

The Pipe Of Death



By Charles B. Stilson

If you think this is the best of the five skitlets in this number, please say so on the special line in the ballot on page 142. Mail your vote to The Editor.

Skitlet No. 15

WHAT fifteen years will do to a boyhood friend is unpredictable. Something to that effect was in my mind as I stamped the snow from my feet in Shaine's hall and followed him into his snug library.

Shaine had been handsome in those college days when seven of us, chosen companions, good fellows all, had formed our own secret society and sworn fantastic oaths of fealty and mutual aid in the Crimson Circle. Boyish foolishness. Doubtless. But I still wore my gold ring with its emblematic groove of scarlet enamel. So, I noticed, did Shaine.

He had grown gross. His face was purple. His jowls hung. His blue eyes were red-rimmed as a St. Bernard's.

Nevertheless, when his summons had reached me, couched in the grotesque and archaic jargon of the Ritual, bidding me be at his house at eleven that night, "on an affair of fatal urgency," I had not disregarded it.

"What's the rumpus?" I asked as he settled into a chair opposite me.

"You'll know when the rest get here," he replied, scowling under snarled brows. "Anyway, you came. I knew you would. So will the rest."

I was beginning to wish I hadn't. I didn't like the look in Shaine's eyes. It was unhealthy and

sinister. I was minded, too, to remark that the gathering of the Seven would not be complete, and never could be again in this world; but I recalled that Shaine knew more about that than I did.

"The show's to come off at midnight," he volunteered. He lapsed into moodiness. We sat and smoked and waited. One by one the others came.

Mason, the doctor; Corwin and Bell, the two attorneys, a Mutt and Jeff pair; and Meyer, the auctioneer, with the possible exception of Shaine, wealthiest and wisest of us all. Shaine was an unknown quantity. He had gone adventuring in strange countries.

Shaine himself lumbered out to answer the bell. None of his servants appeared, though I had a vague impression, from a long previous visit, that he had a rascally Portuguese butler.

Only to Mason did Shaine unbend. "I'm glad to see you, doc," he said. "I'm sorry to pester you chaps, but this had to be done."

Meyer was last. It was well after eleven thirty when he arrived. And when he had eased into a chair and lighted a cigar: "We're all here—the old Ring, by golly—only 'Slender' Hicks, and he's dead."

"He isn't!" The negative was Shaine's, and it was violent.

"I thought he was, but—he—isn't." Shaine

brought his big soft fist down on the table. We stared at him.

"I met him in Guatemala. He'd turned bug-hunter for museums, you know. We went into the Jivaro country, up the Amazon—after emeralds. Hicks knew where they were. I put up the money. Risked our heads. Jivaros are nasty. We got the emeralds. Then we had a row. Hicks said I cheated him. I didn't. He got his share. Anyway, I had put up the money. I—I heard afterward that he was dead.

"He's been writing to me. He's crazy. The damned fool"—Shaine's heavy voice went unnaturally shrill—"has threatened me. He said he'd kill me—even named the day. Yes, sir, the idiot told me that if I didn't come across by a certain day, I wouldn't live to see midnight. And today's the day!" Shaine knuckled the table and glared.

I THINK we all felt that it sounded fishy. If Slender Hicks said he'd been cheated, it was a bet that he had. He was a man who couldn't lie. Moreover, if Slender Hicks had said that he would kill me, I knew that I would have made my will. He had a steely quality of unswerving directness that was invincible and a little awesome. He made a fetish of his word. He had become a scientist and a fanatic. And now—

I looked at the clock, and shivered. It marked six minutes to midnight.

Shaine must have pressed a bell. That rascally Portuguese appeared.

"Bring him in!" roared Shaine. "Oh, yes, I've got him here—safe and fast. I learned where he was hanging out, and we bagged him. He was going to kill me by midnight, and he's got just five minutes to make good."

Two men carried a big, padded chair to the foot

of the table. The Seven were met again. We had to take Shaine's word, though, that it was Slender Hicks, till he opened his eyes. He was yellow, worn to skin and bone, and horrible. But when he opened his eyes, we knew it was Slender. His mouth was shut like a gash, and he didn't say a word, though we were all babbling. He just sat and looked at Shaine, and those familiar eyes in that ghastly, shriveled mask were horrible.

"That's a dying man, Shaine," said "Doc" Mason. "Take off those chains."

I hadn't noticed the chains.

"In four minutes, doctor," said Shaine. "But not for four minutes—and all hell can't make me. Look at his eyes. If a look could kill, by God, he'd make good yet. He won't talk. Hasn't opened his mouth since I got him, day before yesterday—won't talk, won't eat—just sits and tries to hate me to death."

For fear, I suppose, lest we should say too much, we all fell silent. The clock hands crept. Shaine got up and stood over Slender Hicks. "Hicks," he said, "I'm almost sorry for you." The clock clicked and struck.

Hicks's face was raised to meet Shaine's gloating gaze. At the mellow chime of the clock, the chained man's lips parted. I caught a glimpse of a tiny wooden tube clenched between Slender's teeth. I heard a hiss of expelled breath.

Shaine staggered back, clutching at his throat. He plucked away a tiny something that clung to one of his pendulous jowls. "A Jivaro dart!" he screamed. "You—"

He flung himself at Hicks. Big Corwin caught him from behind. He struggled, snarling and frothing like an animal. He was almost a match for all of us. Then, all in a minute, he collapsed. We laid him on the floor, and Doc Mason covered his face.