

Thrilling Mystery, July 1937

The Beast Demon of Yucatan Fosters a Dread Series of Murderous Horrors!



WHEN the BLACK FIEND FED

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“STOP here!”
There was a vibrant note of nervous tension in Karl Reisner’s command. I brought the car to a skidding stop in the loose sand of the narrow roadway.

Reisner and Allan Grove were sitting in the back seat. I got a glimpse of Reisner’s face in the rearview mirror. His features had always been gaunt and pallid.

Now in the faintly reflected moonlight his face was the bleached white of a naked skull.

“There’s the Herron place,” Reisner said, his voice so low that it was a husking whisper. “Now do you see what I meant?”

I stared out across the narrow moonlit valley that separated us from the hilltop estate of the late Gordon Herron. Tiny ripples of dread ran along my spine. Alice

shivered and her slim fingers were cold in mine as she huddled closer against my shoulder.

Since I had last seen the isolated hill country home of Gordon Herron it had changed insidiously. The four of us sat staring across the valley in taut silence. I believe the same thought was in all our minds—the memory of Gordon Herron’s recent death, the weird horror of the manner in which he had died.

Alice and I had been away on our honeymoon when it had happened, but we had been apprised of all the details. The dread manner in which the famous Black God had figured in the tragedy made the story a natural headliner for the sensational press.

Gordon Herron had found the thing in a Mayan tomb somewhere in Yucatan, during his last archaeological expedition. It was the Los Angeles reporters who gave the statue the name of the Black God. Some of them went a step farther and called it the Black Beast-God.

Neither Alice nor I had ever seen the stone figure, and the newspapers’ reports of it were far from informative. They agreed upon the rough fundamentals—that it was of some unknown variety of black stone, that it weighed close to a ton, and that it represented a standing figure that was a repellent blend of man and beast.

But when it came to further details, no two reporters seemed to have seen the thing alike. No satisfactory photographs were ever published. For some curious reason, the statue registered only as an amorphous blur upon camera plates.

GORDON HERRON had taken the thing to his lonely estate high in the San Fernando hills. Three weeks later he died there—horribly. Karl Reisner, Herron’s secretary and assistant, returned late one night to find Herron’s body lying broken and dead beneath the massive weight of the overturned statue.

Herron’s head had been crushed to unrecognizable pulp. By a gruesome freak of chance the Black God’s figure lay with its bestial snout buried deep in the dead man’s shattered skull, its fanged jaws dripping carmine as though in grisly feast.

Karl Reisner’s husky voice cut through the somber thread of my thoughts.

“Do you see now what I meant,” he said, “when I told you that the place had—changed?”

I nodded grimly. When I had last seen the estate it had been a lushly green oasis in the drab vegetation of the Southern California hills. The big stone house had been surrounded by the rich foliage of pepper trees and the graceful fronds of tall palms. But now it was a blighted area of death.

The palm fronds were wilted and black. The thick foliage of the pepper trees was brown and sere. There was an odd symmetry to the blighted area. Close to the house it was practically complete. Then as the circle

widened outward the blighting influence became steadily less virulent.

It was as though in some weird manner the house was a central point from which issued an invisible miasma so poisonous that it brought death to everything within its aura.

I felt Alice’s slender body shiver against my shoulder. The night was sharp with the chill of late Spring, but there was another and indefinable coldness in the air. It was a chill as stark as that which fills the eternally lightless void beyond the stars.

For a long, shuddering moment I felt that somewhere in the dark bulk of that stone house, Something crouched in hideous waiting, a Something of such nameless and abysmal evil that its very presence numbed the brain with crepitant dread. Then I shook off the eerie feeling angrily, and turned to face Karl Reisner.

“You brought us down here by phoning Alice of some vague evil that was threatening the place,” I said impatiently. “When we met you in the village you refused to give any details, telling us to wait until we arrived and saw for ourselves.

“We’re not waiting any longer. If there is real danger lurking in that stone pile, we’re going to know what we’re facing before we go any farther. You’re telling us all about it—here and now!”

Reisner nervously ran the tip of his tongue over dry lips.

“All right, Bartlett,” he husked, “I’ll tell you. It’s that accursed thing that Gordon Herron dug out of that Mayan tomb! For three solid weeks Herron and I lived out here with that ghastly black abomination. From the first day we knew that we were facing Something utterly beyond all normal ken, but we refused to admit the incredible truth, even to ourselves.

“We went on about our work, with every passing day hammering the dread knowledge deeper into our brains. The Black God was in some nameless and blasphemous manner *alive* with an unspeakably hideous life of its own!

“It wasn’t a tangible thing that you could put your finger on,” Reisner continued, his low voice trembling. “It was a feeling deep in your soul that all the time the God was standing there *watching* you—alive, sentient, waiting!

“Its very presence seemed to focus vast forces of unknown evil upon the estate, as a burning-glass focuses the rays of the sun. The trees around the house withered and died. The servants, with the exception of Mack Delmar, the gardener, left en masse.

“Herron, Delmar, and I sickened with a slow illness that seemed to be sapping the basic essence of Life itself, but we stubbornly stayed on. Then finally there came the time when the hideous hunger of the Black God had to be appeased. It fed—and its victim was Gordon Herron!”

“WAIT a minute!” Allan Grove exclaimed. There was disdainful contempt upon his sardonically good looking face. “Gordon’s death was gruesome, yes, but it was nothing but an accident. The stone figure toppled over, and its weight crushed him. You’re not telling us that the Black God voluntarily moved, are you?”

“Yes,” Reisner answered tersely. “You don’t know the real truth of what happened that night. When I entered the house I found the Black God standing upright in its usual place. The body of Gordon Herron was huddled at its feet. There was nothing but a ghastly cavity where Herron’s face had been. And the Black God’s fanged mouth was deeply stained with fresh-dried blood!

“I couldn’t tell the authorities that story, of course,” Reisner said drearily. “They’d have called me a madman. They might even have accused me of killing Gordon Herron myself.

“I did the only thing I could do. I toppled the statue over so that its fall crushed what was left of Herron’s head beyond recognition.”

“That happened over a week ago,” I said bluntly. “Why wait till now to tell us?”

“I waited for the same reason that I hid the real manner of Herron’s death,” Reisner said desperately. “I simply didn’t dare come to you with such a weird story. But I couldn’t keep it to myself any longer.

“There’s stark incarnate Evil in that demoniac stone thing, Evil that will strike hideously again if it is not destroyed. Your wife and Allan Grove are Gordon Herron’s sole heirs. The responsibility is theirs.”

For a moment we sat in stunned silence. My brain was a dazed maelstrom of conflicting thoughts. With the blighted estate staring me in the face and the cold aura of eldritch evil about the place closing in over my consciousness like a chill shroud, I couldn’t shrug Reisner’s story away.

I looked down at the clear blond beauty of Alice’s head nestling against my shoulder, and I wished with all my heart that I had never brought her on this eerie midnight errand.

“Personally, Reisner,” Allan Grove’s hard, flat voice broke the silence, “I think you’re either drunk or crazy. But you’ve hauled us out here to this Godforsaken place, and we might as well go on and have a look at this black bogey-beast of yours. Unless my little cousin and her husband object?”

I felt the hot rush of blood to my face. It was only the restraining pressure of Alice’s slim fingers upon my arm that kept me from turning and taking the swing at Grove’s supercilious face that I had been longing to take for years.

Instead, I allowed Grove’s taunt to goad me into doing something a thousand times more foolish. I crashed the car into gear and grimly headed it down into the valley and up the other slope into the estate.

We swung through the stone pillars of the gate, and passed Mack Delmar’s cottage. The darkened windows showed no sign of life. We followed the winding driveway on into the area of blighted vegetation. Evil seemed to close around us in surging waves of chill menace as we neared the house. The palms of my hands were clammy with sweat as they gripped the wheel.

Ten yards from the house we rounded a sharp curve between tall hedges of withered evergreens. Alice cried out in startled terror. My foot trod savagely upon the brake, bringing the car to a jolting stop. There in the narrow, graveled roadway just ahead was the grotesquely sprawled body of a man.

We got out of the car and approached the body. The brilliant glare of the car’s headlights revealed it with pitiless clarity. Alice got one brief look at the shuddering horror before I had time to sweep her into my arms and turn her head from the sight. Reisner, Grove, and I stood looking down in white-lipped silence at the ghastly fragment of what had once been a man.

The entire face had been literally *bitten out*, as one would bite a chunk from an apple. Where the eyes, nose, mouth, and cheeks should have been there was nothing but a gaping bloody cavity of unspeakable horror. Blood stained the thick shock of grizzled grey hair and splattered the dead man’s faded khaki coveralls. The clothing and the hair identified the corpse as that of Mack Delmar, gardener of the estate.

REISNER’S gaunt face was livid with fear as he lifted his eyes from the mutilated body.

“The Black God!” he chattered between trembling lips. “The Black God has fed again!”

I stared at the stone bulk of the house looming just ahead. The yawning gates of Hell would have been preferable to that bleakly silent house, yet I knew that we had to go in.

My voice was a hoarse croak in my throat as I said, “We’ll go inside and look at the God.”

Reisner started to protest, but I cut him savagely short.

“We have to go in there!” I rasped. “It’s the only way we can ever be finally and definitely sure!”

Allan Grove’s face was sickly grey, but he followed us as we slowly walked up the driveway. The porch floor rang hollowly beneath our feet. We opened the front door and stepped through a small entrance hallway directly into the large high-ceilinged room that had been Gordon Herron’s study.

For a moment we stared into gloom that seemed to throb with eldritch menace. Then the lights blazed as Reisner’s finger found the wall switch.

Alice’s breath hissed in a sharply indrawn gasp. Allan Grove swore in a sibilant whisper. I felt the hair at the base of my skull bristle erect.

The Black God stood in front of the wall opposite us. It was a silent, immovable, apparently lifeless piece of stone—yet upon it was horrible and damning evidence of its grisly guilt! Fresh-dried blood smeared the bestial obscenity of the Thing's snout, and torn shreds of flesh still lingered on the fangs of the hideous mouth!

We advanced slowly toward it, our steps the stiffly mechanical progress of hypnotized birds approaching a deadly snake. We came to a halt in the center of the room. I forgot even the ghastly significance of the blood-smeared mouth in the starkly overwhelming horror of the Black God itself.

It was carved from a single block of some jet-black stone whose oddly lustrous sheen was unlike any rock that I had ever seen. It was a little over seven feet in height and must have weighed at least a ton.

The body was roughly human. Savage power was carved in every line of the thickly muscled shoulders and torso. Set in the center of the massive chest was an egg-shaped gem whose malignant scarlet fire seemed to originate deep within its own core.

The ape-like arms ended in hands that consisted of three curving talons. There was no base to the statue. It rested upon wide-splayed feet.

The face was the crowning horror of the Thing. It seemed incredible that any human sculptor could ever have conceived the unearthly evil of that visage. It was a nightmare of obscenity that could only have been born in the reeling chaos of some other and elder world of abysmal malevolence.

The head was low-skulled, utterly bestial. The open jaws of the long, hideous snout were lined with curving fangs. Above the thick upper lip were the flaring holes of wide nostrils. The face was devoid of all trace of eyes or sockets, yet oddly it gave no impression of blindness. You felt that it had never had eyes because it had never needed them, that it saw with other and weirdly alien powers of its own.

MINUTES must have passed while we stood there staring in hypnotized silence at the grimly monstrous stone Thing, our brains reeling and numb from the surging miasma of nameless evil that poured from it. Then from somewhere there came a sound that snapped our dazed senses back to a realization of our surroundings. It was the hoarse cry of a man in the last extremity of terror!

Wrenching my gaze away from the black statue's baleful fascination, I stared around me and started in shocked surprise. There were only three of us in the room,

"Where's Reisner?" I asked blankly.

Grove shook his head in bewilderment.

"I don't know," he said dazedly. "He was right behind me a few minutes ago."

My gaze roved on past Grove, then stopped abruptly as it fell upon a door in the far wall. I was certain that the door had been closed when we entered the room, but now it was half-open.

"Where does that door lead?" I asked Alice.

"Down to the basement," she answered in surprise. "But there's nothing down there except some—"

Her voice broke off squarely in the middle of a sentence as from somewhere below us there came again the sound of a man's outcry. I saw the faces of Allan Grove and Alice go ashen white, and I felt horror's icy fingers sweep coldly down my spine. There was no mistaking the hideous nature of that cry. It was bubbling, gurgling, as of a man choking upon his own blood!

We hurried over to the door. Just short of the threshold, I reached a hand to Grove's arm and halted him.

"We're unarmed, Grove," I reminded him tersely. "Better equip ourselves from that junk there." I gestured toward a cluster of weapons on the wall, souvenirs of one of Gordon Herron's many jungle treks.

Grove took down a sword with a long curving blade like that of a scimitar. I selected a wooden mace, with a heavy knobbed head. The feel of the weapon brought new confidence to me as we stepped over to the doorway.

We stood there a moment, listening in tense silence. There was no sound from the black gloom of the depths below.

"There's a switch on the left wall," Alice whispered.

I snapped it on. Yellow light from dusty bulbs revealed a flight of stone steps leading down into a basement that was little more than a long, half-finished corridor. There was nothing to be seen in the limited area visible from the door.

"Reisner! Karl Reisner!" I called. "Are you down there?"

There was no answer. We started cautiously down the steps, Grove and I abreast, Alice close behind us.

The stairs ended at a wooden floor. The air was dankly chill, with a musty scent of decaying wood. Tiers of piled packing cases lined the walls, some of them empty, others containing relics from Herron's trips of exploration. We advanced slowly along the narrow aisle between the cases toward a door in the far wall.

We passed through it into another room, a small chamber approximately twenty feet square. Several tall piles of packing cases towered precariously against the walls in here, their contents stone figures and panels from Mayan tombs. We searched the small room for a few minutes, then came to a halt, baffled.

At that moment, with heart-stopping abruptness, the lights went out!

PITCH darkness surged in upon our dazed senses like the stifling folds of a giant blanket. With the

darkness there came a sound that brought stark gibbering horror!

Somewhere in the room above us there were footsteps, not the ordinary light tread of normal human feet but ponderous clumping steps made by a Thing of colossal weight as it strode stiffly upon feet of solid stone. Primeval terror numbed my quivering senses in a dazed stupor as I realized the incredible truth.

The Black God was again stalking through the night!

For a dread shuddering minute that seemed eternities long, the three of us stood frozen and motionless in the dense darkness, listening with hypnotized fascination as the clumping automaton-like steps crossed the floor toward the basement door.

Then as the unseen Thing reached the door, our tension suddenly broke. I heard Allan Grove mumble hysterical curses through quivering lips. He turned and fumbled for the door. He passed through it and raced in blundering flight into the case-lined aisle of the room beyond.

I swept Alice's slender figure close to mine, holding her tightly lest terror should drive her into blindly following Grove's example. Flight in that direction was stark madness. It meant rushing straight into the grimly-taloned hands of the stalking stone horror.

I felt Alice's body shudder in my arms. The touch of her slim fingers upon mine had the coldness of naked fear.

"Steady, darling!" I whispered huskily, trying to put a reassurance into my words that I was far from feeling. "As long as we stay back here we still have a chance."

I groped for the door and swung it shut. My fumbling fingers found the latch and slipped it into place, though I knew the utter futility of the act. That grimly stalking stone colossus could shatter the flimsy barrier with a single sweep of one of its black arms.

We retreated to the far wall of the little room. I placed Alice in the shelter of a niche between one of the piles of cases and the wall. Then, mace in hand, I stood in front of her, tensely waiting.

The stifling darkness blotted out all trace of vision, but we did not need sight to be aware of what was happening. The sounds that throbbed through the blackness told the story all too clearly.

There was the slow ponderous tread of the Black God's feet as it descended the stairs, stone feet clumping solidly upon stone steps. There was the lighter sound of Grove's shoes scuffling over the floor in his mad flight.

Heaven alone knows what fatal quirk in Grove's terror-crazed brain sent him racing headlong into the arms of the advancing Thing. They met, apparently at a spot near the bottom of the stairs.

There was a sharp ringing clang, as of Grove's scimitar striking forcibly against stone, followed by blurred, vague sounds of a hand-to-hand struggle. Allan

Grove screamed once, a shuddering cry of gibbering terror.

His voice was abruptly blotted out by a grinding, *crunching* sound of indescribably horrible timbre. A gurgling moan bubbled through a liquid-choked throat, then died away into silence. There was a dull thud, as of a lifeless body falling limply to the floor.

Next came the sound that I had been dreading with every shrinking fiber of my soul—the ponderous thud of the Black God's stone feet as it again resumed its ghastly march!

The last flickering spark of hope died in my heart as I realized that Grove's death had not appeased the Thing's grisly hunger. The monstrous march of the thudding footsteps was progressing straight toward the door of the room in which Alice and I crouched, helplessly trapped!

ERIE menace pulsed through the smothering darkness in waves of shuddering terror. Every nerve in my body flinched beneath the remorseless rhythm of the stiffly clumping feet as they advanced toward us. The insensate stone body came onward in a monstrous and horrible manner that was alien to every law of a sane and normal world.

It reached the door. The stone feet came to a halt. For a long breathless second there was a tautly vibrant silence. Then sound exploded with cataclysmic force in the close confines of the small room. A hurtling stone arm crashed into the barrier. The flimsy latch snapped as though struck by a battering ram. The door swung violently open.

A small oval spot of red light glowed luridly in the opening. The rays struck full in my face. My eyes blinked blindly in the ruddy glare. The source of the crimson light was the gem on the Black God's chest.

Behind the fiery jewel I could dimly see the towering outline of the mighty stone figure, topped by the flattened skull of its hideously bestial head.

For an interminable second of crepitant horror the Thing stood motionless, its eyeless face fixed upon us as though *watching us* with some eerie sense utterly alien to all Earthly life. Then one of the great splayed feet stiffly rose and the Thing stepped across the threshold.

Grimly and inexorably it advanced upon us. Evil, abysmal and incarnate, flowed from the Thing in a surging flood of soul-chilling malignance. My brain reeled, numb and shaken beneath the impact of that dread aura of stark malevolence. I stepped forward to meet the stalking figure.

The glowing jewel approached my eyes until it was so near that my dazzled vision could no longer discern even a hazy glimpse of the stone body behind it. I lifted my heavy mace and swung with all my strength at the spot where I felt that the loathsome-faced head should be.

The blow never landed. An unyielding solid stone arm met my wrist with a paralyzing force that sent the club spinning harmlessly from my limp fingers.

A taloned hand of lustrous black stone lashed out through the crimson murk. I jerked my head to one side but the hand caromed off my cheek with a force that sent me reeling.

The Thing was upon me before I could recover. I struck blindly with both fists, then winced in pain as they glanced futilely off the skin-tearing surface of living stone. Again a lustrous black arm swung ponderously toward my face, and this time I had no chance to dodge.

The blow struck my forehead with stunning force. My body hurtled backward into a precariously piled heap of cases in the corner. The pile collapsed with a splintering crash, but I was too dazed to scramble clear.

The last thing that I heard was Alice's high-pitched scream of mortal terror. Then the falling cases crashed upon my head and shoulders. White flame exploded in my brain in a blinding sheet followed instantly by a black oblivion that blotted out everything.

MY first waking sensation was of pain. My head throbbled. Agony grated through my left side with every breath that I drew. An intolerable weight was pressing upon my chest. I opened my eyes. They met only smothering darkness.

My arms were partially pinned at my sides. I managed to twist them free sufficiently to explore the darkness around me. I was lying face upward on the floor, half-buried beneath the broken packing cases and their stone contents.

It took long minutes of muscle-wrenching work before I managed to work myself free of the splintered debris, and wriggle clear. My body was an aching mass of bruises from head to foot, but the only serious injury seemed to be in my side. The persistent grating pain there told of broken ribs.

I searched my pocket for matches. I found just one, and it was broken. Its flame lasted for scant seconds before it scorched itself out against my blistered fingers. The brief flare lasted long enough for me to see that I was alone in the small room.

The Black God had gone. And with the monstrously stalking figure of malignant stone, Alice had vanished!

Stark dread closed over my heart with icy fingers as I thought of the unspeakable fate that might have befallen her. My steps shuffled over the floor with frenzied haste as I groped for the door.

Imagination limned vivid and terrible pictures in my tortured brain—images of the clear, flawless blond beauty of Alice's lovely face, and dread memory of the horrible faceless fragment that had once been Mack Delmar.

I groped my way along the case-lined aisle of the next room. My foot thudded solidly into something lying limp and motionless on the floor. My lips spoke a whispered prayer as I knelt and explored the thing with groping fingers.

A mighty wave of relief surged through my heart as my fumbling fingers met a stiff collar and tie that were unmistakably masculine. My fingers passed on up over the chin. Then abruptly I snatched them away with a strangled exclamation of abysmal horror.

The sight of the faceless mutilations that marked the Black God's dread path was horrible enough, but to run one's fingers into one of those unspeakable facial cavities in the darkness was a shock that brought my reeling brain perilously close to the brink of shrieking madness.

My body retching in uncontrollable nausea, I staggered to my feet and blundered on through the blackness toward the stairs. My foot struck the bottom step.

At the top of the flight a faint line of light marked the crack of the door. From somewhere beyond the door there were faint sounds, as of someone or some Thing moving around in the room above.

There was a low rumble of conversation but the words were indistinguishable. I groped my way cautiously up the stairs. The door opened outward into the study. It was slightly ajar, but the crack was too narrow to give any view of the room beyond. I gently pushed it open several inches more. The sight that was revealed numbed my heart with cold horror.

The monstrous form of the Black God dominated the scene. The towering figure was in its former place in front of the wall, but it no longer stood erect upon its splayed feet. It now leaned far forward at an angle so great that the only thing which restrained its headlong plunge to the floor was a thick rope looped around its massive neck.

STRETCHED on the floor beneath the grisly menace of the stone colossus was Alice's helplessly-bound figure. Her position had been calculated with fiendish nicety. When the leaning figure of the Black God was released to finish its forward fall, its long bestial snout would strike with horrible accuracy squarely into Alice's unprotected face!

The rope around the Black God's neck passed on up over an iron hook fastened to the ceiling rafters, then down to a strong steel spike driven deep into the wall. The rope was looped around the spike in a noosed knot that needed only a single jerk at its free end to come loose and send the stone figure hurtling forward on its deadly plunge.

And, standing with his hand almost within reach of the knotted rope, was the human monster who had been responsible for the grisly horror of the night's events.

There was no mistaking the tall gaunt figure. It was Karl Reisner!

Alice's face was deathly white as she stared up into Reisner's eyes, but her voice was pluckily steady.

"Why are you doing this to me, Karl?" she pleaded.

"I have no choice in the matter, my dear," Reisner rasped. "It is either your life or mine. You and Allan Grove were Gordon Herron's sole heirs. An accounting of the estate to you would reveal that the accounts had been looted of considerable sums.

"The shortage would inevitably be traced to me and the authorities would then guess the real truth about Herron's death, that I killed him when he threatened to send me to prison for the theft. But with you and Grove eliminated, the accounting would be postponed long enough for me to cover all traces of the shortage."

I stepped up into the room. Every muscle was tensed in an agonizing effort to keep from making the slightest sound. The spot where Reisner was standing was nearly thirty feet from the basement door. I crept toward him with the slow and infinite caution of a stalking jungle cat.

"Mack Delmar suspected the truth about Herron's death," Reisner's husky voice rasped on, "but he was too canny to act until he had proof. The fool waited too long. I killed him just before I went to the village to meet you tonight, then mutilated his face to make it appear that he had been slain by the Black God."

As I stealthily advanced upon Reisner, I saw on the floor beyond him the discarded costume that had been worn during the attack upon us in the basement. The body and cleverly built-up headpiece were sheathed in a black stone-like material. The soles of the shoes were lead-weighted like those of a diver.

The facsimile gem upon the chest still shone red from a concealed battery. Beside the suit was a bolo, its heavy blade stained dark with blood, in all probability the weapon which had so horribly mutilated the faces of Mack Delmar and Allan Grove.

I could see now how easily Reisner had duped us into playing directly into his hands. When we entered the basement in answer to his cry, he had probably been hidden among the packing cases in the room at the foot of the steps.

After we passed on into the smaller room he slipped back upstairs, donned the Black God costume, snapped off the lights, and descended for his murderous attack. He had made just one mistake in his carefully-planned program thus far, and that was when he had left me for dead beneath the pile of fallen cases.

I HAD covered half the distance to where Reisner was standing when Alice saw me. Her swift-drooping eyelids instantly hid any telltale gleam of hope from her captor. With lightning alertness and superb courage, she helped me in the only way she possibly could, by trying

to keep the fiend's attention diverted until I could get within striking distance.

"You can't get away with your plan, Karl!" she said desperately. "People believed you when you attributed Gordon Herron's death to the Black God, but they'll never believe that three other persons could have died the same way."

"Why not?" Reisner rasped, his voice tense with the sadistic madness that surged through his veins. "The fools of the press built the Black God up into a supernatural figure about which anything will be believed.

"I have cleverly added to its aura of evil mystery, even to the extent of injecting poisonous chemicals into the sap of the surrounding trees. When I tell my story of the God stalking murderously through the house tonight, leaving me the only survivor, I will be believed. No one will—"

Reisner's words broke abruptly off. Some faint sound of my steps must have warned him for he whirled swiftly around while I was still a full six feet away.

There was no time to rush him. His hand swung too perilously close to the knotted rope that would release the stone statue. I left my feet in a hurtling headlong tackle.

We crashed to the floor together. Reisner clawed for his pocket with his right hand as we scrambled back to our feet, but I was upon him before he had time to complete the motion.

My fists ripped into his face in a lashing attack that staggered him. He caught himself, and fought back with a savage ferocity that momentarily held me at bay. There was surprising power in that tall gaunt frame.

But he no longer had the protection of the stone-sheathed armor that had given him such an overwhelming advantage in our basement battle. This time my fists struck solidly home, and their ripping punishment swiftly began to tell.

He gave ground before the blows I rained in his face. Beyond him I saw Alice, jerking and rolling her bound body with desperate efforts, had managed to writhe safely clear of the leaning Black God's menace.

I shot a thudding left home to Reisner's midsection. As he sagged from the blow I caught him with a smashing right on the side of his jaw. He pitched backward to the floor at the base of the leaning statue.

In the heat of the battle I had forgotten his previous effort to get something out of his pocket. I remembered it too late. His hand again flashed for his pocket, and came out with an automatic pistol.

I flung myself forward, but his shot caught me in mid-stride. Smashing pain raked my side as the slug furrowed across my ribs. I staggered backward into the wall.

Reisner rose to one knee. His skull-like face was a contorted masque of demoniac triumph as he carefully

steadied the pistol for the next shot. With pain-glazed eyes I watched the lethal black hole of the muzzle swing inexorably into line with my heart. Then the fingers of my right hand touched a dangling rope end.

Memory of what that rope meant flashed with lightning swiftness through my racing brain. I jerked it savagely, then flung my body to one side just as Reisner fired. The bullet ripped harmlessly into the wall within scant inches of my body.

Reisner looked up in time to see the Black God start forward in its deadly plunge. He tried frantically to

scramble out of the way, but his foot slipped. He sprawled on his back, squarely in the Black God's path.

Reisner screamed, a cry of stark horror that ended abruptly. The falling statue struck with a weird and terrible accuracy. What had been Karl Reisner's face vanished in a hideously pulped cavity in which the statue's blood-smearred snout nuzzled deep, as though the Black God was actually glutting its hunger in one of the grisly feasts that Reisner had simulated.



Next Month: DEATH PLAYS DOLLS, a Fantastic
Novelette of Eerie Thrills, by C. K. M. Scanlon