As I jumped from the car, I glimpsed the most harrowing sight of all—Jane, clenched helpless in the arms of two of the vile mole-men, being carried off into the gloom!

I leaped from the car, shouting wildly, I raced over the lawn, after the human demons who were making Jane their captive, Someone was running beside me; it was Porter Larkin. A metallic shine struck up from his hand; I glimpsed it as an automatic. As swiftly as I realized that it was a weapon to protect Jane, I snatched it from his hand.

At the risk of hitting her—because there was no other hope—I fired at the phantom figures that were spiriting her away. Twice I fired, then twice more, then again. A thankful sound broke from my lungs. One of the mole-men staggered and fell. As Jane slumped to the ground, the other dropped her, and scurried away like a slinking beast hunting cover.

I sent bullets after that damnable thing as I ran to Jane. She was struggling up. She flung herself into my arms and clung, sobbing. I pressed her dose, dizzied by relief, but sickened by the stench of the slime that had been scraped from the loathsome arms of the mole-men. Her clothing had been almost torn off her; her beautiful body seemed stained with the sticky filth.

"You're all right, darling," I said to her breathlessly. "They've run away. They've gone."

She peered around, shuddering. It was true that the mole-men had fled from the grounds. No ugly shapes were lurking in the shadows now. The human beasts were running for their hole in the desolate valley. But this did not allay Jane's terror.

"They'll come back!" she whispered. "They want me—they mean to get me, They'll come back, and next time they won't fail—I feel it, Phil!"

"Don't think that, Jane!" I implored, lifting her face. God! how glad

I was to look into her clear blue eyes, even though they were filled with tears. "Run back into the house. Wash that poisonous stuff off yourself as soon as possible. Larkin! Take her inside!"

Porter Larkin was standing by, peering into the darkness. Saying nothing, he took Jane's arm and led her to the door. I saw, first, that the door was broken in and that many windows on the ground floor had been shattered by the attack of the mole-men. Then I turned to the abominable figure lying on the grass.

This revolting being was the mole-man that I had shot. He was lifeless. I thanked a merciful God for that! I stared down at the skeletal, slimy body, at his matted beard, then into a lean face that expressed all the ruthless depravity of which a degenerate human animal was capable. But then a new chill took me—when I looked into the mole-man's eyes.

They were not the blank white eyes of the blind. They were staring wide open in death, and I could be sure of their color. They were brown—a deep, beautiful, velvety brown. At once I felt that I had seen those eyes somewhere before—but not in the head of this loathsome being. I had seen them— *Danny Gans!*

Suddenly I remembered. Hundreds of times I had seen Danny Gans, the idiot, loafing about the village center. I had noticed, as everyone had, how beautiful his eyes were, as often happens in subnormal persons. I had never seen eyes so lustrous, of such a rich brown, as those of Danny Gans.

And now Danny Gans' eyes were staring up at me, dead in the gaunt visage of a human mole!

Good God above! I thought, *will the horrible moment come when I will see the lovely blue eyes of the girl I love gazing at me from the hideous face of one of the mole-men?*

OVERWHELMED with anxiety for Jane, I tore away from the blood-freezing apparition. I found Jane in the living room, kneeling beside the couch on which her mother lay. Mrs. Vincent, a frail woman, had collapsed under the shock of the raid. Most of her clothing had been ripped from her. She, too, was marked by the evil

slime of the mole-men. Jane, distraught as she was, was endeavoring to bring her mother out of the fainting spell.

Jane's father, pale and stunned, was prowling around the downstairs rooms, dogged by Porter Larkin—rooms that had been turned into a shambles. Still shaken, he told me a story much like that of Lydia Hartley's father—of how they had found themselves surrounded, of how the lights had gone out while they were trapped upstairs, of how the mole-men had swarmed in to prey.

"Then they attacked us—tried to drag us away!" Mr. Vincent said in an exhausted tone. "God! If we hadn't been able to fight them off—"

At that moment the voice of Jane's mother rang out in alarm. She had recovered somewhat; she was struggling up from the couch. Her eyes were full of a frantic light.

"Cathie!" she cried. "Is Cathie all right? Where is she?"

Cathie was Jane's younger sister—a lovely, delicate girl of twelve. Dazed and confused as we were, she had escaped our thoughts. Jane's father turned deathly white as his mind cleared.

"Cathie *must* be all right," he said. "As soon as the mole-men began breaking in, I locked her in her room. I wanted to make sure those damned beasts couldn't touch her. I—I'll let her out."

He began running up the stairs. Mrs. Vincent pattered after him. Jane and I exchanged one fear-fraught glance, for the same dread was burning in both our hearts. We ran up the flight together; and just as we reached the upper hallway, a moan of despair broke from Jane's mother.

"She's gone! Cathie's gone! *They took her!*"

What we saw jolted our very souls. The door of Cathie's room had been broken in! The knob and the panels were smeared with the stinking excrement of the mole-men. The room was disrupted by a struggle. A torn dress lay on the floor—the dress that Cathie had been wearing. "*They carried her away!*"

I clenched my fists. "Damn their evil souls to hell!" I blurted. "I'm going after her!"

With a gesture that warned Jane and her mother to protect

themselves, I ran down the stairs. Porter Larkin, still wordless, followed me. Reaching the porch, we found men hurrying into the yard from the road. The noisy confusion had alarmed the neighbors, and they were coming to help. A state police car had stopped, and two troopers were among them,

"The madmen have taken Cathie!" I blurted at them. "There's only one place they could have gone with her—down into the Black Lode. Good God, we've got to find her—bring her back, before—"

Before it was too late, before little Cathie suffered the horror of having her eyes cut out, of having her young body consumed by the lust of the foul degenerates.

We ran to our cars. As I took the wheel, Porter Larkin, climbing in beside me, pulled his automatic from my hand. I sped over the black road toward the abandoned mine. Other cars swept after me. We formed a terror driven parade. We rushed recklessly through the night, trying to hope that we could find Cathie somehow and reach her in time.

I was the first to arrive at the gate of the Black Lode. The other cars screeched to a stop, and the grim men piled out. The troopers bared their guns. The villagers had snatched up weapons—clubs and knives, hammers and wrenches taken from the tool kits of their cars. Jane's father was gripping a shotgun. We closed in on the gate of the Black Lode.

"Look at that!" I exclaimed as I shook the gate. "The hinges are loose!"

We pushed the gate free and swung it wide. Our flashlights converged upon the gaping mouth of the mine as we ran. There was no power now to operate the hoist; we were forced to use the old wooden ladder affixed to the wall of the manway, I clambered down first. The others descended after me rapidly. In a moment we gathered at a damp, dark level from which we could start our search.

THE gangways stretched into black distances. Rusty tracks led into the reeking gloom. Gaping breasts opened along the way. There were scores of hollows, filled with heavy, humid air, in which

the madmen might be hiding with their human prey. Grimly we started off.

"Scatter!" I directed the men. "Look everywhere! Don't stop until you find her!"

A heartbreaking hopelessness weighed upon us as we searched. The mine seemed a black, baffling maze, complicated by many levels. The madmen who had lurked in it so long must be cunningly familiar with its every cranny, while to us it was stupefying confusion and mystery. But we went on, tramping into the breasts, our lights seeming dim and futile in that oppressive gloom.

"Cathie!" our voices rang from the rock walls as we called again and again. "Cathie! *Cathie!*"

But there was no answer, no sound save the noises of our own movements.

Porter Larkin was at my back when I reached the great pile of broken rock behind which, that fateful day two years ago, the madmen had been trapped. It was no longer an impenetrable barrier. Insanely patient, prolonged digging from within had opened a hole. It was chilling proof that the legend of the surviving madmen was a menacing reality.

Then, in a damp, close tunnel which connected with that pocket, I found other evidences of the depraved human moles. There was fungus growing—growing in beds I The stuff had been cultivated! Mad minds and blind hands, working in utter darkness, had nurtured this supply of food.

Then, in another hollow, I found heaps of small bones. They were

*...the flesh of the dead men cleaned
from the bones by the fangs of the
living.*

the bones of rats. They had been gnawed and licked clean, the raw flesh torn from them by famished teeth. Even more revolting was next discovery—larger bones lying in a dark crypt—human bones! This was an underground graveyard of skeletons. These were the remains of some of the madmen who had died—the flesh of the dead

men cleaned from the bones by the fangs of the living.

"Cathie!" the voices kept calling frantically, echoing and re-echoing far away. "*Cathie!*"

But of Jane's little sister there was no sign.

Somewhere in this reeking hole, we knew, the mole-men must be hiding—yet we could not find them.

Endless hours seemed to have passed by the time we could no longer support any hope for little Cathie. At last, sick-souled, we were forced to abandon the search. As I tramped exhaustedly along the gangway, working back toward the mouth of the mine, I realized suddenly that I was alone. Porter Larkin, silent as always, had been dogging me during the hunt, but now he was gone.

Mystified, I peered around. Then, at the far end of a branch tunnel. I saw a gleam of light. Quietly I went toward it. The glow showed me the face of Porter Larkin. He had climbed upon a ledge of rock and was kneeling, pulling away stones while his torch lay beside him. He was so intent upon his strange task that he did not notice my approach,

I saw, with a start, that something white was sticking up from the pile of rocks. It was the hand of a skeleton! Some human being was buried beneath those stones! The flesh of the protruding hand apparently had been eaten away by the mine rats, for the rest of the body, as Porter Larkin uncovered it, was preserved. Perhaps some chemical reaction of the rocks had prevented decay. I was sure only of this—that Porter Larkin had found a human body!

I watched silently while Larkin pulled the rocks off the head of the corpse. Then a startled sound broke from my dry lips. It was Danny Gans! This poor, shriveled thing was all that was left of the idiot who had been missing so long. And I saw, stunned and revolted, that the eye-sockets in Danny Gans' head were sunken and empty.

"Cut out," I heard Porter Larkin mutter. "Cut out."

Then he raised his head and stared at me.

"The madmen didn't find him because they're blind," he said, "or else they would have eaten him."

"Larkin," I said with abrupt sharpness, "what the devil does this

mean? Who are you? . . . Do you understand what I said? I want the truth! *Who are you?*"

THE other men were coming along the tunnels. Our lights, and the ring of my voice, brought them hurrying. They gathered behind me, staring at the body of Danny Gans and at Porter Larkin. Larkin was silent and his eyes were challenging.

"You've been acting damned strange ever since you came to the village, Larkin," I asserted, "I think someone from outside has been directing the work of these damnable madmen. You've got to understand that no one is above suspicion, no one. Damn you, you've got to explain yourself right now!"

A mutter came from the other men—grim insistence that Larkin must speak.

"Very well," he said. "It may handicap me to tell you now, but I suppose I can't avoid it. I'm a special agent sent here from the Attorney General's office. I've been investigating the disappearance of Danny Gans."

I peered at Trooper McGurney, who was standing among us. "Is that true, McGurney?" I demanded. "If this man is really representing the state, you would be one to know it."

McGurney shook his head. "It's news to me," he said gruffly. "I don't know any more about this man than you do—and I don't like the way he's acting."

"Porter Larkin smiled slowly. "If you need proof," he said, "I suggest that you call up Attorney General Morgan and ask him." I gripped his arm. "I'm going to do exactly that," I said. "And if you're lying—God help you. I'll be damned sure, then, that you *are* behind all this work of the devil—and you'll know where Cathie Vincent is."

The other men closed around Larkin. We marched him to the manway. Watching him closely, we climbed up. Suddenly he seemed to us our only hope of finding Jane's little sister. Urgently, wishing to waste no second, we trooped him in the direction of Samuel Eustace's house, because it was the nearest.

Eustace stared at us as we crowded into his library. While the

others surrounded Larkin, eying him grimly, I went to the phone. The room was silent as I asked the operator for connection with the home of Attorney General Paul Morgan.

Anxious moments passed while the call clicked through. At last the crisp voice of the Attorney General came over the wire.

"This is Philip Ross calling from Westhaven, Mr. Morgan," I said. "There is a man here who calls himself Porter Larkin and says he's one of your special agents. Will you verify that?"

"Never heard of him," Morgan said flatly.

I put the phone down, staring at Larkin. He already knew what the Attorney General had answered. He was suddenly sickly pale. "You lied!" I denounced him. And then—before any of us could move or speak—we heard a cry. A cry that was the pitiful, appealing whimper of a child suffering unbearable, torture. *Cathie!*

At the chilling sound, Porter Larkin made a desperate move. He whirled about. He struck out with his fists at the faces of the men standing between him and the door. His attack was so swift, so savage that they could not stop him. He sprang away from us; he flung himself at the door, jerked it wide, and leaped out.

"Get him!" someone shouted. But then again, from somewhere nearby in the night, came that same heart-wrenching wail of the agonized child.

We rushed to the door. Though some of the men ran after Porter Larkin, he was already gone in the dark. I let him go. I could think only of Cathie. With her father stumbling along beside me, stunned with dread, we searched, our torches slashing the blackness—knowing ill our sick souls that horror awaited us.

Cathie's pitiful cries led us to her. We found her crawling on the

Naked...covered with the slime of the mole-men who had ravished her.

cold ground, trying to find her way through the darkness of the utterly blind. Her poor little face was covered with the blood that streamed from her empty eye-sockets. Her slender, young body was

streaked with it. Naked, she tried to creep toward us, covered with the slime of the mole-men who had ravished her.

Sobbing, her father caught her up in his arms; and in his arms, Cathie died. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE Doom Underground

ILED Cathie's father to the door of Sam Eustace's house. He staggered in, and gently lowered the poor little corpse to the couch. Stricken, we stared down at her, realizing that this was the abomination of abominations. And in our hearts a demand for fierce, pitiless vengeance grew....

Silently, the other men went out. Their grim, common purpose was to search for the man we knew as Porter Larkin. Mr. Vincent, Sam Eustace and I were left alone with the dead little girl.

Choked with determination to do every possible thing to punish the perpetrator of this atrocity, I went over Cathie's despoiled body. It was not the horror of her raw, gaping sockets that I examined—for I knew I would again find evidences of the merciless knife—but her throat. The white skin of her neck was darkly bruised. With fierce gladness, I found what I had hoped for.

Turning back quickly, I gripped Sam Eustace's arm. "Look at those marks!" I said hoarsely. "She was choked, and the man who did it left fingerprints. They're clear—enough to identify that damnable fiend. You know how to photograph them, Sam. Do it—do it now!"

Eustace, with a shudder, bent over Cathie and confirmed my discovery. "Yes," he said in a whisper. "They are well-defined prints." He looked at Cathie's crushed father. "Have I—your permission?" Mr. Vincent numbly nodded, I took Cathie's body into my arms. Carrying her, I went into the laboratory with Sam Eustace. There I placed her on a table; and we began our grim work.

Sam Eustace arranged strong lights that beat hotly upon the dead girl's face, making even more vivid the ghastliness of her raw eye-sockets. He worked carefully with a camera on a tripod. Focussing

the lens, handling the film-holders deftly, painstakingly judging the correct exposure, he photographed the bruises.

At last, when he turned off the lights, I again lifted Cathie into my arms. I took her to her grief-stricken father.

"Take her back now," I said gently. "I'm going to wait until Sam makes the prints. Then it won't be long before we know who is responsible for this—and God help this wretched soul!"

Scarcely understanding, Cathie's father went out into the night, holding close the corpse of his little daughter. He trudged away in the darkness with dragging, leaden steps.

And Jane! Jane—the frightful danger hovering over her—had never been out of my thoughts. Was she safe? How short a time would pass before the murderous, lustful mole-men would return to seize her—to rob her of her lovely eyes—to devour her in their craven clutches? . . . The thought filled me full of a frantic urgency; I wanted to run to her at once; but there was, within reach now, evidence that might trap the demon we were seeking; and I must have it.

Sam Eustace was making preparations in his darkroom. I watched him work. In the dim red light lie developed the films. The images of the fingerprints came up clear and strong. Fear crawled in my heart as, with burning impatience, I watched the process continue—fear for Jane. But I forced myself to stay while Sam Eustace fixed the films in the hypo, then washed them, and dried them rapidly after an alcohol bath.

IMMEDIATELY he inserted them in an enlarging projector. The making of the enlargements consumed less time. Removing them from the wash-water, Sam pressed them between blotters. Then, eagerly, I took them.

"Fortunate—fortunate," Sam Eustace said. "The fingerprints would have disappeared from the skin in a short while. Probably they have already vanished. But with those photographs—"

"I'm going to ask Jane to fly me to Washington with them immediately," I said. "By morning we may know definitely whether

these prints are already in the files of the Department of Justice. If not, then I'm going to demand that every man in the village give us a sample of his prints—and in that way we *will* find him."

"I used my own special process," Sam Eustace reminded me. "If those photographs solve the case, then—I hope to God it will restore my reputation!"

I hurried out of the house. When I left my car at the Vincent place, I saw that several others had just arrived. They were neighbors of the Vincents; and they were speaking with Jane's father at the door.

"We've searched all over for Larkin. We haven't found him," one was reporting, "but we're not going to stop until we do—damn his soul!"

"The Black Lode is being guarded," another said. "The troopers are down there. If any of those filthy madmen try to come out, the troopers will shoot—and shoot to kill."

I went in. Mrs. Vincent was in a room upstairs—I could hear her sobbing over Cathie's body—but Jane was in the living room. She was pale and shaken to the depths of her being, but with admirable spirit she was holding her grief in control

"Darling," I said, holding the rolled photographs tightly, "can you manage a flight to Washington? It isn't far, and it means everything."

She steadied herself and said, "Yes Phil."

I rapidly explained my purpose. The fingerprints of the madmen were filed in various police headquarters scattered about the state, but duplicate prints of all of them were contained in the great file of the Bureau of Investigation. Going directly to Washington would not only save precious time; it might disclose that the prints were those of someone else. Moreover, it would remove Jane from the field of danger, at least for a time. She was eager to start.

"Let's not waste a moment!" she urged.

I explained to her father while Jane hurriedly got into her flying togs. She gave me a leather coat and a helmet and we hurried from the house. Jane's private hangar was located at the rear of the vast Vincent estate. I held the photographs tightly as we ran across the

field. Hurriedly, we swung open the doors of the hangar and rolled Jane's smart monoplane out onto the ramp.

The darkness was fraught with terror—I felt that there were evil presences in the night. When Jane climbed into the cockpit, I cranked the engine. It caught at once, and smoothed out into a powerful roar—but any anxiety sharpened while we waited for the motor to warm up. Standing beside the plane, clutching the precious photographs, I searched the gloom feeling that the hellish things in the night were creeping closer, closer. . . .

"Ready, Phil," Jane said huskily.

I turned to climb in—and then the attack struck us!

SUDDENLY something leaped out of the gloom. It was a swift, terrifying spring that wrenched a cry from Jane's throat. I whirled about—but something heavy was already slashing viciously at my head. It seemed to slice through my upthrown arm; it crashed against my skull with a force that sent a blinding sheet of fire up in front of my eyes. After the flare came a spinning blackness—strengthless nothingness—and as if from far away, I heard Jane scream again.

Fighting my way back to consciousness painfully, I dragged up from the ground, groped to the cockpit.

"Jane! *Jane!*" She was gone!

Tottering, my senses flickering, I ran crazily around the plane. They had come for her! The thought lashed me with desperation. *The flesh-hungry mole-men have taken her.* . . .

Scarcely realizing that my hands were empty, that the precious photographs had been snatched away, I flung myself through the darkness. I had been unconscious only a moment; I tried to hope that Jane's fiendish captors had not had time to carry her far. Stumbling, propelling myself on, I ran in the direction of the accursed Black Lode.

Then—then sounds stopped me, I dropped down, holding my burning breath, listening with the sharp alertness of a wild animal. I heard movement—the noises of things scurrying over the hillside.

With unreasoning hope, I groped my way quickly in that direction. And, thank God, I saw them! Their white, obscene shapes were ghostly in the star-glow—but they were there. A band of the mole-men, led by one maniac who could still see, were sneaking through the night. Their skeletal shoulders were bent with a burden—Jane!

Suddenly, then—so uncannily that consternation paralyzed me—they vanished.

Trying desperately but vainly to catch another glimpse of them, I felt my way on. I crept across a ledge to the spot where the demonical mole-men had disappeared. In the earthen wall of the hill, a round black opening loomed. It was a cave—one of the caves in which Jane and I had played as children.

Now she had been dragged into it as a sacrifice to a mad hunger for flesh! I remembered that this cave was, among all the others in the hills, one which we had never completely explored. It penetrated deep into the hill. Then—then, I realized, it must have a subterranean connection with the Black Lode! The troopers stationed at the manway of the mine must be unaware that the mad ravishers had swarmed out of this hollow, had seized the girl I loved and now were carrying her deep—deep. . . .

I ducked into the opening. Mumbling a prayer of thanks that I had remembered to put my flashlight in the pocket of my tunic, I dragged it out. But the beam, when I touched the button, was dim. It showed me ragged dirt walls, a tunnel descending at a steep slope, but I had used the light so much that the battery was becoming exhausted. It could not last much longer. Fearing that the light would die at any moment, and leave me groping helplessly through hellish gloom, I crouched and ran.

It was true! Reaching the lowest depth of the old cave, I discovered an opening broken through the wall. My fading light, glowing through it, struck the timbers of an old breast of the Black Lode. Prints of bare feet in the black dust revealed that the rapacious mole-men had gone this way with Jane.

Spilling through, I began following those prints of bony feet. My flashlight was growing dimmer rapidly, I was forced to stoop as I

dodged along, forced to hold the lens closer and closer to the ground. And still the light faded—faded until the filament of the bulb was an amber scarcely visible!

I pushed my way through baffling darkness. I jounced against timbers, then collided with a blank wall. Desperately I followed it with my hands. Frozen with fear that I had lost precious minutes by stumbling into a dead-end tunnel—minutes that might mean insupportable suffering and horror for Jane—I fumbled in my pockets. And again I breathed soul-felt thanks, for I found a folder of paper matches.

Only three matches remained in it! I struck one of the priceless things and held the flame high. The prints of naked feet led straight to this spot; but my mind reeled when I saw that I was surrounded by unbroken rough walls.

No—not entirely unbroken. In the corner, rocks had tumbled down between the supporting timbers. There was an opening—small, but big enough to pass one man at a time. The mole-creatures with Jane, had crawled through it. I pushed myself into that hole. The match burned out before I had scarcely time to see that I had entered another tunnel.

LIGHTING the second match, I saw that one end of this tunnel had been walled up. This was why none of the searchers had found it! The other end stretched off into thick darkness. I ran along it—ran until the second match was gone.

Then, as I flung myself around a right-angle turn, I met a sight that stopped me in my tracks.

Bright light was shining from an old breast—the flat glare of gasoline lanterns. The walls and the ceiling had been whitewashed; the floor was boarded. There were cabinets in this room, cabinets filled with surgical tools. In the center of it was a table, and on the table Jane was lying—lying bound by heavy straps!

At sight of her a cry broke from my parched throat. God above! So soon she was to be sacrificed!

A hundred miles, it seemed to me at that doomful moment, *...reaching lustfully toward Jane...were long, slimy white arms.*

separated me from her. I broke into a wild run. Then I saw shapes moving in the shadow behind the table. A man, clad in a white cloak, wearing the white skullcap of a surgeon, was just closing an iron-barred door. The door was set in a wall behind which there was another hollow. Reaching through it—reaching lustfully toward Jane—were long, slimy white arms.

The man in the white cloak was imprisoning the mole-beings who had brought Jane to him. He was forcing them to wait, before allowing them to sate their obscene hunger.

First, with those gleaming surgical tools, he would. . . .

Turning from locking the door, he saw me. At once, with a leap, he sprang in front of the table. The light slanted down across his face. His brown beard and mustache, the stiff hair tufting from under the skullcap, told me that this was the specialist who had vanished—Dr. Walter Lockwood.

"Get away from her!" I shouted crazily. "Get away from her!"

Swiftly, the white-clad man seized with hands a small beam that angled down from the ceiling. He lifted it, swung it aside. It seemed to actuate some cunning system of levers. For suddenly there was a crashing, ripping sound from above, The ceiling at the entrance of the breast began to sag.

Then, with a roar, an avalanche spilled down! Great rocks thundered to the floor. Earth rained over them. Tons of stone and dirt crashed into the tunnel. Swiftly—as though I had myself been stricken instantly blind—the ominous white room was blanked out!

Jane, the mole-men at the barred door, the fiendish figure in white—all of them were wiped out of my sight.

Stones struck my shoulders and my back, and I plunged down. Dazed, shot through with pain, I tried to struggle up while thick dust choked me. Every labored breath drew stinging particles into my

throat and lungs as I writhed and wrenched in a frantic effort to escape the pinioning rocks. My arms seemed to be tearing from their sockets; but I managed to pull myself free, to stagger to my feet.

In my one hand I still clenched the paper folder—with one match remaining in it! With desperate care I struck the match. The flame shone dim in the clicking dust; but it revealed the ponderous barrier I faced. Now a thick mound of rocks, crammed up to the ceiling, barricaded me from Jane.

Abandoning the match, I climbed, struggling, up the slope, realizing that the wall would be the least thick at the top. With my shoulders pressed to the ceiling, I began tearing at the rocks. I pulled one loose, threw it down, then gripped another.

God! It will be too late! I thought. *I can never dig my way through this in time!*

But I kept tearing at that barrier, madly, as fast as I could swing my leaden arms. I spilled one rock after another downward; yet I seemed to make no head-way. The wall seemed, to my frenzied mind, to be growing thicker even as I worked!

Then—a gleam of light! I had made a small opening,

The glare of the subterranean operating room stung my eyes as I pressed close to it.

Jane was still strapped to the table—strapped immovably—hut now

Jane was still strapped to the table...nude and helpless...

she was disrobed. Every garment had been torn off her. She lay nude and helpless, her lovely body quivering with terror, under the hands of the demon in white,

Her eyes were fixed upon the face of the fiend who was preparing to cut them from her head.

THE white monster was bending over her now, holding an instrument whose edge gleamed razor-sharp—an instrument of death and horror.

And at the barred door, the abominable mole-men were still reaching through, whining with obscene impatience, pleading that the girl be thrown to them. . . .

My wild shout did not bring the response of even a movement. Jane's head was strapped so that she could not even turn her eyes toward me. The demon with the knife did not glance up, so intent was he upon his horrible task. Instead, he lowered the knife closer to Jane's beautiful, staring eyes. . . .

Madly I wrenched away another rock, widening the opening a little. I tried to push my way in—but I could not. I seized another stone, then tore still another away. Again I thrust my shoulders into the gap. Staring at the blade lowering toward Jane's eyes, I twisted my way halfway through.

There was only a fraction of an inch, now, separating the needle-like point of steel from the fear-blانched skin above Jane's terrified eyes.

"Get back!" I screeched. "Get away from her! Get away!" Suddenly I spilled down. Springing to

my feet, I snatched up a stone and hurled it—hurled it at the white figure, because it could reach him faster than I. It struck him between the shoulders. It jolted him across Jane.

He twisted away from the table, still holding the knife.

Seeing me flinging myself toward him, he broke into a wild run. He disappeared through a crevice that I had not seen before at the side of the room. Letting him go, I ran to the table. Thank God Jane still had eyes with which to look at me! They were full of tears of terror; and her lips were quivering.

"Look out, Phil!" she gasped. "He'll turn the madmen loose on you!"

They were struggling to beat down the iron door, those lustful maniacs—crazed with hunger for Jane's body. If they should break loose, they would be too many—they would outnumber me. . . .

I whirled to face the passage into which the white despoiler had run.

"Walter Lockwood!" I shouted, "You can't get out of here now! I'm

going to kill you, do you hear—kill you!"

I ran into the tunnel; but abruptly I pulled up short, staring at the white figure slumped on the black floor.

Walter Lockwood lay as if asleep, the white cloth over his heart stained with blood that had already ceased to flow from the gleaming steel that was buried deep in his heart.

"You damned monster!" I shouted crazily—"to kill yourself; to cheat us even of the punishment you deserved!"

I was unbuckling Jane from the table, with frantic haste, when I became aware that someone was scrambling through the hole I had made in the wall. Turning in alarm, I saw that this man was already inside the room. Porter Larkin.

"Stay back!" I warned him. "If you come another step nearer—by God—!" I snatched up one of the sharp surgical tools. Porter Larkin paused, looking at me silently. He did not turn as another man came through the hole. Trooper McGurney crawled in. Then another trooper followed him. And last came Samuel Eustace.

Eustace said something about their having heard the crash of the falling rocks, and having come down to investigate; but I was too numb to hear.

"He's in there," I said, pointing toward the corpse of Walter Lockwood while still watching Larkin warily. "He was mad—the leader of the mole-men—"

Sam Eustace and the troopers hurried to where the body of Walter Lockwood lay. Porter Larkin still stood silent, gazing at me. Eustace, hastening back, seemed full of an unusually vehement exuberance.

"As I thought!" he exclaimed. "I was sure Walter was responsible. I'm the only one who can explain the real truth now. Walter's mind had cracked—he was desperately continuing his experiments on developing the image of a dead retina. Without my help, the horrors would have gone on, and the case would never have been solved. This will restore my reputation! Without a doubt, the whole world will have to admit that I am one of the greatest criminologists living."

One quiet word came from Porter Larkin: "Hardly."

Still standing between him and Jane, I demanded, "What the devil do you mean?"

INSTEAD of answering me, he spoke to Sam Eustace. "I'd like to ask you a question. What about the negatives you made of the fingerprints on Cathie Vincent's throat? You still have them, of course?"

Eustace started. "Why no—no, I'm afraid I haven't," he said. "Someone broke into my laboratory a while ago. They stole into my darkroom and carried the negatives away. But it doesn't matter now. The answer lies before us."

Porter Larkin stepped past Eustace. He went into the passage where Walter Lockwood lay dead. Walking past Lockwood, he reached into a crevice in the wall. He came back with something furry in his hand. Confronting Sam Eustace, he smiled dourly.

"No one stole those negatives," he said calmly. "You destroyed them yourself—because you knew they were prints of your own fingers. And this—this is the beard and the wig you wore when you disguised yourself as Walter Lockwood. You tried like the devil to put the blame on him but—"

A strangled cry broke from Sam Eustace's throat. He struck at Larkin, then sprang into the passage. Before any of the rest of us could move, he was racing into the far darkness. But Larkin was swift. He sped after Eustace, he leaped upon the criminologist. A sharp struggle followed; but Larkin bore Eustace down.

When he came back, holding the fuming little man in an inescapable grip, I had released Jane from the straps, and she was clinging to me in my arms.

"This man," Porter Larkin declared grimly, "is the real monster."

PAUL MORGAN, the Attorney General, spoke with grim satisfaction as we sat in the living room of the Vincent home—Jane, Porter Larkin, the Vincents and I.

"I'm sorry I had to put Porter on the spot by denying that he was one of my agents," Morgan paid. "Fact is, he's my best investigator."

But we'd agreed that he must work under cover of complete secrecy. When you called me, Ross, I wasn't aware that his hand had been forced, you see."

Porter Larkin said with a smile, "My job was to find out what had happened to Danny Gans. I suspected he'd been murdered, because a simple-minded kid like that couldn't possibly have made himself disappear so completely. You'd be amazed at the lead that made me sure he'd been killed. It was a pair of glass eyes." "Glass eyes!" I exclaimed. Porter Larkin nodded. "When I began investigating, the first thing I noticed was that Sam Eustace made frequent calls at the post office. He inquired repeatedly about a package he was anxious to receive. When it came. I opened it, and found it contained two glass eyes. They answered the description of Danny Gans' eyes. Then—"

"Then the eyes I saw in the dead mole-man weren't the eyes of Danny Gans at all!" I said. "They were glass, put there to make us believe that they had been transplanted from Danny's head."

Again Larkin nodded. "Exactly. You see. Walter Lockwood had actually, in his desperate attempt to prove his brother innocent, performed an experimental operation on Danny Gans. But Sam Eustace failed to say, when you questioned him, that he had taken an active part in that experiment. He was as desperate as Lockwood, after all, to vindicate himself. But the experiment failed, and Danny Gans died—and that spelled murder."

Attorney General Morgan said, "Eustace has admitted this, you know. This is part of the confession we got from him."

"Eustace and Lockwood hid Danny Gans' body in the mine. The shock of the boy's death was enough to discourage Lockwood from making another such experiment. In fact, it so preyed on his mind that he'd told Eustace he was going to confess what he'd done, and throw himself on the mercy of the court. But Eustace was desperate to keep the whole matter quiet, because he was a party to the murder, and he could never have re-established himself if this had become known. His panic gave rise to his plan. "He suspected that I was investigating

Danny Gans' disappearance, and was afraid I would learn the truth," Larkin went on, "and that made him doubly desperate. He schemed to put the whole blame on Lockwood, get hold of as much money as he could, then flee to some foreign country.

"In the Black Lode, while disposing of Danny Gans' body, Eustace had found evidence showing that the madmen were still existing underground. Alone, he went back, and found them. By means of a wig and a false beard, he was able to simulate Lockwood's appearance well enough to deceive the few madmen who could see a little.

"He made them believe he could restore their lost sight by grafting good eyes into their heads—which, of course, is impossible

"In their insane eagerness, they robbed for him and brought him victims. In your case, Jane, he was forced to make a new attack because of the fingerprints. He had had to make the photos, because Ross had insisted, but then he had to get them back. He intended to

...he could restore their lost sight by grafting good eyes into their heads...

kill you, after excising your eyes, because he was afraid you had seen through his disguise. Thank God Ross was able to stop him!"

Attorney General Morgan rose. "He'd kept Lockwood prisoner in the mine. At the last moment, frantic to complete his plan of putting the blame on the surgeon, he killed Lockwood, intending it to look like suicide."

"I'd been hiding in the Black Lode, you know," Larkin said, "ever since I broke away from you, Ross—hiding there, and searching. I saw Eustace run out of the tunnel, where he'd left Lockwood's body, then go up to the surface through an old manway in the rear, after which he came down again with the troopers. A moment sooner, and I would actually have seen him kill Lockwood."

"Those madmen, poor devils," Morgan said. "We've accounted for every one. The survivors will spend the rest of their miserable days in the asylum. It's the only punishment the law permits. But

Eustace—that man is going to the chair for three murders. I know we'll all feel easier when his last night on earth comes —when the clock runs past two minutes after twelve midnight."

I gripped Porter Larkin's hand, "Damned sorry I misjudged you, old man," I said sincerely. "We owe you a great debt. I think I can promise that you'll be well rewarded."

Larkin grinned. "Forget it," he said. "It was my job. You're the one who deserves a reward—but I think you already have it."

Jane's hand closed warmly on mine; and she gazed at me, unafraid now, with eyes that were clear and blue and beautiful. . . .

THE END