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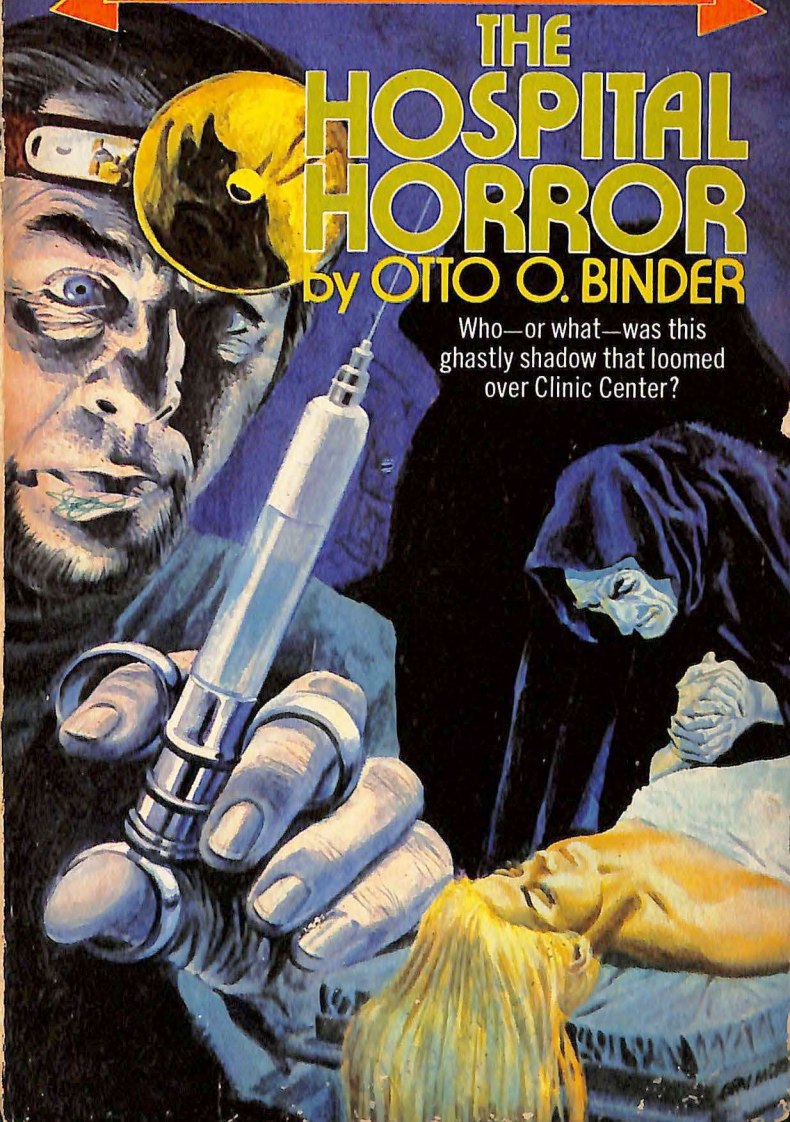
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FRANKENSTEIN HORROR SERIES

# THE HOSPITAL HORROR

by OTTO O. BINDER

Who—or what—was this  
ghastly shadow that loomed  
over Clinic Center?





Lynne gasped as she saw a small black-caped figure scurrying down the steps that connected to a lower door. She ran out on the platform to look below where he went. Her eyes opened wide. She saw nothing—nothing at all. The figure had been *real*, not an illusion. How could it have yanked open the door and vanished in those few seconds? There was no hiding place nearby, only the walls of the building and a straight drop down for five floors. A killing drop. And no body lay below.

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## Chapter 1

Some twenty miles outside the city of Tarlton, near the new turnpike with its teeming traffic, black clouds scudded across the sky, hiding the stars. But when the clouds parted for a moment, the moon's beams shone down like a spotlight, revealing a huge gleaming structure with aluminum walls and a golden dome on top. The turnpike drivers turned their eyes to this magnificent building with its five pentagonal wings that made it a unique haven of mercy.

Everybody knew its name—Clinic Center. Within its antiseptic walls were the latest medical labs, the finest operating rooms, and some of the greatest doctors. The uppermost of its ten stories held the research facilities where daring new medical techniques and miracle drugs (hopefully) were tested. The lower floors were devoted to regular hospital practice, filled with patients—the patients lucky enough to gain admission to this great healing emporium whose reputation was unmatched around the world.

Inside, in the hospital section, nurses in crisp white uniforms and varishaped caps walked the corridors, tending their patients. Harried doctors scampered here and there. Orderlies pushed their patient-carts; most of the patients were alive. But occasionally, as in the best of all hospitals, death had won out and the dead bodies were carted below to the morgue.

It was, in one sense, a place of hope and healing and lives snatched from a too-early ending caused by merci-

less germs, vicious viruses, internal organs laid waste, and broken bodies of all sorts.

It was, on the other hand, a place of pain and anxiety and suffering souls as gleaming needles jabbed and shiny scalpels sliced away under the arc lights and drugs brought miserable side reactions.

But it was something else too, something entirely unplanned and unexpected. It was a place of—*terror*.

Down in the nurses' lounge on the fifth floor, outfitted with comfortable chairs, dispensing machines of all kinds, with soft music piped in, a half dozen of the hard-working staff were "taking fifteen" as allowed by the rules.

The next girl who came in did not wear a nurse's outfit, but rather a loose white coat that dangled down to her knees. She glanced around at the others with a quick smile.

"Lynne Carlyle, lab technician," whispered one of the nurses, enviously. "She handles test tubes instead of bedpans, like us. That's what good looks do for you."

"Don't be catty," another girl said, shrugging. "And let's face it—she's got brains *and* beauty."

Strictly speaking, Lynne Carlyle was not beautiful. Her features were regular, but not classical. Her full lips were a bit too wide and her ash-blonde hair hung somewhat distractedly from under her starched white cap. Even her slender hands were slightly too large. Her shoulders were a bit squarish, marring an otherwise trim and perfect figure including long, elegant legs.

But what gave her the look of true beauty were her large beige-brown eyes. They sparkled and made her face look alive, animated with warm-hearted feelings.

"Hi, Gert," said Lynne cheerily to the girl who had whispered before. "I hear Dr. Peabody said you were superb during that appendectomy he performed this morning. Good work."

"Yeah, so where's my medal?" said Gert rather sourly. But it only hid the pleased glow within her at those words.

That was Lynne Carlyle's greatest talent. Her sincere friendliness made everybody like her, staff and patients, and even the most snarling, overworked doctor. Somebody had said that she could go down in the morgue and



make a stiff sit up with a happy grin. Lynne greeted the other girls, each with some little compliment that brought a quick smile to their lips.

All except one nurse, whose face turned into a mask of terror. Her mouth opened to let out a long scream as she pointed at the farther wall.

There, as moonbeams fitfully shone in the opposite window, was a huge black shadow of a short figure with long dangling arms and a monk's cowl over its head. A sort of billowing cape hung around its shoulders, making the body shapeless.

"It's the sh-shadow horror!" screeched another of the girls.

The other nurses cowered in paralyzed fright as the shadow, misshapen by the angles of the wall, seemed to somehow sway back and forth. At times the shadow's profile would be seen, vaguely showing an open mouth stretched in a menacing leer, a sharp nose, and a large forehead over which unkempt hair dangled from under its hood.

Even in black silhouette, unrevealed in any true detail, the uncanny form struck unreasoning panic in the nurses. They stumbled back and huddled in a corner of the room, eyes glued hypnotically to the eerie apparition.

"Who or wh-what is it?" moaned one girl.

Lynne Carlyle had swung around to see the huge, horrifying shadow extend its long arms to the side, with its long fingers curled like the claws of a beast. The girls shrieked even more.

Lynne stood a moment, her pulse hammering in shock. But then she conquered her own fears and tried to figure out what it meant. Glancing at the window, her eyes narrowed. Whoever—or whatever—it was must be outside, letting the moonlight cast the bloated shadow within the dimly lighted lounge where it would stand out starkly.

*Deliberately.*

Twice before in the past week, nurses in the lounge had reported glimpses of the same distorted shadow on the wall, as if purposely striking terror in their hearts.

Lynne swiftly strode to the door and flung it open,

nearly bowling over another nurse coming in. With a hurried apology, Lynne ran to the nearest door at the left and yanked it open, revealing the steel-mesh platform that led to another wing of the hospital.

She gasped as she saw a small black-caped figure scurrying down the steps that connected to a lower door. She ran out on the platform to look below where he went. Her eyes opened wide. She saw nothing—nothing at all. The figure had been *real*, not an illusion. How could it have yanked open the door and vanished in those few seconds? There was no hiding place nearby, only the walls of the building and a straight drop down for five floors. A killing drop. And no body lay below.

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The next day, as evening fell, Dr. Richard Soames was in the operating room, performing delicate open-heart surgery. A stand-by doctor and two nurses handed him the instruments he called for. The anesthetist watched his instruments intently, at times murmuring the reading aloud—"Pulse fluctuating . . . breathing shallower . . . blood pressure lowering." Dr. Soames winced each time, knowing that his time for saving his patient was drawing shorter. But he thought he could win this race against death.

Overhead hung the operating spotlight, shining its intense beams downward on the small group of figures around the operating table. The rest of the room was in comparative gloom.

Lynne Carlyle, on her way down the corridor, paused to glance through the large window that looked in upon the scene. Suddenly, she stopped. One of the nurses had drawn back in alarm, a hand at her mouth to choke off a forbidden scream. The stand-by doctor frowned fiercely at her above his mouth mask, wondering what was wrong with the girl. It was very nearly a crime for any nurse at an operation to go squeamish, as if she couldn't stand the

sight of blood or the snicking sound of a sharp instrument cutting through living flesh.

But then the stand-by doctor noticed her staring at the further wall with eyes wide open in some nameless terror. He turned that way. He almost gasped, but checked himself, while beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. The young nurse stood paralyzed with a scalpel in her hand. Surgical nurses are trained to never let *anything* disturb them during a critical operation, but this was her first experience, as part of her training, with a doctor actually performing on a patient.

"Hand that scalpel to me," snapped Dr. Soames. "Hurry! The time limit is short now. . . ."

But the young nurse kept staring rigidly at the gyrating shadow of horror and the scalpel fell from her nerveless fingers. The loud clink on the tiled floor made them all jump. Realizing something was wrong with the girl, Dr. Soames himself twisted his face and then saw the nerve-shaking black apparition on the wall. Momentarily, his eyes showed astonished shock. But as a veteran surgeon, he was steeled to battle off any emotion that might interfere with his work.

He jerked his head at the senior nurse, who had been standing by, and she darted to the sterilizer, snatched up another scalpel, and handed it to him. Conquering a slight tremor in his hands, Dr. Soames bent over the patient with the new scalpel. Even though it was oversized, he compressed his lips and went back to work.

But the anesthetist now saw the black shadow, too. Not as rigidly disciplined as the doctor in suppressing emotion, his hands froze on the valves and controls for the oxygen and the anesthetic gases. With an effort, he ripped his bulging eyes away from the giant black shape cast menacingly on the wall, turning back to his controls with trembling fingers.

The young nurse, shouldered aside by the senior nurse, put her hands to her face, but could not blot out what she saw on the wall.

Distorted, cape billowing, clawlike hands stretched out,

the fearsome black form made her cringe involuntarily. It was uncanny, hellish, a frightful wraith from the unknown. Glimpsing the grotesque shadow and the tableau of fear-stricken watchers, Lynne Carlyle pressed the button for the sliding door to silently open. Running up, she grasped the arm of the senior nurse, whose face was pale and drawn. She knew it was against all rules . . . she should have been sterile . . . but something had to be done.

"Keep going," Lynne whispered tensely. The senior nurse handed Dr. Soames a suture as he called for it hoarsely. Lynne noticed that he was working more slowly than usual, even though he resolutely kept from glancing at the unearthly black shadow dancing on the wall.

Lynne also shook the anesthetist, who sat white-faced. "Pull yourself together and give readings," she commanded in a low voice.

Guiltily, the anesthetist turned to his dial readings. His eyes reflected an even greater shock as he saw that the rhythmic cardiac wave pattern on the glowing screen had died away to nothingness.

"Dr. Soames," he breathed hoarsely, "the patient is . . . dead."

Dr. Soames slowly straightened up, his face stunned. Then rage spread over his features and he shook a fist at the mocking shadow on the wall as if something had snapped inside him.

"You killed him," he snarled. "You caused a fatal delay in the operation with that dropped scalpel, and slowed us all down. It's your fault, you . . . you fiend out of hell!"

He was practically screeching now and Lynne hastily jabbed her elbow in the young stand-by doctor's ribs. He nodded, swiftly filled a hypodermic from the bedside cabinet, and came up behind Dr. Soames who was yelling now like a madman. A jab into his upper arm and Dr. Soames almost immediately went limp, falling back into the young doctor's arms. The older doctor would wake up in the psychiatric ward, where his tortured mind would be healed without guilt for a patient who might have lived—but didn't.

Despite a carefully built image in the public mind, doctors are not all steel-nerved humans without emotion, thought Lynne. Not when confronted by a terrifying shadow that had ushered in another shadow—of death.

Lynne was now running down the corridor to the first exit that led to the outside steel crosswalk between the wards of this giant hospital. But she knew she would be too late to see what *thing* had again utilized moonlight to cast its shadow into the operating amphitheater at the crucial moment. This heartless event had cast the die and consigned the patient to the morgue instead of the post-operative recuperating room.

Lynne looked around and then below, biting her lip in exasperation. She saw nothing—nothing. But then by inspiration she glanced upward, just in time to see a caped and cowed figure swing over the flat roof edge ten stories higher and start drawing up a thin plastic rope.

So that's how he had done it! Swinging daringly like an acrobat from a long transparent rope, before the window he had chosen, always with the moon back of him to cast his magnified shadow within.

Then the shadow terror was *human!* And he had no black-magic powers. Up to that point, Lynne had not known what to think. The eerie black form on the walls had seemed like something out of hell, or another occult dimension, but hardly of earth. Some of the nurses had spread the rumor that the new hospital, strange as it seemed, was *haunted*.

Haunted, yes, but by some agile human being with a twisted mind, thought Lynne Carlyle. She wanted to tell her story to the administrator of Clinic Center, but he was away at the time and would not be back for a day or two.

No clock bonged, but all the electric clocks showed the hour of midnight, the next evening. Lynne Carlyle was now at her own job, as lab technician. Actually, she was more than that—assistant to a research medical scientist. When Clinic Center had opened up, the surgeon she had worked with had switched to medical research. He was a Ph.D. in biology as well as a doctor of medicine.

The shadow terror had given her heart fibrillations of fear. Her lab boss also made her heart beat erratically, but for quite a different and more pleasurable reason. Tall and rugged, he gave her that little-boy smile that made every gland in her body do flip-flops. She had to turn her eyes away so he wouldn't see how they shone.

Dr. Quentin Q. Quaine—so named by sagely impish young parents who wanted him to have a distinctive set of initials nobody else had—stood tall and rugged. All-American college football champ . . . county tennis title holder . . . Olympic runner-up in the decathlon . . . able canoeist, mountain climber, gym star. Nobody would suspect that this muscular machine also had even greater muscles between his ears. The result—member of a half-dozen medical societies, consultant for pharmaceutical labs throughout the country, honorary degrees and awards from hospital associations around the world, and Chief of Advanced Curative Research here at Clinic Center.

Quaine was the handsomest man on earth—at least in the eyes of his female beholder. Actually, his once-broken nose had a slight twist to it. His mouth was narrow, out of phase with his long face and ample ears. His red-brown hair—“like tarnished copper” in his own phrase—was cut long in the new-age style, curling uncut just above his shoulders in back, in front running as long sideburns to join his cheek beard and Fu Manchu mustache. Oddly enough, his beard and mustache were a different shade, more golden than red-brown—“like fool's gold” he insisted, as it lacked the luster or tone of gold itself.

Strangely, Quaine did not impress people as forceful or dynamic, in keeping with his strong body and stronger mind. He was quiet, almost meek. His large steady eyes, blue as the sky and sea combined, were often a bit humble, especially when some awesome breakthrough came in his work.

“Tired, Miss Carlyle?” he queried, turning his eyes on her. But she knew he didn't really see her, as she was just a convenient and efficient aide. He had never called her Lynne and maybe half the time he wasn't aware of

whether she was male or female. He was totally lost in his work. And completely lost to her?

Lynne shook such thoughts out of her head. "Listen, Dr. Quaine. I saw the so-called shadow terror twice, and found out the gimmick for his 'mysterious' appearances." She related her story. Quaine listened politely, but no change of expression came over his face.

"The point is," concluded Lynne, "that he is a man, not a wraith. But why is he terrorizing Clinic Center?"

He stared at her blankly and she repeated the question.

"I'm sure I don't know, Miss Carlyle," he said absently. "Maybe some teenager playing pranks."

Lynne was infuriated. She was sure he had heard little of what she said and hadn't caught any of the horror that had half the place jittery by now.

"Back to work," said Quaine, practically. "We should be through with distillation number five within an hour."

Lynne rolled her eyes upward and resignedly began checking the complicated glass maze of the distillation unit. At the end was a small beaker into which a thick green liquid dripped slowly. "Distillation number six," she announced, "should give us the pure product for crystallization."

Quaine permitted a tiny amount of enthusiasm to enter his voice. "Hopefully, we'll get enough of Substance X for human tests. If it works the way it did with the test animals. . . ."

"Then you'll get an award for something almost equal to a cancer cure," predicted Lynne enthusiastically. "Substance X will lead to a dozen different ways of treating major human ills of the central nervous system."

"An area never conquered before," Quaine said, nodding.

Lynne went back to her supervision of the distillation process. A shadow fell across the final beaker and its wondrous green liquid. The girl frowned, wondering if the soft fluorescent light over the lab bench was burning out.

She glanced up. With all her might, she suppressed the scream that almost exploded from her throat. She merely

plucked at Quaine's arm and pointed at the far wall of the big lab.

Across it danced the shadow terror, with his usual acrobatics. Lynne could vaguely see now the transparent nylon rope he used, through which the moonlight shone, hiding the fact that it was the support that enabled him to dangle in front of windows.

Quaine actually made a surprised grunt. That was equivalent to any other man shouting violently or a woman screeching her head off.

"Quick," Lynne snapped. "I can guess where he's dangling from his rope. Follow me."

Quaine responded instantly, turning from a preoccupied researcher into a man of action, galvanized by the mystery shadow. He pounded down the hall at Lynne's heels. She took the curving corridor that skirted one edge of their lab. As she came to a heavy door marked EXIT, Quaine pushed her aside and yanked it wide open, dashing out into the cool night air.

Lynne was right behind him as he glanced up. They saw a misshapen black form agilely climbing up the thin but strong plastic rope.

"So that's the scoundrel," growled Quaine. He put his head down and sprinted toward the window of his lab where the end of the rope dangled. Just as he grabbed for it, it was yanked up out of his reach. Quaine muttered a curse.

"He reached the roof in time to pull up the rope," said Lynne breathlessly. "But if we rush up there, maybe we can trap him."

Quaine was already darting into the building again. "Who is 'him'?"

Lynne shook her head. "Nobody knows. But if we once catch or expose him, the shadow terror will be gone and we'll have peace and quiet again in Clinic Center. Dr. Quaine, the elevators are too slow. . . ."

"I know," said Quaine, already pulling open the door marked EMERGENCY STAIRS. Taking her soft hand firmly in his, Quaine began bounding up the stairs three



at a time. Lynne breathlessly felt as if she was flying, her feet hardly touching the stairs. This was Quaine the athlete, letting go with his high-horsepower muscles. Nobody would have guessed that five minutes before he had been owlishly peering at a green serum and using his high-powered mind.

Since their lab was on the eighth floor, they only had two floors to go. Panting somewhat, Quaine pulled the girl to the steel ladder that led up through a roof trap door, used by repairmen. They scrambled up. Quaine gave a groan. "The trap door is locked, naturally, and we can't get the key without wasting time."

"Oh, Quentin," Lynne said, forgetting to be formal. "Then we're blocked off from the roof."

"Who says?" grunted Quaine, bracing his feet on the steel rungs and then thrusting his broad shoulders upward in one mighty heave. The lock burst with a loud report and the trap door flapped open violently, nearly torn off its hinges.

Lynne had only a moment to admire this feat, then she was yanked up by a strong hand. They now stood on the flat roof of this wing of the pentagonal clinic, which was like a wheel with five spokes and no rim. The sky was dark with roiling black clouds and the moon was now hidden. Waiting for their eyes to adjust to the dimness, they began searching the roof's expanse slowly, peering behind each ventilation shaft, TV-aerial installation, and other structures. Quaine had his body tensed, ready to spring at any huddled form or avoid any sudden thrust with some weapon like a knife or club.

But there seemed no sign of their quarry at all. Quaine waved his hand, shrugging. "There are a dozen ways a man can leave a roof—by the elevator housings, ventilators air-conditioner vents, and what-not. I'm afraid he got away—"

"No—look!" interrupted the girl tensely, pointing at one edge of the long roof. "There he is. But he's going to the next roof by—*walking on air!*"

It was a weird sight that Quaine saw as he jerked

around. The caped and cowed figure was halfway between the two roofs, moving along like a tightrope walker. Only there was nothing but thin air under him!

Lynne shivered from more than the chill night air. Were they dealing after all with some uncanny supernatural menace, as most of the nurses believed?

"Is he some evil being," whispered Lynne, "from another dimension? Or from some unknown occult realm?"

Quaine glanced at her, startled. Then he ran forward to the edge of the roof nearest to the mystery figure, just in time to see him about a hundred feet away, reaching the other roof of the Clinic's next wing. The black-clad form turned and waved mockingly at them. Then he melted into the shadows of his roof. Only a wild laugh came back to them, a laugh that seemed to come from no human throat.

Lynne shivered again. "Walking on air . . . levitation . . . those *are* supernatural powers."

But Quaine was busily using his hands around a stanchion holding a guy-wire to a TV aerial. He held forth something that touched Lynne's hand. "Does a supernatural creature require a nylon rope to walk on air? We didn't think of that at first, but he simply threw a loop at one end of his rope to some support on the other roof, tied it fast here on this roof, then walked across the taut rope."

Lynne sagged against him in relief. "Of course, how simple. I was being silly about him using black magic or whatever." Then she stiffened again. "But even if he's human, he has to be stopped from playing his role as the shadow terror or he'll turn Clinic Center into a house of horror!"

## Chapter 2

"Yes, Dr. Endersby," nodded Lynne. "The evidence of the nylon rope indicated he is some human who for unknown reasons is terrorizing Clinic Center."

"Then the shadow terror must be stopped." It was the next day and the clinic's administrator had listened to Lynne's full story in growing dismay. He had been pacing the floor but now he sat behind his desk and punched a button of his intercom.

"Yes, sir?" came his secretary's crisp voice.

"Get me the sheriff," barked Dr. Endersby. "Sheriff Anton Blaine."

After the connection was made, the chief of Clinic Center spoke rapidly and firmly into the phone. "Yes, sheriff. I said full coverage at night of the clinic's grounds. A man at each entrance or exit, if possible. Send every man you can spare, please."

Dr. Endersby hung up and smiled confidently at Lynne Carlyle. "If the shadow terror, whoever he is, dares return tonight, he'll be caught. Thank you, Miss Carlyle, for alerting me before this menacing madman demoralized the whole place."

Lynne left with mixed feelings. Would a staff of well-trained plainclothes guards be able to seize the unknown culprit? Or was he too clever to be caught? Lynne thought of the roof episode and shook her head. What would happen tonight, if the shadow terror showed up again?

The sky was clear for a change. But a night haze had arisen and a growing mist began to shroud the giant clinic.

A huge statue of Hippocrates stood on the main lawn, with one arm upraised as though administering the Hippocratic oath that all doctors swear to.

In the marble statue's shadow lurked the shadow of a man, muttering low curses at the mist rolling in. Constable Emory of the sheriff's staff was in plainclothes, guarding this main entrance to the Clinic. Other men were scattered over the grounds on all sides, keeping sharp watch for any unauthorized intruder.

Doctors and nurses sometimes emerged or entered at the floodlighted main entrance, and once an ambulance careened around the curved driveway, siren screaming. But it was dark where Constable Emory stood. Still, he had keen eyes and was not too disturbed by the haze, which was not nearly as bad as real fog. His glance kept darting on all sides of the statue, alert for any dark, moving form.

Constable Emory forgot to look up—up at the top of the statue. A black-caped figure huddled there, between the giant stone head and the upraised arm. Then, with a silent chuckle, the figure braced its back against the stone head and thrust his feet toward the stone arm. Leg muscles tightened as he applied steady pressure.

Finally, there was a sharp crack. The great stone arm, yards long, plunged down—right where Constable Emory stood at the moment. Emory had glanced up at the sharp sound and threw himself aside, but not far enough. The hard hand of the statue struck him in the back with the force of a piledriver. Emory sank unconscious to the ground.

The black figure on top of the statue stared down as if in triumph at the scene of the stone arm, now broken in several pieces, with the constable's limp form sprawled nearby. The caped figure stood erect, chuckling horribly, but not too loudly.

"So they thought they could keep me away?" he chortled. "The shadow terror will strike again!"

He stood gloatingly with the wind blowing his cape, basking in the thought that the way now lay open for him

to creep to the Clinic. His gaze swept over the lighted windows; he would choose one where he could perform his acrobatics and chill the hearts of those within.

But the motionless human monster did not know that from one lighted window a pair of beige-brown eyes were staring out at him. Lynne Carlyle, on her way down the hall, had heard that sharp crack of breaking stone, even though muffled by distance and the misty air. Glancing out, her eyes had riveted on the statue with a missing arm.

Now, as the moonbeams shone down and the wind partially cleared away the mists, she had a clear view of the black form on top of the statue. As the wind whipped the cape and exposed most of the figure, Lynne noticed he was oddly short, with legs and arms seemingly too long for the body. Then she choked as the flapping cape revealed the contours of its back.

"Why, he's a *hunchback!*" she murmured aloud in stunned surprise. Memories clicked in her mind. Her thoughts funneled back into the past and came to focus, forcing a loud gasp from her lips. "Good Lord! Could he be—Renolf LeClaire, the architect who had that unfortunate accident?"

Lynne could not see that the hunchback, with his cape wildly blowing in the wind, had a bitter expression on his face as he clambered down the statue. He toed the unconscious form of the sheriff's guard with a malicious grin, then melted into the shadowy mists.

Moments later he had reached the Clinic. With a swift glance on all sides to see that he was unobserved, he brought out an overloaded key ring and silently opened a ground-floor door marked—FURNACE ROOM. He padded down a corridor and skirted past the furnace room where the giant boilers were tended by two engineers.

Another key unlocked a closet door in which a supply of tools were kept for furnace repairs. No one was there. Now he leaped up onto a workbench from which he was able to reach the ceiling of the small room. One push upward and a trap door swung away. Using his powerful

arms, the hunchback swung up through the opening. He closed the trap door, grinning. He was sealed off now from the rest of the busy place.

And that was why the guards, to whom Lynne Carlyle had told her story about the hunchback on the statue, searched in vain. There was no sign of the culprit, no trail to follow.

Before the hunchback stretched a long dark passageway that seemed to have no end. Various electrical cables and bunched wires were strung along this passageway. Nobody except the electricians called in for an occasional repair of the Clinic's power system knew that this passageway meandered through the five wings of the pentagonal structure. It gave access to any part of the huge place.

And why shouldn't the hunchback know of this "secret" passageway? Hadn't he, after all, been the designer of Clinic Center, reputed in architectural circles as one of the most unique structures ever built? But there was no triumph or pride in the hunchback's face over this. Only bitterness. . . .

He sat down on an empty drum of electrical wiring and his thoughts twisted themselves back through the corridors of his memory—back to that fateful day almost a year ago.

He had stood tall and straight then, a man in his early thirties, with wavy brown hair, a sensitive face, and an athletic build.

Renolf LeClaire had already made his mark as one of the top new architects of the time. He had won the coveted assignment to design the new Clinic Center. On this day in the past, he stepped from his parked car and stared in excitement at the skeletal framework now being fleshed out with side walls and flooring. The pentagonal Clinic with its golden central dome would be the crowning achievement of his career and make him world-famous.

Out of the car with him stepped a girl whose form was flawless and whose clothing starkly emphasized her sexiness. She clung to his arm, awed at the structure being built.

"Oh, sweetie," she said in her husky voice, "it's magnificent! Just as *you* are, dear boy."

Renolf was not particularly flattered. Many girls had said that or something similar. He had the pick of all those women who were drawn to his ruggedly handsome features and the graceful power of his lean figure.

He pulled loose from her arm. "Listen, Francie. Stay here while I take a closer look at things."

"Can't I come along, sugar?"

"No. No women allowed beyond the ropes. It's a rule of the construction company."

"You mean, it's dangerous?"

Renolf walked on, throwing a brief smile over his shoulder. He came to the ropes that cordoned off the construction area. Several visitors were curtly told by a guard that no one was allowed in that area. As Renolf approached, the guard held up an imperious hand. "Hey, you. Keep off, the sign says. Can't you read—?" He broke off apologetically. "Oh, Mr. LeClaire. I—I didn't recognize you at first. Of course, you can go on." He lifted the ropes so that Renolf could slip under.

Renolf strode forward and now the loud roar of machinery beat around him. Growling bulldozers, clanking cranes, whining generators, staccato rivet-hammers, the shouts of workmen—the usual din of any construction site.

Renolf stepped close enough to see where workmen were putting up aluminum side-paneling over the steel-and-concrete framework. It already foretold the gleaming glory that Clinic Center was to be. Renolf smiled in satisfaction, drinking in the army of workmen making the vision in his architectural dream come true.

Renolf did not notice the crane cab nearby, its cable singing as it lowered its scoop to take in another load of clawed dirt to gouge out the roomy basement quarters. The claws bit into clay and soil and the huge bucket filled. Then it swung up into the air and the cab began to turn to deliver the load to a waiting truck.

Renolf was between the crane cab and the truck. The bucket swung over him some twenty feet high. Then it happened—the awful sound of a frayed cable snapping

apart. A hoarse yell of warning came from the crane operator.

Renolf had no time to look upward or even leap aside. The giant bucket of dirt tumbled down too swiftly for him to react. Renolf would have been crushed flat if he hadn't at least staggered back in sudden alarm, realizing his danger from the menacing shadow that suddenly grew around him, edged with steel teeth.

Only the clawed end of the scoop struck him on the back, high on his shoulders. Renolf momentarily felt as if his body were being hammered down into the ground. He felt bones give way within him, all down his back. Then everything turned black.

He woke up in the hospital. One portion of the north-east wing had been finished and set up as a test for surgery equipment. The first thing his eyes saw was a white-clad nurse's face, smiling down sweetly at him. Her beige-brown eyes were tender and compassionate.

"How do you feel, Mr. LeClaire?" she asked perfunctorily.

He didn't answer, still taking in her lovely face, the kind he had dreamed about along with his architectural visions of the small mansion he would build someday, cozy as a cottage. It would be for a girl, built by the great architect, a girl with all the stately beauty of his buildings—inside and out.

And there she was now, right before his eyes. If love at first sight had been a pure fiction before, it had happened now for real, thought Renolf. His eyes fastened on her as she checked medicine bottles, took his pulse and temperature, and marked a chart.

There was no doubt of it. She was the Taj Mahal of all women, the finest flesh-and-blood construction he had ever seen, and radiating a golden personality that went with it.

"Aches and pains?" she said sympathetically.

"Not too many," said Renolf, speaking for the first time. He found his voice scratchy and weak, not the ringing baritone he had always had. "How long have I been here since the—uh—accident?"



"Three days, Mr. LeClaire. You were kept under sedation and were operated upon by Dr. Quentin Quaine, our foremost surgeon."

"Operation?" Renolf frowned, uneasily. "On what, or where?"

The nurse took a moment before answering. "The doctor will explain in a week, when you're first allowed to get out of bed. You'll be all right—"

She broke off for some reason and went to the door. She turned once and smiled at him cheerfully—and sadly, it seemed to Renolf. When she had gone, Renolf felt his inner uneasiness growing. Vague feelings and impressions flitted across his mind. Why did his back ache so? Why did his lungs feel *constricted* somehow? And why did his feet, under the blankets, seem so *close* to him?

Probably his blurred eyesight from the many drugs they had given him.

But something else bothered Renolf even more. He quickly became aware of the glances the nurse stole at Dr. Quaine whenever he came in to examine his patient. Looks of admiration? No, more than that. Was Lynne Carlyle in love with her doctor?

Renolf set his lips in determination. There was no reciprocal reaction from the tall doctor. He treated her quite impersonally, almost absent-mindedly. It takes two to tango, thought Renolf, conjuring up an old cliché. If Lynne was falling for a man who couldn't see her for dust, then Renolf would take over once he was out of the hospital. With the way most women fell under his spell, Renolf had no fear of failure. He would make her forget that pill-pusher in short order. He would get her to say "yes." To marriage, that is, not a sordid affair.

Renolf was almost shocked at the thought. This was the first girl who had broken down his resistance to matrimony—all at his first glance of her.

Renolf drifted into sleep, impatient for the day when he could be released from the hospital.

A few days later, Renolf heard the low voices of Dr. Quaine and nurse Lynne outside his door. Did the doctor only ignore the girl in the presence of others, but talk

sweet nonsense when alone with her? Renolf's sharp worry eased off as he managed to pick up their words by straining his ears.

"That malpractice suit against me is coming to court next month," Dr. Quaine remarked, biting off his words.

"Oh, people have taken to yelling malpractice at the drop of a hat," came Lynne's calm voice. "Unscrupulous lawyers have fanned it into a blaze. Doctors—and good ones—are being sued right and left. That woman can't possibly prove that your spinal operation left her with one weak leg. If she'd just stand straight and exercise, she'd be normal in two weeks. It's purely psychosomatic with her."

"I know," agreed Quaine. "But hell hath no fury greater than a neurotic woman with a fixed idea. Well, let's forget it for now. Our biggest problem right now is—" he must have jerked his thumb at Renolf's door—"how to get him to *accept* . . ." The rest became a low mutter that Renolf couldn't pick up clearly.

He puzzled over it, his worry gathering force. Yet he didn't know what to really worry about. The next day, Dr. Quaine came in with his nurse, Lynne Carlyle. The big doctor very slowly, almost hesitantly, began to pull the covers down, speaking all the while.

Renolf caught only a few words . . . "must understand, LeClaire . . . life at stake . . . had to do the only thing possible . . . remember, crushing weight fell on you . . . human bones are fragile compared to steel . . . your spine . . . driven down. . . ."

Covers off, the doctor and nurse helped Renolf sit up, then swing his legs over the edge of the bed.

"Stand up," commanded Dr. Quaine. "Do it slowly."

Gingerly, Renolf tried his legs, which seemed rubbery. But after a moment, he was able to slowly start standing up, helped by the other two.

Renolf grunted. "Why can't I get all the way up on my legs?"

"You are," said Quaine quietly.

Renolf stared at him, startled. Quaine towered over him like a giant. "Some kind of joke, doc? I'm as tall as

you." He turned to the nurse, whose face was cast in a rigid mold as if she were forcing herself to show no feelings. "Why, I can't even look at the nurse at eye level. Get me up off my knees. . . ."

But even as he said it, sweat broke out on Renolf's brow. He could feel his feet flat on the floor. He wasn't on his knees. Silently, Dr. Quaine motioned at a full-length mirror the nurse had uncovered.

Renolf stared at his reflection in consternation that swiftly turned to shocked disbelief. "That has to be a funny mirror . . . from some amusement park!" he choked out. "Makes me look like my arms and legs are too long . . . and my body, my torso, all scrunched up. No, it can't be. . . ."

Slowly he had turned to see a profile of his body. His horrified eyes saw the big bulge under his hospital gown, sticking out ludicrously.

"So that's it," he gasped. "I'm a—a HUNCHBACK!"

## Chapter 3

A black purgatory filled Renolf LeClaire's mind in the following days during his convalescence. They had removed the mirror, but that didn't help any. Two vivid images floated in his mind. One was of himself as he had been only a few weeks ago—tall, straight, handsome. The other was of his new form—squat, misshapen, hunch-backed. He groaned in misery.

Even his face had been scarred, he had noticed during his glimpse in the mirror. The wounds had already healed, but left their imprint in ugly scars across his cheek and forehead. His upper lip, too, was twisted downward at one corner and his left ear looked crumpled. His broken nose had healed crookedly, and one eyelid was missing, giving his left eye a gruesome protruding look. His scalp had also been ripped open, apparently, and tufts of dark hair were growing haphazardly. He cursed bitterly, staring at his reflection in the shiny metal surface of his bedside cabinet.

He was not only a freak, but an ugly one.

"You'll be given a plastic surgery job too," came a sympathetic voice behind him. LeClaire whirled and saw Lynne Carlyle, smiling. "Dr. Peabody, our expert in facial repairs, will do the job. And after he's done, your face will look like it was before."

"But my body never will!" snapped LeClaire. "Nobody can repair my hump and stretch me out into a normal-sized man, can they?"

Lynne dropped her eyes, not attempting any answer.

Then she smiled brightly. "I really came to tell you that you have a visitor. We didn't allow them until now."

She stepped aside and for the first time, LeClaire noticed the other girl behind her. She was tall and elegantly formed with large blue eyes and a piquant face. She was dressed rather flashily and her silky black hair was stylishly correct.

"Elaine!" said LeClaire explosively. His hands flew to cover his damaged face. "Don't look at me. What did you come here for?"

"Why . . . uh . . . to see how you were. . . ."

"To see what I *looked* like, you mean," returned LeClaire harshly, peering between his fingers with his one enlarged eye. "To see if what you had heard was true—that the operation turned me into a . . . a freak!"

The girl flushed in humiliation. She hardly knew what to say. Lynne, who had pretended to be busy with medicine bottles, gave her a swift glance of pity. Lynne tried to say something but LeClaire snapped, "You stay out of this." Then he turned back to the visitor.

"Go away," he groaned, still with his hands before his face.

But the girl resolutely took a step forward. "Please, Renolf," she said in a small voice. "We were good friends—*are*, I mean, and. . . ."

"No, you meant *were*," hissed LeClaire savagely. "Here, take a good look." He pulled his hands away from his face, with a leer that made him look doubly grotesque. The girl could not suppress a gasp.

"Would you go dancing with me now, Elaine?" pursued LeClaire pitilessly. He sat up in bed, hurling the cover aside, and twisted his body around. "And see? My hump. Go back and tell them all that I'm not a man any more, but a monster!"

The girl jerked as if lashed by a whip.

"Go and tell all my friends!" raged LeClaire. "And tell them I don't want any more visitors. Get out!"

The girl, deathly pale, first extended a hand toward him. Then, with a whimper, she turned and fled from the room. Her sobs could be heard from the hall.

Lynne paused a long moment, as LeClaire fell back in his bed, as if exhausted.

"Why are you taking it out on your friends?" she finally asked quietly. "It took more courage for her to come and see you than for you to let her see your condition. Your other friends will show up too, your real friends. . . ."

"I told you," said LeClaire in a low, deadly voice. "No more visitors—none. Not one. I forbid it."

"But—" began Lynne, then thought better of opposing him. She tried another tack, keeping her voice casual. "Was that girl, Elaine, anything special to you? Fiancée, perhaps?"

First, she thought he would turn on her, as his head snapped around. But his furious anger seemed drained out of him, leaving a hollow listlessness. "No, just a girlfriend. I had many, you know—" He broke off abruptly as if to shut that out of his mind.

His eyes were on her now and Lynne felt uncomfortable. She wanted to go, but she felt as if he had something more to say.

"Of all the attractive girls I've known through the years," he blurted out suddenly, "I've never really fallen in love . . . until now . . . with you."

The nurse glanced at him, startled. "Me?"

"Yes, you." The words tumbled out now, pent up within him. "I fell in love with you from the first moment I saw you. That was before . . . before I knew the results of the operation." He rushed on, as if afraid of being interrupted. "Now I'm an ugly hunchback that no woman would want. And that means . . . I can never have you." His voice held agony at the end.

"I . . . I'm sorry," breathed Lynne, hardly knowing what to say. "But look," she said more firmly, "ugly is only a relative word." She tried not to sound like a preaching Pollyanna as she went on. "How a person looks outwardly doesn't count that much."

"Sure, sure, I know," interposed LeClaire, with a sarcastic edge to his tone. "Inside, I'm still the brilliant architect with a winning personality. Witty, suave, debonair . . . bah!"

"But you mustn't allow yourself to be twisted by this," said Lynne earnestly, putting a soft hand on his shoulder: "You can still be a great architect—admired, respected."

"And shunned," interrupted LeClaire, shaking off her hand. "Freaks don't hold friends."

"You're looking at the worst," persisted the girl. "You must adjust to your new condition. . . ."

"Adjust? Adjust?" snarled LeClaire. "Adjust to the curious stares of people I pass on the street? To kids hooting at me and calling me what I am—a hunchback? To the revulsion in women's eyes . . . like in yours?"

Lynne tried to protest, but LeClaire went right on, half-bitterly, half-sadly. "You're the only woman I could ever care about. But how can I be a rival to Dr. Quaine?"

Lynne stiffened and knew her ears had turned red. "Dr. Quaine?" she said after a moment, sighing. "He doesn't even know I'm alive."

"He will someday," retorted LeClaire, with a snort. "Unless he's a fool. He'll have you, the woman I love."

Lynne winced. LeClaire had climbed out of bed, in his hospital gown, to pace the floor. He went on in a voice more hollow than before. "And me? My future will consist mostly of avoiding mirrors, so I can't see the hump on my back."

"Stop it, LeClaire!" came a firm masculine voice. Dr. Quaine had come in, hearing his last words. "Self-pity will get you nowhere if you expect to live a decent life despite your handicap."

LeClaire whirled, hatred twisting his face. "You should talk—you *quack!*"

Quaine recoiled slightly, as if he had been slapped.

"Yes, quack," repeated LeClaire with a hiss. "You *bungled* my operation, that's what you did!"

Quaine winced again.

Lynne spoke up for him quietly. "Dr. Quaine can get another surgeon—or three or four if you wish—who can examine the reports and check the X-rays. They will verify that the only operation possible, to save your life, was the one Dr. Quaine performed. They—"

"Pah," sneered LeClaire. "Everyone knows how doc-

tors stick together, backing up each other's mistakes with lies. And besides," he went on accusingly, "I heard about that malpractice suit one woman brought against you. That proves you're incompetent and a butcher at the operating table."

"Don't say such things," burst in Lynne, shocked "That woman will lose the suit because Dr. Quaine did nothing wrong. Even the best doctor in the world can be hauled into court by a stubborn, misguided patient."

"Don't defend him," snarled LeClaire. "People don't sue for the fun of it. And if he slipped with one patient, he can with another." He swung about to face Quaine squarely, looking up into his face. "My career is ruined. My life is ruined. My body is ruined. And you're to blame for it all, Dr. Quentin Quack. *Your bad surgery made me a hunchback.*"

Quaine showed no reaction except a twitch of his lips. To Lynne, he said quietly, "All the more reason for him to see Dr. Saunders tomorrow, Miss Carlyle. See that he is ready."

"Who is Dr. Saunders? The plastic surgeon?" LeClaire went on fiercely. "What good will it do to patch up my face when nobody can patch up my hump?"

"Dr. Saunders is not a cosmetic surgeon," said Quaine slowly. "He's a psychiatrist."

LeClaire stared, new anger rising in his face. "Now my mind has to be repaired too, eh? You think I'm going mad from brooding too much, is that it?"

"Nothing personal, LeClaire. Even amputees are sent to the psychiatric ward," explained Quaine patiently. "A missing arm or leg is also a shock. They must be helped to adjust to their new condition and adopt a positive viewpoint. It's really hospital routine to send you to Dr. Saunders. Be ready tomorrow morning. Nurse, come along."

Quaine turned on his heel and left.

"It's for your own good," said Lynne. With a compassionate smile for the grotesque little man, she went out, softly closing the door behind her.

As Quaine and Lynne walked slowly down the corridor, the girl related the whole episode about the visitor,



but left out what LeClaire had said later to her. "He's a bad case," she finished, shaking her head. "He's sensitive and imaginative enough to foresee how his life will change drastically. He's angry, frustrated, and terribly bitter. Has he no relatives who might come and help him bridge the gap between his former life and the new future he'll face?"

"No close relatives," said Quaine, gloomily. "I checked into his background rather thoroughly, knowing he had a difficult adjustment to make."

Quaine turned into his private office, waving Lynne to a chair. Then he pulled open a drawer of his desk and took out a folder, opening it. He picked up papers and glanced over them.

"LeClaire, Renolf. Age thirty-three. Never married. Parents both died when he was a child of five. They died horribly in an automobile accident, when the car overturned and caught fire. Renolf was thrown clear and saw it all."

Lynne shuddered, sensing already why LeClaire's reactions were so unbalanced, or at least abnormal.

Quaine went on. "No grandparents alive. No uncles or aunts, a cousin or two on the mother's side, whom he has never met. Renolf was thus placed in an orphanage. His record there was one of aloofness and antagonism toward the other children. But he did well in studies and showed an early aptitude for drawing pictures."

Quaine shuffled the papers and sorted out another one. "He was taken into a foster home at the age of twelve, for possible adoption which never took place. The woman was kind to him, but the man was a brute who often beat up the boy for no reason. He was not a drunkard and thus the woman covered up the cruelty and the boy was never taken away from him."

Worse and worse, thought Lynne. A human psyche warped by tragedy and then cruelty.

"Renolf ran away from that home at age sixteen. He seemed to disappear. The authorities finally traced him, but by then he was eighteen and free, according to the law in that state."

Quaine looked up. "Clinic Center has many sources of

information, since some patients turn out to be criminals, psychopaths, patients with a past, disturbed personalities, and so on. When I put in my request for full coverage of LeClaire, it was quietly done."

Quaine went back to his sheets. "But LeClaire did not, as some youths might have, turn criminal or become a drifter. Driven by some inner resolve, he worked and finished high school in night classes. Then he went to a college that offered a degree in architecture and graduated with high honors. He showed exceptional talent and was paid well in his first job, enough so that with his savings he could open his own office at age twenty-six."

Quaine put down the papers. "From then on, his background is pretty well known from newspaper and magazine write-ups. He rose like a skyrocket as a daring avant-garde architect and was sought after for his services. He gained nationwide fame and money poured in."

"That's it," said Quaine, closing the folder.

"No, that's not it!" snapped Lynne, her eyes somber. "At the height of his career, the accident happened which changed him physically, and drastically, into a hunchback. For a man in the limelight, and popular with beautiful women, that was the worst possible blow."

"Yes, I know, I know," agreed Quaine, his long face sober and his blue eyes dull. "The deformity to his body is nothing compared to the deformity that might occur to his psyche. I just hope Dr. Saunders and his staff can straighten out his mind, if not his body. It's already plain that there has been mental damage. . . ." Quaine paused.

"Calling you a quack, you mean," Lynne said for him. She went on half-angrily. "How could anyone say that of you with your record? I felt like giving LeClaire, regardless of his troubles, a good piece of my mind, and—"

Lynne stopped, aware that she was speaking much more passionately than she should have. And that she was defending him not just because he was a great doctor, but also a wonderful man.

Quaine had glanced at her quizzically. But then he said mildly, "Thank you, Miss Carlyle, for your loyalty."

Loyalty? Lynne felt herself collapsing inside. Was it hopeless for Dr. Quaine ever to know her feelings or to respond to them in like form? Lynne knew his life story by heart. Good home, money, college. Then, as if answering a call, medical school and a single-minded devotion to the art of healing. Once he had begun his career as a master surgeon, with medical research on the side, his social life was practically nil.

He had never been known to date a nurse or be seen with any other woman. Lynne didn't know whether to be glad or sorry about that. On the one hand, it meant she had a clear field unless, on the other hand, he was already married for life—to his work.

She started, realizing Quaine had been talking.

"I was saying, Miss Carlyle, be sure to have Renolf Le-Claire in Dr. Saunders' office by eight o'clock in the morning."

Lynne nodded. "He should be sleeping now, getting a good rest."

## Chapter 4

But neither of them knew that their patient did not sleep at all as the night wore on. His mind was too busy—planning his escape. Stay to see a head shrinker and have his psyche operated on? Not him. He'd lose out on the plastic-surgery deal, but he could get that taken care of himself if he wanted.

*Out! I want to get out. I'm not going mad as they think. I just have to escape so I can start my campaign of REVENGE—revenge against that quack who made me a cripple for life. Dr. Quaine will be sorry for his blundering operation, I'll see to that. By the time I'm through, he'll be WORSE off than a hunchback. . . .*

The escape from his hospital room had been no problem, a matter of simply easing up a window and climbing out in the middle of the night. It was the first floor of the northeast wing, the only one completed at the time. The skeletal framework of the other four wings glinted in the starlight.

LeClaire took no pleasure in the thought of how magnificent the finished structure would be that he had designed. He shuddered at the thought of some opening ceremony where the architect would be called on the stage for honors and awards. And then the audience would see a travesty of a man coming forth, his hump and dangling arms showing no matter how carefully his tuxedo had been tailored.

No, no! He could never face that humiliating event. Renolf LeClaire, the architect, must *disappear*. His plans

were already forming. First of all, he couldn't just leave the hospital grounds in the shapeless white gown he wore as a patient. But that would be easily remedied, once he reached a certain shack ahead. He was safe as yet in the darkness.

It felt queer as LeClaire began to walk and thread his way among the still and silent construction machinery. His legs and body didn't seem to cooperate the right way, so that he stumbled along in a drunken manner, at the verge of flopping to the ground awkwardly at any moment.

He realized, grinding his teeth, what it was. His entire body balance was now altered. His center of gravity had changed because of his surgically shortened torso and twisted spine forming the hump on his back. He was simply not used to his "new" deformed body. He slowed down and took careful steps, learning how to swing his long arms—too long now for his short body—in rhythm with his legs as a sort of balance wheel.

*I even have to learn to walk again, in a new way. You'll suffer for that too, Dr. Quack Quaine!*

Mastering the new technique slowly, LeClaire felt more sure-footed as he wound his way along, until suddenly his knees felt weak. He had to sit down on a cement block among the construction supplies to conquer a dizziness that swept over him.

He knew what it was. After all, he had been scheduled to recuperate in the hospital for many more days, to fully regain his strength. The bandages from the operation were gone, but internal healing was still going on. He knew he could not get very far on his legs, but he didn't need to.

When he felt better, he got up, gritting his teeth. "Got to make it to the shack," he muttered. "Not far now. . . ."

Then he saw it ahead, the small shack with the sign—RENOLF LECLAIRE, ARCHITECT. It was the field office they had put up for him, for the construction chief to consult him at times over the intricate blueprints. And the jeep parked nearby, that was his, too. Everything had been left as it was, since his accident.

The shack was locked, of course. LeClaire cursed for

a moment, then remembered. He reached up to a narrow ledge above the door, unseen to the casual glance. His spare key. He unlocked the door and entered. Inside the shack office, he did not dare turn on a light. The night watchman for the construction company would see it and come running.

But LeClaire knew the office by heart and felt his way to the closet where he had kept spare clothing. Swiftly, he slipped into a suit which was too big for him, but it would have to do. He cursed when he had difficulty putting on a leather jacket over the hump on his back. Did everything have to remind him of that?

Soon, he crept out of the shack and reached the jeep. He used the spare ignition key from his office. The engine came to life with a roar and he drove off. In his headlights, he suddenly saw the startled night watchman, blinking his eyes and flinging up a hand to stop.

"Stop and go back? Not me!" LeClaire grinned crookedly and gunned the jeep straight at the man. The watchman barely jumped aside in time. Only a grating laugh came back to him as the jeep wound its way into the distance.

But even driving the jeep was a new and soul-grinding experience for the hunchback. He had to hold onto the wheel and pull himself half out of his seat, in order to see through the lower part of the windshield. He felt like a boy instead of a man. Within his seething mind bubbled more angry curses at the hellish fate that had given him a misshapen body.

But he was thankful for the jeep. He could never have made it, trying to walk the twenty miles to town on his unsteady legs. When he reached the outskirts of Tarlton, he relaxed for the first time. He was dressed now and it wouldn't matter if anybody saw what he was. In a city of one hundred thousand people, hunchbacks were no great novelty.

Nevertheless, he drove down side streets where hardly a soul was about in the middle of the night. Secrecy was important so that he couldn't be traced later. He parked at the curb in front of the big old house where he lived in

his third-floor architect's studio. He crept up the stairs as quietly as possible, wincing at an occasional creak. He didn't want his landlady to awaken and accost him, asking embarrassing questions.

Unlocking his studio door, he groped his way to a table and turned on a dim lamp. It was really a big attic converted into living quarters plus a workroom. Scattered around were various architectural drawings. He swept them off the main table with a snarl.

That part of his life was closed and, for a moment, mental agony made him tremble all over. Gone forever was the tall, handsome designer of avant-garde structures.

"From now on I'm the hunchbacked avenger!" he muttered hissing. "And my target is Dr. Quentin Quaine, the quack who changed me from a man to a freak!"

There was only one thing LeClaire wanted from the studio. He knelt at a steel safe in the corner and worked the combination lock. He drew out a pouch containing several hundred dollars. Then, from a desk drawer, he took out a bankbook and put the full amount on a withdrawal slip. It was a large enough sum to keep him comfortable for a long time.

He quickly wrote a note to the bank, instructing them to deliver the package of money to a post-office box he had, where he could pick it up at his leisure. And his signature was authentic, of course. His affliction hadn't changed *that*. He put the note and withdrawal slip in a self-addressed bank envelope, licked on a stamp, and took it with him to be mailed.

Next he gathered several of his suits, which he would have altered at some tailor shop in town to fit his hunchbacked form. He put them in a suitcase. The rest of what he would need he could buy in town later.

At the door, he took one last look around at where a busy architect had worked and dreamed of a rosy future. That future had been utterly shattered. For a moment, he hesitated. That nurse at the hospital—what had she said? That he could still carry on as a brilliant architect and win "respect and admiration." Perhaps she was right. Maybe he should give up his mad scheme.

But as the vision of her flawless beauty—at least in his eyes—arose in his tortured brain, another pang shot through his jangled nerves. Lynne Carlyle, the girl who could have captured his heart, was beyond his reach now. But if he could never have her, neither would Dr. Quainel!

With his single-minded resolve once more hardened, he closed the door. He swore never to return. On the street, he mailed the bank's letter at the corner box, flung his suitcase in the jeep, and drove off. His destination now lay out of town and back toward the Clinic. About half-way there he turned off the paved highway onto a gravel road that began winding through the hills. The scenery became a scraggly wilderness where nobody lived. Rocky slopes and tall cliffs appeared on all sides. It was called the Devil's Playground.

Putting the jeep in four-wheel drive, LeClaire bounced over a rugged stretch of weed-grown land to the foot of a towering cliff. And there was what he sought—the black mouth of a cave.

With a flashlight from the jeep, he entered, stooping low. Further on the cave widened out into a large cavern. Surprisingly, it was not empty. The flashlight beam revealed a cot at one side, cooking utensils on a rock ledge, and crude furniture.

LeClaire lifted the glass chimney of a kerosene lamp and lit the wick. The pale flickering light filled the cavern where the architect had sometimes spent a week alone, like a hermit, to get away from crowds and civilization. A good way to renew his architectural inspiration and refresh his spirit.

At any rate, nobody knew of this secret hideaway, not even his most intimate friends. LeClaire would drive to town tomorrow and stock it with canned foods and other necessities. From then on, he would live here. During the day he could walk in the wilds and regain his full health. In time he would take to climbing the cliffs to build up his muscles. Being a hunchback did not mean you couldn't become tough and agile and learn acrobatic tricks with a rope.

For already, dimly, LeClaire could see ahead to the



time when he would become the shadow terror of Clinic Center—the first step in his campaign of revenge against Dr. Quaine for his *crime*.

Yes, in LeClaire's mind it *was* a crime of unspeakable proportions, turning him into a crooked-backed caricature of his former manhood.

The black-clad hunchback shook his head now, clearing out all those memories of the past year. He had work to do—as the shadow terror. He crawled slowly through the electrical conduit until he came to a central link where four other passageways branched off to the other wings. Clinic Center had been staffed and put into operation wing by wing.

He chose the conduit with the newest electrical cables. The fifth and final wing had just been completed. And tomorrow night the opening ceremony for this wing would be held.

A leer spread over the hunchback's face. An unscheduled event would happen at the grand opening.

## Chapter 5

Under the arched beams of the huge central auditorium of Clinic Center sat a capacity crowd, all in formal attire for the occasion. Besides doctors and hospital authorities, there were the mayor and other officials from Tarlton, representatives of medical societies, members of endowment groups, and a sprinkling of political guests from Washington. Part of the cost of Clinic Center had been supplied by federal funds.

Directly over the stage hung a huge fluorescent lamp skillfully shaped like an old-time candelabrum. Its light shone down on a half-dozen invited speakers seated in chairs.

A hush fell over the crowd as Dr. Endersby strode from the wings with somewhat of a self-important strut. He had a shock of white hair and a salt-peppered goatee. He stepped to the podium, looked around slowly at the big audience, then spoke into the microphone, his goatee bobbing up and down.

"Ladies and gentlemen, and distinguished guests. As you all know, Clinic Center has gradually put four wings into full operation in the past year."

He pointed around the room at four big double doors, evenly spaced from one another. Above them were signs saying TO WING NUMBER——, whichever one it was.

"Tonight," resumed Dr. Endersby, "I have not only the honor but the personal thrill, as Chief Administrator, of officially opening the final wing."

A spotlight swung to a closed doorway with a colored

ribbon across it. Above it, a new sign marked WING NUMBER FIVE, with a directory to the side telling exactly which facilities were there.

"Before the ribbon is cut," said Dr. Endersby, "we will have the pleasure of hearing several fine speakers. . . ."

They were the usual speakers at a ceremony like this, and their speeches the usual high-flown oratory extolling the virtues and greatness of this magnificent haven of mercy. The audience dutifully clapped at certain ringing phrases.

After the final speaker, Dr. Endersby again stood at the podium. "As has been mentioned in the previous speeches, Clinic Center is not only a hospital but also a center of advanced medical research." Pride crept into his voice. "And in less than a year, one of our researchers is at the verge of a new landmark in medical history. It is not premature to predict that his first test on a human being, after many animal tests, will be a success. I give you—Dr. Quentin Quaine!"

In the wings, Quaine stood ill-at-ease in his tuxedo and swallowed. "Oh Lord," he half-groaned. "Did Dr. Endersby have to insist on . . . on *displaying* me, like a prize monkey at a zoo? Miss Carlyle, please. Couldn't you tell them I just caught measles or something?"

"You've had measles," said Lynne Carlyle, smiling. She was dressed in a lavender evening gown that highlighted her ash-blonde hair. "Go on out there, great germ-fighter!" She gave him a little push.

"That's an unkind cut," he mumbled as he shuffled out on the stage, blinking in the blinding overhead lights. Vigorous applause greeted him, for Quaine was well known to the medical portion of the audience.

Quaine conquered his nervousness at the microphone. He spoke quite informally. "Dr. Endersby is right. I may be at the *verge* of something medically unique. But that's like being at the verge of a cliff, and I haven't fallen over the edge yet . . . until the first human test."

A wave of laughter rustled across the audience.

More seriously, Quaine began to describe his work,

avoiding technical medical terms. Dr. Endersby stood to the side, ready to award a plaque to Quaine for meritorious service.

All eyes were upon the young medical scientist on the stage. Nobody looked up, beyond the fluorescent floodlights into the dim recesses of the vaulted chamber. Up there, a shadowy form crept along one of the arched beams that spread out from a central hub, somewhat like a spider web. The beam the figure was on extended high over the center of the stage.

The shadow terror was going to do more than just frighten people with his eerie hunchbacked shadow thrown through a window by moonlight. This was his opportunity to strike directly at his hated quarry.

Renolf LeClaire's eyes gleamed triumphantly as he reached a position directly above the podium where Quaine spoke. Within his reach now was the steel cable that hung down from an anchorage at the ceiling, supporting the giant floodlight over the stage. The hunchback reached slowly toward the cable with a steel cutter. He had only to clip the final strands of the twisted steel wires. The others he had patiently filed through during the day, when the auditorium had been empty.

And a pilfered program had told him that Dr. Quaine was to be given an award.

". . . and so, ladies and gentlemen," Quaine was finishing up, "one great test remains for Substance X. Namely, trial with a human patient. As with animals, it should allow manipulation of the central neuro-system in a way never achieved before, and. . . ."

In the wings, Lynne Carlyle thought she heard a scraping sound above. She peered upward, squinting her eyes. What was the strange black shadow that *moved*? She saw a black arm extend with a cutting instrument, clipping the last strands of the cable. Lynne, frozen in horror, heard the fiendish hiss from the rafters.

"Here's *my* award for you, Dr. Quaine—for *quackery!*"

The cable parted and the huge floodlight plunged

down, straight at Quaine's figure on the podium as Dr. Endersby was about to approach with the award.

"Quaine!" screeched Lynne. "Dr. Quaine—above you—danger—JUMP!"

Startled, Quaine flicked his eyes upward and saw the plunging doom aimed at him. He had gained another fractional second of warning when the light had died overhead, as electrical wires ripped loose along with the cable. Reflexes from his athletic days in college triggered leg muscles, and he made what looked like an impossible leap out of the way.

Missing him by the proverbial eyelash, the heavy flood-light fixture smashed through the wooden flooring of the stage and crashed somewhere below. Dr. Endersby and the others stood paralyzed in fright. But Lynne ran and grabbed Quaine's arm, pointing up at the rafters of the chamber's dim vault.

"It was the shadow terror," gasped the girl. "Or Renolf LeClaire, the hunchback!"

Quaine saw the black-clad form dancing mockingly among the rafters. LeClaire was not disappointed that Quaine had escaped harm. In fact, he had expected it, knowing Quaine's reputation for quick reflexes. So much the better. LeClaire could strike at him again—and maybe again and again. Let him die a thousand deaths before it finally did happen.

But the evil glee drained out of LeClaire at what he saw below—the lithe form of Quaine climbing up the frescos along the side of the stage—toward the rafters. Moments later Quaine's head popped in sight as he grabbed one rafter and swung himself up.

Gaining his feet and balancing on the broad rafter, Quaine grimly stepped toward the figure of the hunchback. "If you're going to play games like that," yelled Quaine, "you're going behind bars where you belong!"

"If you can catch me," mocked LeClaire, dancing away lightly along the beam. All his long practice at the cliffs for a year, hardening his muscles to whipcord toughness and developing apelike agility, would pay off now.

He could pull any daring deed in Clinic Center, and always escape pursuit.

But strangely, Quaine seemed to lose his anger. He stopped and held up a hand. "Wait, LeClaire. I want to give you a break, if you'll only surrender now voluntarily—before you commit yourself to too many criminal acts. You must listen to me, for your own good."

"Listen to you, Dr. Quack?" mocked the hunchback. "Not a chance. The only break you could have given me was never operating on me after the accident."

"All right, then I'll capture you and make you hear me out." Quaine darted forward.

Laughing, LeClaire made a surprising move. He leaped off the beam and flew through the air. Then his long arms and hands clutched the next beam. With no break in the smooth motion, his body swung up around the beam to land him on his feet. He grinned over at Quaine, ten feet away.

Quaine also pulled a feat, leaping to a crossbeam and then to the main beam in two giant steps, bringing him close to LeClaire. But the elusive hunchback was already scampering away to make another flying leap out of Quaine's reach.

Lynne's heart was in her mouth as she stared up and watched the two figures maneuvering in the rafters. "Oh, Quentin!" she murmured, heart beating. "One slip and you'll fall to the floor." It was a long way.

Frustration grew within Quaine as the agile hunchback time and again eluded capture in the dangerous chase high above.

But maybe LeClaire was tiring, too. He stood breathing hard, as if hesitant to make another leap. Quaine was able to jump near him on a rafter. His hands stretched out to seize the hunchback.

But with a wild laugh of elation, LeClaire reached up and grabbed the end of a thin plastic cord hanging down from the vault's apex.

"I had this planted here, fool," he chortled, as he gave a push with his legs and swung Tarzanlike through the air. Quaine grabbed empty air and lost his footing. As he

fell, one hand shot out and grabbed the rafter, nearly wrenching his arm from its socket. Laboriously, straining every muscle, he managed to get his other hand on the rafter and then pull himself up to a sitting position. He took time out for his heaving lungs to subside. Then, when he ran toward where the dangling cord swung aimlessly back and forth, there was no sign of the hunchback. He had vanished from the rafters, as if by magic. Bewildered and weary, Quaine climbed down the frescoed wall to the stage.

After hearing the story, Dr. Endersby turned away with a grim face. "So Renolf LeClaire is doing more now than just terrorizing the Clinic as the shadow terror. He's now guilty of a crime—attempted *murder*! I'll call Sheriff Blaine and notify him that the hunchbacked madman must be hunted down."

There was no attempt to finish the opening ceremony. Most of the audience had left, one woman half-hysterical. In passing, Dr. Endersby, with a pained face, ripped off the ribbon for the door to wing number five.

Lynne Carlyle turned to Quaine, silently thanking heaven that he had returned safely from the fantastic chase through the rafters. "I suppose LeClaire is quite mad, isn't he?"

"He is—and isn't," returned Quaine thoughtfully. "He's psychotic in only one direction—his hatred for me, thinking I performed a bad operation to make him a hunchback. Yet he wouldn't listen to my offer up there . . ."

"What offer?" Lynne was puzzled.

Quaine shook his head and gave no answer. Instead he looked up, baffled. "How did he vanish like that? That's what beats me."

Gloating, Renolf LeClaire closed the panel that was set flush with the wall of the auditorium, above the rafters. He had "vanished" by simply swinging on his rope into the panel door feet-first, thus shoving it open. He had landed catlike on his feet. Quaine did not know—few people did—that LeClaire's architectural designs had called

for this passageway; with stairs going upward in case the roof ever leaked and needed repairs.

Chuckling at how he had outwitted Quaine, he opened another hatchway that led into the main conduit for plumbing. Pipes of all types and sizes stretched interminably ahead through one wing. Further on, there was a connecting door to the electrical conduit system, which would lead him outside via the furnace-room path as before.

Nobody would ever catch him or trail him in this vast ratlike maze that existed unseen throughout Clinic Center. He could strike anywhere, anytime, and no one could stop him. Not even Quaine, his hated enemy. And even the law would come to a blind alley, if they tried to track him down. . . .

Three days later, Quaine and Lynne sat in Dr. Endersby's office where he had called them.

The Clinic's chief fumbled with a paper. "Here's the sheriff's report. His men found Renolf LeClaire's studio abandoned. Also his bank account had been closed out and his post-office box canceled. Where he's living is a complete mystery. There is not the slightest clue to his whereabouts." Endersby crumpled the paper in exasperation. "He has some hideout that even the police can't trace. That leaves him free to plague Clinic Center."

"And to scheme for my death or downfall," muttered Quaine bleakly, "because he holds me responsible for making him a hunchback."

"He has a double revenge motive against you," said Lynne Carlyle hesitantly. She glanced at the two men and went on in a low voice. "You see, he fell in love with me."

Quaine stared. "Miss Carlyle, what are you saying?"

"He told me so himself," murmured Lynne.

Quaine whistled. "No wonder he's so vindictive against me. His love life, too, was ruined by my 'quack' operation."

"Not only that—" the girl flushed painfully but went on—"he hated you because he couldn't be your rival in . . . uh . . . well, winning me. If you ever became interested in me," she added hastily.

Quaine stared at her, open-mouthed. Lynne bit her lip.



"Oh, I'm sorry it had to come out like this, Dr. Quaine. But I'm only repeating what he said to show how his bitterness all focused on you."

"Of course, of course," said Quaine quickly. But he was still staring at her as if he had never seen her before. And she saw approval slowly dawning in his eyes. Lynne had the queer thought that it had taken another man's viewpoint of her to make Dr. Quaine open his eyes and notice her—as a woman.

Dr. Endersby spoke up, in worried tones. "I want you to be careful of yourself, Dr. Quaine. If that maniac keeps trying to kill you. . . ."

"I can take care of myself," said Quaine shortly, getting up to go. Lynne followed him. Outside the office door, Quaine stopped and turned to her. "Would you have lunch with me—Lynne?"

The girl felt inwardly as if a bomb had exploded. Strangely enough, the mad hunchback had done her a good turn. She forced herself to reply calmly. "I'll be glad to, Dr. Quaine."

"Quentin, if you please."

"All right—Quentin."

At lunch together in the Clinic Center cafeteria, Quaine still looked at her as if in surprise. "How long have you worked for me, Lynne?"

"Over a year, Dr. Qua . . . uh . . . Quentin."

"Well, then it's about time to mention that you are quite a lovely girl." He stated it firmly as if it were a scientific fact. Then quickly, as if caught in some misdeed, he asked, "What will you have?"

Giddily, Lynne glanced at her menu.

"You're holding it upside down," said Quaine and she hastily turned it around. "Oh, I guess ham and eggs."

"For lunch?"

"Oh, how silly," said Lynne, flustered and trying to get hold of herself. "I had that for breakfast, didn't I?"

"Is something bothering you, Lynne?" said Quaine, puzzled.

*You're* bothering me, thought Lynne wryly. The man I've adored since we first met, here at the Clinic. The man

who sends my pulse up ten points just by looking at me. How could she ever get through this luncheon without wearing her heart on her sleeve? She was trying to think of something to say to cover up when she was saved by the waitress. Lynne ordered a sandwich while Quaine chose an omelet. Quaine spoke up again, then, taking her completely off the spot. "Hmm. Could your nervousness be that you're thinking too much about the hunchback and his menace?"

"Yes! Yes, that's it," she agreed eagerly, in relief. "I can't get him out of my mind."

"Well, let's not brood about him as he broods about me," said Quaine in a practical tone. Then he leaned his elbows on the table, folded his hands, and turned his steady blue eyes on her. "Tell me about yourself, Lynne."

She was a bit taken aback by this. "Biographical?"

"More or less," nodded Quaine. "I just want to know you better."

Lynne thrilled at his personal interest, so newly awakened. "There really isn't much to tell. My family lives in the East, in an old ancestral home near Boston. My childhood was ordinary. My older brother is an executive in an insurance company. My sister, younger than I, is in college."

Their food came, and Lynne condensed the rest as they ate.

Lynne, twenty-five, could easily remember her college days. "I majored in chemistry, then went to a nursing school to become an RN. But I really had further ambitions and took a post-graduate course to get a degree as a lab assistant in medical research."

Lynne took a sip of coffee. "The rest you know. When I joined the staff of Clinic Center, I was assigned to you as chief aide in your surgical work."

"And then," finished Quaine for her, "when my request to shift to medical research was granted, I chose you as my lab assistant for your all-round competence. To tell you the truth, I only looked over your records both to choose you as my nurse's aide and then my lab assistant. You could have been forty and plain." He gave

her a sly glance. "How could I have missed seeing you were young and beautiful?"

"Oh, Dr. Quaine, you . . . you're flattering me."

"So it's 'Dr. Quaine' again, Miss Carlyle?"

They both laughed. It was on this light-hearted note that they emerged from the restaurant.

## Chapter 6

As they walked back to the elevators, Quaine seemed uneasy. Once he stopped and looked back quickly. "I have the strangest feeling that we're being followed," he muttered. "Oh, it must be my imagination."

But during the afternoon, in the lab, Quaine kept glancing at the door suspiciously. Finally, putting a finger to his lips for Lynne's benefit, he tiptoed to the door and suddenly yanked it open. A man stood there, startled. He was not hospital personnel since he wore street clothes.

"Who are you?" demanded Quaine. "What are you lurking around me for?"

"Well, you weren't supposed to know," returned the man, sweating a bit, "but I suppose you'd have found out sooner or later. I've been assigned by the sheriff's office to keep near you at all times."

He was a tall gangling man with a rather hard face and powerful build. The bulge of a gun could be seen under his coat, in a shoulder holster. "My name's Johnson, Pete Johnson. I'm to guard your door in the daytime and take up a post outside your windows, on the fire-escape landing, at night. It was Dr. Endersby's idea, you see."

"Yes, I see!" snapped Quaine, ripping off his lab coat with a heavy scowl. Then he strode rapidly to the elevators.

Dr. Endersby was startled at his desk as the door swung open violently to reveal an angry face. "Since when do I need a *bodyguard*?" roared Quaine.

"Now please be calm, Dr. Quaine," said the chief. "I thought it wisest to give you protection."

"From what?" demanded Quaine.

"Well, with LeClaire still at large . . . after all, that mad hunchback will be after you again." Dr. Endersby got up and spoke in an earnest tone. "Who knows what devilish trick he might try next, to threaten your life?"

"But an armed nurse-maid following me around—I won't have it. I'm no baby."

"Yes, I know," said Dr. Endersby, waving a hand. "You can take care of yourself—*maybe*. When we're dealing with a cunning madman, we can't take chances."

Quaine was still fuming. Always ruggedly independent, he resented any interference in his personal life. He knew it was mainly his pride that was hurt, but he felt he could handle any emergency that arose.

"But for heaven's sake, I still don't need a bodyguard," he said stubbornly.

"Yes, you do," and now the chief's voice became firm. "Sorry to have to pull rank on you, Dr. Quaine—but that armed guard stays with you. After all, I run this place and am responsible for the safety of all personnel."

Quaine glared at him a moment, then shrugged. "You win," he growled, turning to go.

Endersby caught his arm. "You have to understand my viewpoint. You're too valuable a man to lose. You must finish your project with Substance X—no, not just to bring glory to me or Clinic Center. Because Substance X is somewhat comparable to a cancer cure in scope and will save a whole new class of patients from their afflictions. We can't let them down."

Quaine lost all his anger, feeling petty. Yes, his research had to go on. And perhaps, just perhaps, it could accomplish one great miracle—he broke off his thoughts.

He would keep that wild idea to himself.

"All right, I see it your way," said Quaine, leaving the chief. Outside in the hall, he waved cheerily to the plain-clothesman. "Okay, Johnson. Trot along behind me. I won't toss you out the window."

The bodyguard grinned uncertainly. And he *did* have to trot to keep up with Quaine's long strides.

At the lab, after Quaine told Lynne the story, she

looked out of the window apprehensively. Would even a bodyguard, patrolling out there at night, prevent the vengeful hunchback from striking again? Was he even now slinking toward Clinic Center, planning another horrifying attack?

But Renolf LeClaire had a new human target for tonight. His black-clad form invisible in shadow, he watched the night crew working under floodlights, putting the finishing touches to the grounds around Clinic Center, now that all five wings were completed. The crane operator was using his giant steel scoop to dig up a pile of leftover dirt and spread it evenly around the lawn.

The hunchback's eyes narrowed, centering on the crane's cab. Soon, the foreman waved and the operator jumped out to take ten, stretching his muscles and smoking a cigarette. When he had strolled a dozen yards from his cab, LeClaire darted out of hiding. Blending with the shadows, he crept toward the huge crane and leaped into the cab from the other side.

He glanced around warily. Nobody had seen him. Then he turned to the controls, remembering clearly the manual he had read and memorized on operating such earth-moving machines. He pulled levers and thrilled at the throaty growl of immense power in his hands, as the crane's diesel engine came to life.

The operator whirled in surprise as the steel scoop, resting on the ground, now swung upward. It swung toward him. Yelling in horror, the workman turned and ran.

"You won't get away," hissed the hunched form in the cab, working more levers. "You're Jim Todd. The man who worked the crane that day, a year ago, when the scoop fell and crushed me into a hunchback. Now it's your turn. . . ."

A wild laugh of triumph came from the cab as the clawed bucket swooped down and struck the ground right behind the running workman. Then the scoop jerked forward and engulfed Todd, his legs and arms flailing helplessly.

Other men stood horrified as they saw the scoop go high

on its cable, then swing around and stop suddenly, thus flinging Jim Todd out. Shrieking, he flew through the air and his body struck the side wall of Clinic Center.

Shuddering gasps came from the other workmen's throats as they heard the sodden thump of human flesh and fragile bones smashing into hard stone. But when he slid to the ground, he was moaning. He hadn't been killed outright—exactly as LeClaire had planned.

"No worse than I had," chortled the hunchback in the cab. "You'll live, with the hospital so near for emergency treatment. You may not come out a hunchback, but you'll bear the marks for life—like me!"

Cursing, several of the other workmen dashed toward the crane cab to seize the heartless fiend within. But the hunchback was prepared, skillfully using his levers. The swiveled cab swung around and the clawed scoop came whining down its cable. It was timed to sweep sideways at the knot of men, knocking them down like tenpins. The few who kept their feet ran back for safety, not daring to charge the madman running the murderous machine.

LeClaire's mocking laughter rang through the scene of pandemonium. He leered as he saw the ambulance roaring up and stretcher men carefully picking up the crumpled body of Jim Todd. But then he whirled his head, hearing a siren.

A passing police cruiser had been hailed. Its brakes screeched as it came to a skidding stop. At the same time, the crane's scoop was already churning to a position directly overhead. Then it came straight down as LeClaire moved a lever and the cable went slack.

The two policemen climbing out were barely able to leap clear as the massive scoop crushed the cruiser flat with a grinding of torn metal and broken glass. White-faced, they pulled out their guns and began shooting at the cab.

LeClaire was ready for that, too. While ducking low to avoid bullets, he manipulated levers. The steel scoop dug up a load of dirt, then swung forward and dumped it over the policemen, half-burying them.

But they had sent out a quick radio alarm before, and

soon three more police cars came roaring up. Warned by waving workmen, they parked out of range of the deadly scoop. Now a concentrated fire came from six guns aimed at the cab—only to hit the giant scoop. LeClaire had expertly swung it in the path of the bullets.

After a hasty consultation, the policemen split up and spread out, as if to surround the cab and get at it from all sides. Instantly, the scoop responded by clawing up a pile of loose gravel, then swinging around to tip forward somewhat and hurl out stones. With the scoop making a circle, the gravel pelted the policemen, preventing them from taking potshots at the cab.

But the two original policemen, having dug their way out of the dirt pile, hid behind a cruiser and swung their arms. Teargas bombs looped through the air. Landing, they popped and began to throw their choking mist around the cab. And then one bomb landed inside.

“That got him!” yelled one of the policemen. “Now we can nab him. Put on masks and let’s go!”

The masked policemen ran through the white mists surrounding the cab, only to hear a mocking laugh from above them. The black-clad hunchback had immediately held his breath when the teargas bomb landed in the cab. Then he had swiftly leaped to the roof and was now climbing agilely up the crane’s gigantic main boom, set at an angle. He was entirely clear of the heavy cloud of teargas around the cab.

A floodlight operated by one of the workmen now swung and spotlighted the climbing figure. Staring upward, the police held their fire.

“Where are you going to go when you reach the top?” a police sergeant yelled, grinning. “You might as well give up and come down now. You’re trapped, chum.”

“Am I?” yelled back LeClaire, reaching the top of the crane boom some fifty feet high. He turned his back to the floodlight and those below could not see him swiftly uncoiling a thin plastic cord hung at his belt. Tying one end at the top of the boom, he slid down suddenly, with gloved hands that prevented rope burn.

The unexpected trick caught them all by surprise. They



pulled guns, but the floodlight lost the sliding black figure and their shots went wild. The next thing the police knew, a black form swinging at the end of the rope came hurtling at them with its feet, sending them sprawling.

Staggering to their feet, the police opened fire again. But it was a moving target that flickered in and out of the floodlight's beam as the operator frantically tried to focus. The acrobatic hunchback swung like a pendulum and gained speed, at the end of his rope, foiling both the floodlight beams and bullets.

Then, at the end of one long-timed swing, the hunchback let go and sailed through the air feet first, to land neatly where the workmen's cars were parked. Quickly finding one car with keys, LeClaire leaped in and drove off in a cloud of dust through the construction site, thumbing his nose back at the workmen and police who came running up—too late.

"Cripes!" gasped one panting workman. "That . . . that hunchback horror got away!"

That name—the Hunchback Horror—was to stick and be repeated from then on in terror and fear, both by human lips and in newspaper headlines. Where would he strike next?

In their eighth-floor lab, the next evening, Quentin Quaine and Lynne worked late, as they often did. Quaine rubbed tired eyes and shut off the vacuum pump. After opening a valve to let in hissing air, he reached within the bell jar and pulled out a crystallization dish holding a few grains of a green chemical.

"The first pure specimen of Substance X," he murmured in quiet triumph. "When we have enough, we'll be ready for the great human test." He turned. "Did you hear me, Lynne?"

The girl was busy back of him. "I'm performing an even greater experiment," she said. "Here, I've got it, a very precious liquid, a whole cupful."

Quaine grinned as he took the steaming hot cup. "We could do without Substance X, but who can do without coffee?"

Lynne turned the spigot of the electric percolator and filled another cup. "This is for Johnson, your bodyguard. Please open the window, Quentin."

Quaine complied. "It must be cold out there," sang Lynne. "Hot coffee, Johnson."

"Thanks."

Lynne's eyes widened as a black-gloved hand reached in and took the cup, then hurled it away.

Lynne shrieked. "That's not Johnson! It's the hunchback!"

Quaine, walking away, whirled in alarm. Outside the window, on the wire-mesh landing, crouched a dark figure, with two eyes gleaming brightly. And ominously.

"Your bodyguard took a tumble," came LeClaire's harsh voice. Then his hand raised, holding a gleaming object that aimed toward Quaine. "Nobody can protect you from me, fool!"

"Look out—a gun!" screamed the girl.

"Bang! You're dead," came LeClaire's doomlike voice.

Quaine had no time to do anything, as the gun barked. Horrified, Lynne ran toward the scientist, expecting to see blood and his body falling. Instead, Quaine pulled on a small dart with a rubber suction cup which came loose from his lab coat, just over the heart. Quaine leaped to the open window and leaned out. There was no sign of a hunchbacked form clad in black. Only a faint mocking laugh drifted on the breeze, from no particular direction.

But ten feet away, the dazed form of Johnson rose up from the landing. "Are—are you all right, Dr. Quaine?"

"Yes, but what happened to you?"

"I—I don't know. I was standing out here when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw a black form swinging at me. Next thing I knew, his feet hit me like a pile driver and I turned a somersault before I blacked out."

Quaine nodded. "A typical trick of LeClaire, the hunchback. He swung from the roof by a rope and got you from behind. Come in and let's see if you're hurt."

"Some bodyguard!" said Johnson disgustedly, as Quaine helped him climb in the window. "You ought to

fire me. I've got a broken arm," he finished with a pained grunt.

"Lynne," snapped Quaine, "get him down to the emergency room. And there'll be no more bodyguards for me—putting them in more danger than I'm in."

When the girl left, holding Johnson's other arm, Quaine looked at the dart and noticed a piece of paper wrapped around it, held by a rubberband. He got the paper loose and unrolled it. On it was bold lettering.

**SEE HOW EASY I COULD KILL YOU, DR. QUACK QUAIN? BUT SUDDEN DEATH IS TOO GOOD FOR YOU. I WANT YOU TO LIVE—AND SUFFER—AS YOU SEE CHAOS RISE AND OVERWHELM CLINIC CENTER. BEFORE I'M THROUGH, THE PLACE WILL BE A SHAMBLES, AND YOUR CAREER HERE WILL BE RUINED.**

**YOUR SURGICAL VICTIM.**

When Lynne returned, Quaine handed her the note with a stunned face. She read it, gasping. They looked at each other silently, wondering what fearful days lay ahead for Clinic Center.

A succession of living nightmares invaded Clinic Center in the following week.

The night nurse in Ward B waited for the elevator door to open, then stepped in. Her eyes opened wide as she saw the only passenger—a black-clad form with a humped back and leering face. She opened her mouth, but the scream never came as black gloves closed around her throat.

A few minutes later, a small group of internes and nurses, who had stepped outside for a ten-minute break of fresh air, paused, startled, as one nurse screeched and pointed upward. At the tip of the golden cupola at the hub of Clinic Center, a ring of floodlights revealed a blood-chilling sight.

A deformed black figure raised a white-clad nurse's

form in its hands, over its head. Then, with a maniacal laugh, the nurse was flung with enough force to clear the edge of the cupola and hurtle straight down to the ground, ten floors below. A terrified wail came from the falling form, alive as yet.

Below, shocked eyes watched as the falling nurse landed in a big oak tree, tumbled down from branch to branch, then finally jolted to a stop, unmoving.

"That tree broke her fall!" yelled one intern, running forward. "Maybe she'll live through it. Let's get her down."

"Yes, she'll live," said the doctor in the emergency ward later. "But she'll probably be paralyzed. Besides a broken leg and an arm with a compound fracture, her spine was injured."

"The Hunchback Horror did it," whispered one of the internes. "That's what they called him in the newspapers, when he mangled that crane operator." He shuddered and looked around fearfully. "We're all in danger. He strikes out of nowhere!"

## Chapter 7

Down in the morgue the next night, the medical aide on duty indifferently began wheeling the white-sheeted body toward the nearest empty "drawer" for corpses. Death and dead bodies were nothing new to him.

But live bodies were. The hair on the nape of his neck stood up. Had this body twitched a little, under the white sheet? Calming himself, he shook his head. A breeze must have rustled the sheet, he thought, then jerked. Breeze? There's no breeze down here!

A strangled yelp next came from his throat, as the figure on the wheeled cart suddenly sat up. The white sheet was flung aside. A black-clad figure grinned malevolently at the attendant, who stood transfixed in terror.

"I don't belong in the freezer for corpses," said the hunchback. "You do!"

Leaping nimbly from the cart, LeClaire grabbed the attendant from behind, arms locked around his chest. The powerful arms slowly squeezed, choking off cries from the man. When he went limp, the hunchback dragged him to the open drawer and stuffed his body inside. "I diagnose you have a fever," he chuckled gratingly. "You need cooling off." Then he closed the drawer with a bang.

Meanwhile, a nurse stepped into an elevator and gave a piercing yell. An armed guard came dashing into the elevator before the doors closed. "What's wrong?" The nurse pointed at the body of an elderly male patient, who had just died and lay sagging in the corner, head askew. "He never got to the morgue. Somebody tossed him off the cart."

When the guard reached the basement stop, he ran from the elevator in time to see a black misshapen figure slip down the corridor

"The Hunchback Horror! Stop, you—"

The guard whipped out his gun—equipped with a silencer—and fired, just as the black marauder whisked around a corner. When the guard dashed around that corner, the long lighted corridor ahead was empty.

"He did it again," muttered the dumbfounded guard. "How does he escape right in front of your eyes?"

Alerting the morgue-department staff, the guard led a group of aides to the morgue. A hurried search revealed the attendant, alive but badly frozen with a big tag tied to his toe, reading—COMPLIMENTS OF THE HUNCHBACK HORROR! The guard cursed. "Is the poor guy dead?" "No," said an interne. "He's alive, but badly frozen. He'll probably suffer from tissue damage for a long while. That hunchback is a . . . a *monster!*"

Clinic Center was now swarming each night with armed guards, supplied by the sheriff. A thorough hunt was organized after the morgue incident, but again, their quarry was not uncovered.

Huddled safely in a dim passageway that led off from a broom closet along one corridor near the morgue, LeClaire grinned gleefully. To the guards, he was as elusive as a ghost, thanks to his knowledge of the many hiding places and escape routes in the giant Clinic. Even if they searched the passageways, they would never corner him when he always had a choice of other side passageways ahead.

But this time, as LeClaire slipped out into the open air from a back door of the Clinic in wing two, he was spotted by a guard. To the law, he was their most wanted man for his fantastic criminal assaults against innocent people.

Yelling "halt!" and brandishing his gun, the guard began to chase the hunchback as he loped across the dark grounds. The guard turned on a powerful flashlight and kept him in sight, firing a shot at times. Ahead, the black-clad form began darting between trees, as if to avoid bullets.

Suddenly, the guard tripped over something stretched tightly between two trees. With a wild yell, the guard went sprawling and lay still, stunned. "You didn't see me tying a plastic rope here," mocked the hunchback, as he melted in the shadows.

But the stunned guard recovered enough to put a whistle to his lips and blow lustily. The shrill signal alerted more outside guards. One of them spied the dark figure scuttling through the shade trees of the Clinic's wide grounds and the chase was on.

Some of the fleeter men drew closer to the black figure, following a well-trodden pathway among the trees. Suddenly, around a bend, the hunchback was no longer seen. Men immediately began to search the area off the path. Flashlight beams crisscrossed everywhere. Even a rabbit might have been flushed out of hiding.

But not the Hunchback Horror.

Nobody thought to look up and see his dark form silently leaping among the branches of a tall tree, and then to the next tree, occasionally swinging by his arms like an ape. To LeClaire it was child's play after all his strenuous acrobatic practice of the past year at the Devil's Playground.

Moments later, his hunched form dropped silently down from the trees into his parked jeep. As it sped away, the searching guards straightened up and looked at one another ruefully.

One guard emptied his gun futilely at the speeding jeep, now rapidly disappearing across the fields.

Another guard clicked on his walkie-talkie and notified the police. "The Hunchback Horror in a jeep, heading cross-country north, probably to Route 6-A. Intercept if you can."

A state-trooper patrol car soon raced down Route 6-A in time to see the jeep ahead. LeClaire saw the headlights in his rear-view mirror, and chuckled aloud. "I'll give you a merry chase," he promised. He made a sharp right turn at the next road, narrow and rutted. The chase now led through hills and winding curves, including some hairpin

turns that the jeep whipped around skidding, but well under control.

But the police car had trouble and was forced to cut down speed, barely keeping the jeep in sight. And gradually, as the grades became steeper, the more maneuverable jeep was in its element while the big cruiser bounced violently and threatened to jump the road entirely.

Finally, around one twisting bend, the jeep was completely gone. The police car skidded to a halt and one trooper waved a helpless hand. "God knows where that jeep is heading," he growled. "He could make turnoffs anywhere and leave no tire marks in this rocky land. One chance—turn off the engine and listen."

With the engine killed, they listened to the dead silence, broken only by the faint buzz of an insect.

"Not a sound," muttered the trooper in deep disgust. "He must have stopped too. He could be parked one hundred yards away, with his motor off and we'd never know it. Guess we're licked."

After the roar of the police car vanished in the distance, the grinning hunchback started up his motor and drove out from under the dark shadows of a spreading tree. Ignoring roads and following his own route across the rocky badlands ahead, he wound his way into the Devil's Playground and thence to his cave.

"They'll never trail me here," he murmured with a twisted leer. "The deeds of the Hunchback Horror will go on . . . and on . . ."

Night again.

Under a pale moon, Clinic Center lay sprawling like a giant wheel with five spokes but no rim. Lights gleamed from various windows of the first five floors which comprised the hospital section. Fewer lights gleamed from the upper five floors where medical research went on. The golden cupola atop the hub of the five wings gleamed brightly under its nightly floodlights, making the place visible as a landmark for miles around.

It was meant to be a cheerful place where bodies were mended and lives saved. But an atmosphere of tense dread



pervaded its many corridors and rooms. Hardly a soul inside, whether staff or patients, felt calm and relaxed. The exploits of the Hunchback Horror seemed like a curse that hung threateningly over them all.

There was no keeping his menacing exploits a secret, even from the patients. The news buzzed through the place and lit a spark of trembling fear in every heart. Worst of all was the news that the guards on duty day and night had been unable to halt the Hunchback Horror's depredations, much less capture him. Like some necromancer with diabolical powers, he seemed able to appear and disappear at will, no matter how many alert eyes watched for him.

And left behind by each visitation of the monstrous hunchback was a train of lesser evils, such as nervous nurses making mistakes and patients, as a result, taking a turn for the worse.

Everyone was jittery at one universal thought—*when and where would the Hunchback Horror next create danger and panic?*

At midnight in Ward M, on the fifth floor, grim guards patrolled the corridors, also the landings outside the fire-escape exits.

The guard on the landing darted his eyes all around constantly, and especially upward. The Hunchback Horror sometimes swung down from the roof on a thin cord, they had said, and he wasn't going to be caught flatfooted.

Suddenly, he saw it—a black-clad deformed figure swinging down on a rope fastened at the roof. A gleam came into the guard's eyes, as he was pulling his gun. This time the marauder had somehow made a mistake. The guard could not miss as the form lowered itself toward him.

All their guns were equipped with silencers to avoid the noise that would otherwise alarm patients and shatter the peace and quiet necessary in any hospital. His three quick shots could not have missed, carefully aimed. He expected the black form to lose its grip and fall with a scream or groan.

But why was it silent? And how could it still grip the

rope if it was mortally wounded? It was uncanny, weird, unbelievable.

Baffled and unnerved, the guard kept his head. He crouched and waited, then leaped to seize the swinging form in his arms as it reached his position. A sharp exclamation was torn from his lips, as the form hung limply and unresisting in his arms, its back slowly bending until it jackknifed impossibly, its head lolling.

"A straw dummy!" The guard hurled it aside. And then he saw what the delaying trick had cost him. Fifty feet away at the corner of the wing, another black form was swinging—a *live* one. In his hand he held a flaming torch, which he tossed through a window, shattering the glass.

"You'll have a hot time in there," came the mocking voice and mad laughter of the Hunchback Horror. In flashing seconds, before the guard could bring up his gun, the acrobatic hunchback had dropped to the landing and quickly scuttled around the corner of the building. By the time the guard ran there, nothing was in sight.

Meanwhile, pandemonium had broken loose. The fire-brand had landed on an empty bed in a three-bed room. The other two beds were occupied by traction cases with broken legs, helpless to flee. The flaming bed ignited sparks that in turn started flames in their beds.

But their frantic screams quickly brought a horrified nurse, followed by an interne with a fire extinguisher which kept the two other beds from flaring up into roaring flames. Hospital aides then dragged in a hose from the hall and quenched the burning bed.

"Patients okay!" barked one interne, after a hasty check, "except for burns. Some of them may be serious, though. Nurse, arrange to have them transferred to another room as quickly as possible." He coughed. "And open all windows to let this smoke out . . . hurry!"

One of the patients, a young woman, was almost hysterical. She kept pointing out the window. "I saw him—the Hunchback Horror! He came flying past and . . . and hurled it in . . . a flaming torch. Oh, it was awful!"

She had to be given a strong sedative. The other patient, an older woman, kept groaning at the pain of her

burns, caused when the edge of her bed had caught fire. She was given a pain-killing shot until the difficult task of transferring them out in their traction gear could be accomplished.

An interne wiped the sweat from his brow and sat down, staring at the broken window. "What a monster!" he said savagely. "To hurl a flaming firebrand at immobilized patients . . . it's *fiendish!* Can't they stop that Hunchback Horror?"

That grim question hung silently over Clinic Center.

"Everyone is a nervous wreck," reported Lynne Carlyle to Dr. Quentin Quaine, in their lab. "And it's pretty obvious now that the Hunchback Horror doesn't want to kill, only maim and cripple people. The crane operator was flung for a short bone-breaking distance that wasn't fatal. The nurse was flung from the cupola into a convenient tree so it wouldn't be a death plunge. The morgue attendant was meant to be discovered and removed from the freezer in time. And the fire last night—the firebrand was carefully tossed into the empty bed so the other two patients would only suffer burns and dislocations of their broken legs. One of them, with a bad fracture, might have to have her leg amputated."

Her beige-brown eyes blazed in fury. "His deeds are worse than outright killings. He wants people to suffer the same fate he did, facing a lifetime crippled or deformed in some way."

"Hmm," spoke up Quaine, listening thoughtfully. "Then it isn't too late to save him."

Lynne gaped at him. "Save *him*—from what?"

"From becoming a murderer," Quaine murmured as if to himself.

"Oh, you mean that so long as he takes no lives, the plea of temporary insanity could keep him in a mental institution. Then psychiatric treatment could give him a new start in life."

"Something like that," agreed Quaine absently. "As a killer and murderer, he would be beyond any help. He would not be able to benefit by—" Quaine broke off as if

unsure of what he meant. Then he turned his attention to the process of crystallizing more Substance X *in vacuo*.

"Quentin!" Lynne's puzzled eyes sought his face. "You're holding something back. There's something you're not telling me."

Quaine opened his mouth, then closed it.

Lynne persisted. "You have something else in mind. I can tell. Quentin, what is it?"

"All right," he sighed, pulling off his lab coat. "You can handle the rest of the crystallization yourself, Lynne. We should get ten milligrams within a month."

Quaine went to a closet and pulled out a turtleneck sweater which he began pulling on.

"Where are you going?" pleaded Lynne, now completely bewildered. "What are you up to?"

Quaine faced her squarely, his lips tight. "I'm going to try to stop the Hunchback Horror. And capture him . . . before it's too late. I'll go out night after night if necessary."

Lynne caught her breath, stunned. "What will Dr. Endersby say?"

Quaine raised his eyebrows at her, almost as if amused. "Does it matter?"

Then, without another word, he strode out the door, leaving Lynne with a dozen unanswered questions crowding in her mind. And growing dread. Quaine versus the Hunchback Horror. Did the young medical scientist, despite his quick brain and physical power, have a chance against the sadistic cunning of a hunchbacked madman?

Lynne's hand trembled as she went to take the crystallization dish out of the bell jar.

Quaine had one clue to go by, in his hope to seize the Hunchback Horror. The three last attacks had occurred, respectively, in wings one, two, and three. Would he follow that pattern and strike in wing number four next?

Gambling on it, Quaine prowled that night around wing four, slowly pacing its length down one side, then the other. When a sheriff's guard appeared, Quaine would quietly step into a shadow. If they saw him, they might in-

sist he stop "interfering" in their task of guarding the Clinic. It had been established by the police that LeClaire came and went via jeep, from some unknown hideout. If Quaine could just spy him sneaking into wing four. . . .

Quaine stopped, holding his breath. Faintly, he heard a twig snap somewhere in the darkness. Keeping an eye in the direction of the sound, Quaine finally spotted the black-clad figure crouching and approaching the lower door labeled FURNACE ROOM.

Quaine silently followed. When he saw the hunchback dart in the door, Quaine quickly ran and yanked it open. There was nobody in sight. Quaine peered into the furnace room, but obviously the engineers had seen nothing unusual for they were routinely checking their dials.

Quaine ran down the corridor and glanced in every branch hallway, baffled, "Round one to LeClaire," he muttered in frustration. The hunchback had some secret way of getting up into the hospital proper from the engine room. Was he on his way to some diabolical new misdeed in his vow to create chaos in Clinic Center?

## Chapter 8

Cursing himself for losing the hunchback's trail so easily, Quaine went out again into the night darkness to pace the length of wing number four—at least his hunch about *that* might be right. His eyes sharply surveyed every window from the first floor up as he went along.

Suddenly, he noticed moving figures in a lighted window of the third floor, where medical supplies were kept. There seemed to be violent motion between a black-clad and white-clad figure, and the latter went down. The Hunchback Horror was at work!

Quaine galvanized into action, racing up the fire-escape steps. When he reached the third landing, he crouched and lifted his eyes to the level of the window. Inside he saw a fantastic sight.

On the floor lay an interne, in a pool of blood. Quaine's heart sank. Had the hunchback at last done a killing, ruining Quaine's plans? But then Quaine twisted his eyes to a corner of the room where he saw LeClaire at work, opening plastic bottles taken out of refrigerated lockers.

Quaine suddenly realized what the place was, the storage room for bottled plasma and whole blood. And Clinic Center had just received a shipment of a very rare type, vital in certain transfusions. The Hunchback Horror was deliberately ripping off the lids and spilling the precious red fluid on the floor.

Quaine felt momentary relief that the pool of blood around the interne was not his own. It had flowed there from the containers being emptied. He had only been knocked out. Quaine waited no longer. Knowing the

window was locked, he stepped back ten paces and ran forward, catapulting himself through the pane. He landed in the room in a shower of glass and whirled catlike, facing the hunchback.

LeClaire stood holding another opened bottle of blood, but motionless in surprise. "Dr. Quaine!" he gulped. "You?"

"Right, LeClaire." Quaine held up a hand. "Now listen to me, as you refused to do in the rafters. This is important to me—not only you. I can intercede for you, in regard to the lawless acts you've done so far, short of murder. That way you still have a chance."

"For what?" snarled LeClaire, recovering his poise. "To let the head shrinkers declare me insane and lock me up for life?"

"You don't understand," Quaine said, half-pleadingly. "It's hard to explain, but I have a different plan that could save you, if you'll only voluntarily surrender and put yourself into my custody."

"Pah!" spat the hunchback vehemently. "Being a quack, you've learned how to hoodwink people with an oily tongue and clever lies. You just want the credit for capturing me. But your scheme won't work, Quaine. I'm not surrendering voluntarily."

"Then it'll have to be involuntarily!" barked Quaine, leaping at him.

"There's blood in your eye!" snapped LeClaire. "Literally!"

At the same time he flung the contents of the bottle he held at the charging man. Quaine felt the wet, sticky fluid splash into his face, making him stop short. Revolted, he wiped the blood from his eyes, only to see that LeClaire had skipped around him and was at the door.

Growling, Quaine turned and lunged for him before he could grasp the doorknob. But LeClaire had another bottle with him, which he ripped open and spilled at the same time. Blood splashed directly in front of Quaine's feet. His shoes struck the slippery fluid and his feet went out from under him, landing him flat on his back and knocking out his breath.

In the open door, the hunchback paused to leer back at his fallen foe. "Idiot! You'll never get the better of me. And I'll keep creating chaos in Clinic Center, with a change of tactics now and then—such as spilling that blood and wrecking the schedule for operations on patients requiring that type of blood. There are a thousand things I can do in the Clinic to spread havoc and bring the whole place to a grinding halt, in time. And you'll go down in the ruins, Dr. Quack Quaine!" Then he disappeared.

Gasping in huge lungfuls of air as he regained his breath, Quaine staggered to his feet. Out in the hall, glancing both ways, he saw nothing. He clenched his teeth as he heard a faint mocking laugh from somewhere—but where? Quaine could not know it was from beyond the wall, from a secret passageway.

A nurse came down the hall and shrieked, stopping short before him. "Dr. Quaine! You're covered with blood. I'll rush you to the emergency ward. . . ."

"Forget it," growled Quaine, pushing her hand away. "I only lost one hundred quarts—of the Clinic's supply, that is." He strode away, leaving the nurse with her mouth open and looking dizzy.

At five o'clock the next evening, at the lab, Quaine promptly peeled off his lab coat.

"Keeping regular hours?" observed Lynne with a gentle smile. "Have you joined the researchers' union?"

"My moonlighting job awaits me," said Quaine straight-faced. A trace of tense anger came into his voice. "When I think of last night and that fiasco in the blood room. . . ." The rest was a growl. "He tricked me like a child. But if it's a battle of wits, I think I can match him." He frowned. "The one big advantage he's got is how he can vanish so swiftly, almost before your eyes."

"What's the answer to that?" the girl was puzzled.

"Simple, Lynne. The whole place, like any big building complex, contains a hidden honeycomb of passageways for repairmen and troubleshooters, if anything goes wrong with the electricity, plumbing, air conditioning and all



that. Being the architect, he undoubtedly knows the whole maze by heart."

"Then couldn't we get hold of the blueprints and see the whole layout?"

"I inquired already," said Quaine briefly. "Dr. Endersby says the Clinic itself has no set of plans, and the construction company were told to return them to LeClaire. He must have destroyed or hidden them by now."

Quaine strode to the door. "A blind alley. So my only hope is to watch outside, hoping to spot him sneaking here and grab him before he slips into his rat maze."

Lynne was still shuddering after he left. The thought of a psychopath crawling unseen throughout the Clinic, able to pop out at any moment to pull his deviltry, was unnerving to say the least. Lynne left soon after. The daily crystallization of Substance X was proceeding on schedule and operated automatically. She left the vacuum pump running for another batch. She would return before midnight and turn it off, retrieving another portion of the precious crystals.

The girl strolled down the corridor and took an elevator down to the fifth floor. She passed the general lounge to the dormitory section of wing number one. Unlike many other hospitals, Clinic Center had provided living facilities for a select portion of its staff. Small but comfortable apartments had been installed, at an economical rent, for those who wanted to live close to their work.

Quaine, of course, had taken one. It was ideal for him, a bachelor, to live there. Lynne had also rented one, since her parents lived far away and she disliked the thought of daily commuting from Tarlton, the nearest city.

Lynne paused at apartment twelve, used her key to unlock the door, and stepped in. It was a compact living-room-bedroom-bath. All meals were eaten out at the Clinic's various cafeterias, coffee shops, and its one restaurant. The furniture was modern American with a spacious couch and two stuffed chairs, plus stand lamps. Her decorating touch was reflected in the flowing curtains of a rose design and a few choice landscapes on the walls. Not fancy, but adequate.

She fixed herself a mild drink with rye and ginger ale, and added ice cubes from a small portable freezer hidden in the corner. She sat down on the couch, sipping slowly, feeling her jangling nerves slowly ease up. She peered anxiously out the window at the gathering dusk, shivering again at the thought of the misshapen black form that might be only awaiting full darkness before he stalked the Clinic like a ghou. But she worried more at the thought of Quaine out there, hoping to waylay the hunched culprit who was carrying out his deadly program of turning the Clinic into a madhouse.

She was not only worried for Quaine's safety, but over his attitude toward her. Since that first luncheon together, Quaine had seemed to relapse into his old routine, drawing within his shell. Was her short "romance" all over before it had really begun? Should she try to forget him as a man and just consider him a boss? *Forget him? How?*

She took a gulp of her drink, but it didn't help. Quaine was the only one for her, and if he was beyond reach, what then? All the while her eyes surveyed the grounds outside as the darkness spread its blanket. Wing one was, of course, adjacent to wing five, where the construction machinery was now mostly gone. During the day, workmen were tearing down all temporary shelters and storage sheds. Soon, when the last landscaping had been done, all signs of the work crew would be gone.

Suddenly, Lynne caught her breath. One shack still stood there, apparently scheduled to be among the last torn down. The one-time field office of Renolf LeClaire, chief architect.

*Was there the slightest chance that his complete set of blueprints was still in there?*

Lynne jumped up to put on her coat and tie a scarf around her ash-blond hair. Surely, LeClaire would have removed all blueprints by now, realizing that if they fell into other hands, he might be pursued and trapped within his maze of passageways.

Still, criminals and lawbreakers of all kinds were known to forget the *obvious* at times. It was worth a try. Heart beating in hope, Lynne slipped out of a side exit of her

wing and stood in the cool night breeze, wrapping her coat more tightly around her. She had brought a small flashlight but did not dare use it here in the open. It would be too easy for LeClaire to see the light and become suspicious of someone snooping around his shack.

So she stumbingly picked her way over the rough ground, in this last unfinished patch of the construction site, seeing the shack dimly in the reflected glow of Clinic lights. Reaching the cabin, she carefully tried the door, but it was locked. She bit her lip.

But then she began circling the small shack and checked the windows. They were the swing-in type, hinged at the top. She almost gave a cry of relief as she saw one of them open an inch. That meant it was not latched inside.

Hastily, she dragged over several boards lying nearby and piled them up. Standing on them, she was able to push the window all the way in until a catch caught hold. Then she swung one leg over the window sill and drew up the other one, then jumped down into the shack.

All was still and dark, with a musty odor as if undisturbed for some while. She had to risk using her flashlight now, keeping the beam low. She quickly found the upright file with narrow shelves an inch apart, from top to bottom. In each were thick sheets of paper.

She drew one out and found it was a flat heavy piece of paper two feet wide and three feet long. Her heart leaped as her flashlight beam showed a typical blueprint of some portion of Clinic Center. She eagerly pulled out sheet after sheet and finally saw one that was labeled ELECTRICAL CONDUIT ACCESS PASSAGEWAY. The drawing and its intricate markings confused her eye, but she knew it must delineate one of the hidden repair tunnels within the Clinic. An experienced eye could point out exactly where that passageway was.

She could hardly believe her good luck. By some quirk of his reasoning processes, LeClaire had neglected to clean out this set of blueprints of Clinic Center, which was complete from end to end. Elated, she began pulling out and piling up the sheets. She realized she could not carry them flat. When she tried rolling them up, the pile was too

thick. She had to separate them and make small rolls. She had noticed a ball of twine nearby on the desk and swiftly began tying up the paper rolls.

She worked frantically. There was no time to go and get help. She must get them out herself right now in case LeClaire, by some twist of fate, should happen to think of the dangerous blueprints and come for them. As she was trying the last roll, a sound made Lynne straighten up in alarm.

It was a key in a lock!

The next moment the door swung open and a deformed figure, blacker than the night darkness, was outlined against the faint outside glow of the Clinic. Lynne remained kneeling, transfixed in terror. She tried to scream, but it caught in her dry throat and only came out as a strangled sound.

"Ah, Miss Carlyle," came the raspy voice of the Hunchback Horror. "You might have gotten away with this and severely handicapped my plans, except that I was on my way to the Clinic and happened to glance this way to see a faint gleam in my cabin. Your flashlight."

He spoke as if to himself next, toeing the rolls of blueprints beside her. "Stupid of me, really. How could I forget about these and fail to destroy them?"

Lynne was still struck dumb in fright. But her mind was working, seeking a way out of this fearful situation. She suddenly sprang up from her kneeling position and darted for the open door, brushing past LeClaire and hoping to take him by surprise. Then, if she yelled bloody murder outside, some guard would be within earshot and come running.

But Lynne never reached the doorway. In lightning reflex, the hunchback caught her hair and yanked her back. She managed to let out one piercing shriek before a gloved fist brutally struck her on the jaw.

Dazedly, she kept her feet and heard his hissing voice. "Though I love you, my dear, and wish you no harm, I must render you helpless quickly and destroy those blueprints."

She hardly heard the last word as again a powerful blow caught her on the cheek, jerking her head back. Blackness enfolded her senses and she sank silently to the floor, out cold.

LeClaire dragged her limp form outside the door. Then, after a quick glance around, he leaped back in the shack. Taking a packet of matches from his belt, he lighted one and stooped to set fire to the blueprints. As the blaze grew bigger, he kicked the other rolls together in a heap and watched them go up in flames.

"The shack will burn too," he muttered, "but who cares? The girl goes with me. . . ."

It was the hunchback's turn to gasp in surprise, as a hulking form leaped over the limp girl and catapulted into the cabin.

"Quaine!" said LeClaire in a choked tone.

"Your nemesis, shall we say," Quaine said in a deadly tone. "I saw the flicker of flames coming from this shack's window. I was hunting for you, LeClaire—and I've got you trapped!"

The blueprints were burned through, but the flames had caught at the dry wooden flooring and one wall, rapidly spreading.

"The place will be a raging inferno in a few minutes," said Quaine grimly, blocking the door with his big body. "And the only way out is through me. Want to try it?"

The hunchback licked his lips, drawing back as a tongue of flame flicked toward him.

"You can save yourself in one way." Quaine glared at him. "By surrendering to me without a struggle."

"To be handed over to the police, I suppose," said LeClaire harshly.

"Not necessarily," Quaine replied to his enemy's surprise. "I want to explain how I can perhaps help you—" He broke off as a burning ember from the blazing wall broke loose and almost fell at his feet. "But no time to go into that now. Promise to come out quietly and we'll both get out of this firetrap."

For answer, the hunchback suddenly grabbed up an-

other burning ember and flung it. Quaine dodged, but then saw that it hadn't been aimed at him. It arched out the door and landed on the sprawled form of Lynne Carlyle.

"Her clothes will catch on fire!" Quaine whirled and darted out. "But I'll still be outside the door," he yelled back. "You can't escape."

"I'll find my own door out," came the hunchback's confident voice. Beating out the flames that had caught in Lynne's skirt, Quaine glanced in at the fire-lighted scene to see another amazing acrobatic feat by LeClaire. He leaped up to catch a crossbeam of the crudely built shack, which had never had a regular ceiling. He swung himself upward and his feet crashed through the flimsy roof of cedar shingles. His whole body followed through the gap in a smooth, flowing motion. Quaine ran around the corner of the shack, but the black-clad form was already dashing away, blending with the night shadows.

Mocking laughter floated back. "We'll meet again another night—to your sorrow," were the hunchback's gloating words.

Muttering curses, Quaine swiftly returned to the fallen girl. He ripped off the part of her skirt that was still smoldering. Underneath, he saw the raw red burns she had suffered on her thigh.

"Lynne!" he moaned aloud, agony in his tone. "Lynne, why don't you come to? Did that monster kill you? Oh, Lynne—my darling—"

He grabbed up her still form, hugging her fiercely. "Lynne, if you're dead, I'll hound him down and—"

Lynne opened one eye carefully. She stirred and gave a little moan. "Lynne! You're alive! Thank heavens—"

"Why didn't you feel for my pulse, doctor?" she whispered softly in his ear.

Quaine jerked, but did not let go of her. "Because," he said sheepishly, "every rational thought scattered out of my head when you looked so pale . . . and so lovely. . . ."

He suddenly sat down beside her, his eyes staring as if into the past. "Now I see," he said slowly. "Now I see that

I've loved you all along . . . and didn't know it. Fantastic, but true! Yes, do you hear me, Lynne darling? I love you!"

Lynne very nearly went limp again in a dead faint. Again the queer paradox flashed through her mind—it was always the Hunchback Horror who aided her love life.

Weakly, she whispered, "Kiss me, my dearest."

Quaine did, almost crushing her ribs.

When he let go, Lynne gasped, "That was no scientist's kiss. That was the kiss of a *man*. A red-blooded man. And you're all mine." She added timidly. "Aren't you?"

Quaine laughed. "Every inch of my body and every ounce of my brain, you lovely witch." He pulled her to her feet, wrapped his arms around her, and planted a firm kiss on her lips again.

He let go as she whimpered a little. "No, it's not you," she said quickly as he looked appalled. "That burn on my leg . . . tender."

"My God, what a genius I am," Quaine chided himself. "You're hurt and I'm making love to you. Let's see, if I carry you in my arms, that sore place will rub and hurt more, so. . . ."

With one easy motion, Quaine slung her over his shoulder and trundled her at a trot toward the nearest door of the Clinic. Ignoring the stares of nurses and internes, Quaine continued his unconventional manner of transportation, trotted down the corridors to the emergency room, and tenderly placed her on a wheeled table.

"Dr. Quaine. What—?"

"Lynne Carlyle. Burns on left thigh. Blows in her face, judging by those welts. Take good care of her, Dr. Simpson. *Very* good care."

Lynne didn't even wince in pain as Dr. Simpson probed at the burns. The words "*Very* good care," rang through her mind in giddy joy.

"I say, Miss Carlyle, where does it hurt when I touch your face?"

"Hurt?" echoed Lynne vaguely. "Oh, I don't hurt anywhere, doctor."

Growling something to himself, Dr. Simpson began attending to her burns and facial bruises. He shook his head as she smiled and smiled through it all. She didn't even need an anesthetic. Some other amazing anesthetic was at work within her.



## Chapter 9

After the nurse had installed the big bouquet in a suitable vase, Lynne opened the card. "To my lab partner," it said, "and my life partner." Signed, "A Googol of Love, Quentin."

Lynne snatched up her bedside phone, asking for a medical researcher known for his mathematical ability. "Dr. Cratchet, what's a googol?"

"A googol, my dear young lady, amounts to one followed by a hundred zeroes, or ten to the ninety-ninth power. That's more than all the atoms in all of cosmic space. It's purely an exaggerated term. There is no such quantity of anything in the entire universe."

"Oh, yes, there is," said Lynne to herself as she cradled the phone. "Quaine's love for me." She shook her head at the miracle of it all. "When those brainy guys fall, they fall all the way—for a googol of miles."

Quaine visited her in the evening. He sat down stiffly, his face impersonal. "I understand that your burns are so superficial that no skin graft is needed, only bandages for a week. But you'll be released tomorrow. I trust I'll see you back in the lab on the job the day after. That is all, Miss Carlyle."

He got up stiffly to go, his face wooden. Lynne's beige-brown eyes were wide and filling with tears. She tried to speak, but couldn't. He had thought better of it. He was pulling out of her "clutches."

Quaine whirled around with a face-splitting grin, strode to her bedside, and gave her a bone-crushing hug. "Couldn't resist pulling it, lovely one."

"Oh, you monster!" breathed Lynne, letting the tears of happiness run.

"Listen," said Quaine, handing her his hanky. "We'll celebrate tomorrow night, after you're released. How about the amusement park in Tarlton?"

"Oh, darling, that'll be a googol of fun."

Not thirty feet above, at the end of an air vent from her room, a hunched figure huddled in a cramped space with big air pipes and listened, able to distinguish the words in spite of their faint voices. His scarred face was a mixture of jealousy and fury. His prediction to Lynne had come true, after all.

"Lynne Carlyle, the beautiful creature I love," the hunchback muttered to himself. He shook a clenched fist. "Quaine won't have her, I'll see to that. I'll spoil their love idyll, one way or another. You'll see, Dr. Quack Quaine!"

Lights and gaiety. Couples laughing. The carousel's merry tune. The rumble of roller coasters and screaming girls.

Quaine and Lynne drank in the carnival atmosphere, holding hands. Steady sea-blue eyes and beige-brown eyes smiled at each other.

Serious for a moment, Lynne said, "Did you say there were no further depredations at the Clinic by the Hunchback Horror in the past few nights?"

"Right," nodded the tall scientist. "I suspect that Le-Claire sustained a few burns himself during the fire at his shack. When I looked in and saw him make that swing up through the roof, several patches of his black suit were smoldering. He had to lie low and nurse his wounds, no doubt. I didn't even patrol, having a feeling he wouldn't show in the meantime. Incidentally, that was a great idea of yours, looking for his blueprints in his field office."

"What good did it do?" Lynne spread her hands. "He succeeded in burning up the blueprints, keeping everybody in the dark as to his secret system of passageways. But don't the repairmen of various kinds have their own individual maps to their particular passageways?"

"Yes, but they're limited and incomplete, failing to

show any connection to the maze as a whole. LeClaire is the only one alive who has it all memorized and locked up in his mind." Quaine waved a hand of dismissal. "But let's forget that dismal subject. We came here to have fun—and celebrate. Celebrate the fact that you're my girl now."

Lynne squeezed his hand and leaned her head against his shoulder. Even the discomfort of the bandages around her left thigh, hidden by her skirt, failed to dampen her spirits. The slight swelling of her jaw, and the faint bruise mark on her cheek still showed on close scrutiny, but as Quaine had assured her earlier—"You still look more beautiful than any ten other girls put together, honey."

"Oooh! Cotton candy." Lynne pointed at the stand ahead where the paper cones were propped, topped by huge pink-and-white fluffs. "Haven't had any since I was a little girl."

Quaine bought her one, and took a taste at her insistence. Then she gobbled the rest, exclaiming over its wonderful taste. Further on, they had soft drinks, toasting each other with light remarks but with deep meaning. Each moment, the links of love were being forged between them, stronger and stronger all the time.

Lynne happened to glance back of them and froze suddenly. "That little man following us," she said in a low voice, half-alarmed. "A hunchback!"

Startled, Quaine took a look. The deformed little man was dressed in a gay clown's outfit, topped by a gaudy peaked cap painted in psychedelic colors. On his feet were sandals with funny curled-up toes. His face was painted in a caricature of a gorilla with big purple lips, a green nose, and yellow skin dotted with confetti. People smiled at him in passing and kids hooted and laughed.

Quaine grinned in relief. "Just a hired clown, Lynne. There are other hunchbacks in the world, you know."

"Silly of me to think of LeClaire," said Lynne, brushing away a strand of her hair with a still-shaky hand.

But it *was* LeClaire following them. His disguise was complete so that nobody could associate him with the Hunchback Horror. He had been following them surreptitiously for some time, and closely enough to hear many of

their low-voiced endearments. Each time, his painted face hid the black scowl that crossed his features. Jealousy mounted higher each moment. Jealousy of Quaine, his mortal enemy.

You made me a hunchback, Quaine, his thoughts seethed. And you've won the only girl on earth I ever fell in love with. But we'll see if she wants you after I get through with you.

The scheming hunchback waited until the couple ahead turned down a side walkway where the crowds were less and the carnival attractions fewer. At the end was a dock and moored boats. The water of an artificial stream went into a tunnel with a huge neon display of two hearts pierced by an arrow, plus a sign—TUNNEL OF LOVE. Everybody knew it was dark inside, the ideal place for stolen kisses.

Like young teenagers, Quaine looked at Lynne and she nodded with a grin. Quaine bought tickets and the attendant shoved them off in a small boat with one paddle.

When their boat disappeared within the arch of the canal, the gayly dressed hunchback darted from cover and hired a boat. Each boat was swept by the gushing water into and through the long, winding tunnel. Most of the outside light was cut off except for a dim glow that came from underwater light fixtures, enough to prevent panic or accidents with children. The paddle was only for gently moving away from the side of the tunnel if the boat came too close to the wall.

When the hunchbacked clown's eyes adjusted to the deep gloom, he spied the boat ahead. Again emotion choked him as he saw Quaine and Lynne hugging each other and kissing passionately. Their sighs of love further scorched his writhing soul.

Now's the time, he thought, glancing quickly backward. No other boat behind them, and none ahead. Taking care to dip his paddle without noise, he slowly drew closer to their boat. Their mutual adoration made them oblivious to danger.

Carefully, the hunchback drew a stoppered plastic bottle from within his clown suit. It was labeled—DANGER!

ACID! Now was the time to act. His boat drew parallel with theirs and LeClaire grasped the side of their boat with one hand. The other hand held the bottle poised; after he pulled off the cork with his teeth.

"Dr. Quack Quaine!" hissed the hunchback. As Quaine turned his full face, startled, LeClaire yelled, "I'm a plastic surgeon and I'm going to change your face—with acid!" At the same time he flung the contents of the bottle straight at Quaine's face—only Quaine's face wasn't there.

Hearing the slight squeak of the plastic cork coming out of the plastic bottle, Quaine had turned a split second before. Again, his trained scientific mind took in the situation in computerlike swiftness. He had shoved Lynne to the bottom of the boat and bent himself far backward, as the fuming acid flew between them through the air. Meeting nothing, it went on and fell hissing into the water beyond.

With an anguished curse, the hunchback threw aside his empty bottle and started paddling furiously ahead, following the moving current through the tunnel of love.

"It was LeClaire, *our* hunchback," snapped Quaine, grabbing his paddle. "Stay in the bottom of the boat so I can paddle with freedom."

Quaine then used his paddle furiously, first on one side and then the other, as in a canoe. The bogus clown had a head start and his powerful muscles propelled his boat through the final straight stretch of the tunnel at high speed.

But Quaine was putting all his power-packed back and shoulders into his stroke, remembering the timed precision of shellboat racing he had done at college. Slowly, he gained on the fleeing boat.

"I'll get you for this, you human monster!" Quaine spat through his clenched teeth.

LeClaire's face only held its huge painted grin, but underneath his true expression was panicky. Was Quaine a man or a superman? His boat kept gaining despite the gasping effort LeClaire put into paddling.

But then the artificial tunnel ended and the two boats shot out into the small landing lagoon at the end of the

ride. The hunchback swerved for the nearest boarded curbing and leaped out. Quaine was seconds later, as an astonished attendant stared in wonder. Lynne was left to use the paddle and make her own way to the landing dock. When she stepped from the boat, both racing figures were out of sight down the winding walkway.

The two running figures almost bowled people over on the walkway. LeClaire's legs propelled his short light body at good speed. But again he heard pounding feet behind him, getting louder. Quaine had his head down and was running like an athlete in the one-hundred-yard dash.

Was there no way to shake that mass of muscle behind him, thought LeClaire in growing alarm. Then he saw his opportunity. He ducked under a turnstile, ignoring the hoarse shout of a fat woman in the ticket booth nearby. He darted past a sign proclaiming—BEWARE! PIT OF DARKNESS!

Beyond was pitch darkness. The hunchback collided with an unseen wall. He stopped and held onto the wall for a moment, wheezing. Behind him he heard heavy panting—Quaine had also plunged into the place.

But now LeClaire's fear died down. He knew this place, having taken some girlfriend through it years ago—at the time when he *had* girlfriends, he thought bitterly. He pictured the general layout. It was a sort of maze with short blind alleys into which people stumbled and had to grope their way back to the main passageway. Some people ahead with kids were laughing hilariously as they blundered around. At timed intervals, various large niches in the wall would light up briefly so that people wouldn't get scared in the prolonged darkness. In each niche, was a gargoye face, meant to be fearful, but executed so crudely that they looked funny rather than menacing.

LeClaire saw the faint glow of a niche lighting up beyond a turn ahead. Knowing that the niche nearest him would next light up in a timed sequence, he threw himself flat on the floor against the wall.

Quaine reached that spot just as the niche light flashed. He quickly stared ahead, then stopped. No sign of the hunchback ahead. It baffled him. LeClaire could not have

raced through this utter darkness and should be within sight.

The only possibility was that his quarry had managed to slip into a side passageway, a blind alley, momentarily. In the renewed darkness, Quaine groped his way forward and came to the bend into the side passage. He stopped to wait for another niche light to expose the hunchback cowering in a corner of the blind alley.

Quaine was unaware of the silent black form, now behind him, that slowly arose and tiptoed back the way they had come. LeClaire emerged into the open air, laughing within. By the time Quaine searched gropingly at every possible twist in the maze, LeClaire would have all the time in the world to leave.

He even paused to flip a coin at the ticket seller after he ducked under the turnstile again. Then he sauntered away and soon lost himself in the gala midway crowd.

Meanwhile, Quaine went on through the Pit of Darkness, nowhere encountering the hunchback. When he emerged at the exit, he stared at the midway crowds, baffled. Somehow, LeClaire had cunningly escaped him. Muttering to himself, Quaine retraced his steps to the Tunnel of Love dock where Lynne waited.

"Got away," murmured Quaine, taking her arm, briefly telling about the chase in the Pit of Darkness.

Lynne kept looking around anxiously. Her face was pinched and pale, with horror still reflected in her eyes. "He—he threw acid at your face. Oh, Quaine! If he had succeeded!"

"Forget it," barked Quaine. "He didn't, so why think about it? And don't keep looking over your shoulder. He wouldn't dare try pulling something twice. And there's no use telling the amusement-park police and describing his costume disguise. By now, LeClaire has stripped it off and is in hiding."

Quaine was right. Emerging from a dark space between two concessionaire structures was a hunchback in ordinary clothes. He had not worn his black suit under the clown suit. Also his face bore no sign of paint.

LeClaire threaded his way through the crowds without

fear of recognition by the public. In all the headline stories about the **HUNCHBACK HORROR** in the past few weeks, no paper had published a picture of his damaged features. No picture had ever been taken, either at the hospital before his escape or afterward when he eluded all guards and police. He was just an anonymous hunchback to all eyes. The only real stare he got was from a small hunchbacked woman who gave him the eye, half-smiling. LeClaire hastened on.

Sure, he thought, as another wave of frustration shook him from head to toe. I can get a date anytime—with a female hunchback! Or some other freak. Blast it, why did that acid miss Quaine? Then his eaten-away face would have made Lynne shriek in horror. And he wouldn't even be able to look in a mirror and see it for himself—he'd have been blinded for life.

Two policemen came strolling along, toward LeClaire. The hunchback halted, worried. They might have heard a good description of his face. Taking no chances, the hunchback turned to a nearby booth and bought a ticket. He hurried through the turnstile, not even knowing what the exhibit was. He glanced at the sign as he entered—**HOUSE OF CRAZY MIRRORS!**

As he went past them, he glanced indifferently at the various distorted reflections of himself in the full-length mirrors. People ahead were laughing uproariously at their own hilarious images, but LeClaire only wanted to get out, now that the cops would be gone.

Suddenly, he stopped at one mirror, stricken. The image that stared back at him was of a tall man with a straight back and normal body, arms and legs. By some diabolical quirk, this "funny" mirror had "distorted" his twisted shape back into its former upright physique.

He stood there, caught by a horrible fascination. He trembled. It was no distortion of the mirror that an infinitely sad look came over the image's face. Nor that two tears squeezed out of the haunted eyes.

Then the hunched little man turned and went on, his shoulders slumped in infinite despair. . . .



## Chapter 10

The next morning, Lynne was first at the lab and opened the door with her own key. She donned her lab cast and turned on the vacuum pump for the continued crystallization of Substance X.

Turning to make a test of the purity of the last sample, she shuddered as she saw the shelf of bottles all labeled ACID. Would the vengeful hunchback try some other way to maim or cripple Quaine? She would talk to him when he came in and make him promise to be on his guard all the time. Lynne knew she would always feel nervous until the Hunchback Horror was finally caught and jailed. Or killed.

Last night's blood-chilling incident had cast a pall over her happiness. It was great to be in love, but not so great when your man was the target of an inhuman fiend. Why must LeClaire, without any proof whatsoever, believe that Dr. Quaine was a quack? An incompetent bungler who had made a ghastly surgical error and turned his patient into a hunchback by mistake? How could any sane and reasonable man think that and then seek revenge in fantastically horrible ways?

She sighed. The answer was that LeClaire was neither sane nor reasonable. He had turned psychopathic. He was a paranoid with a fixed obsession that he had been wronged.

Waiting for Quaine and his instructions, she had time to go to her locker and pull out a brush. She began brushing her hair before the mirror affixed to the back of the locker

door. It was then she saw the envelope tucked behind the mirror.

She drew it out. It was dead black with no name on it. She opened it and drew out a single sheet of black paper, with writing on it in bright red—like fresh blood. It read:

Dear Miss Carlyle:

You think I'm a madman who has unfairly accused Dr. Quaine of being responsible for my condition. By snooping around and checking hospital records, I finally found *proof*. If you want to find out the truth about it all, check the records in the back medical files for the time of my operation. You will find them in Room 22-D, sixth floor, in a folder marked with my name. Look for Dr. Alfred P. Henderson's written evaluation of my condition before surgery. What you read will alter your entire attitude toward both Dr. Quaine and toward me. And you will wonder *which one* of us is the "madman".

—Renolf LeClaire

There was a postscript: "Don't tell Dr. Quaine or he'll have a chance to slip up there and remove the incriminating document."

Lynne read it twice, her eyes shocked. At first she was tempted to throw it away as the mere ravings of a twisted mind. But then it would always lurk naggingly in her consciousness. Better to make the check-up and prove it a senseless trick, once and for all.

As the door opened and Quaine came in, she quickly thrust the black letter with its blood-red writing into the pocket of her lab coat and pretended to be touching up her lipstick. She responded to his cheery good morning with a forced smile.

She was nervous through the morning's work with the centrifuge, and Quaine finally said, in a kind tone, "Last night's experience still bothering you, my lovely?" Without waiting for an answer, he went on solicitously. "For the price of a kiss I'll let you have the afternoon off. Go to your room and rest, or take a walk. But the payoff first."

Lynne responded light-heartedly and made a movie siren pose. Quaine swept her up in his bearlike arms, lifting her off the floor, as he planted a solid kiss on her lips. "It's lunchtime," said Quaine after letting her down. "I'm going to keep working and have a bite later, so you go now. See you tomorrow."

Lynne had no appetite either. The letter burned in her pocket.

She was grateful for the afternoon off for she could now check the records and get it over with. She felt foolish as she told the nurse in charge of the sixth floor that she was on an errand for Dr. Quaine and needed to see some records in Room 22-D. The chief nurse made no objection and went to unlock the door for her.

Alone inside, Lynne felt even more the fool for carrying out the instructions of a demented man. But she might as well go through with it now. Then she could tell Dr. Quaine and they'd have a good laugh over it.

She found the right file and pulled it open, extracting the folder labeled—RENOLF LeCLAIRE. She went quickly through various unimportant sheets noting his arrival at the emergency ward, the preliminary diagnosis, and other medical data.

Then she came upon a smaller folder which held the forms and statements made out by three other doctors. As in any major surgery, the evaluation of several doctors was required to confirm—or reject—the surgical procedure planned by the doctor in charge of the patient.

The first report was signed by Dr. Edmond Philbert. Familiar with medical terminology, Lynne glanced through the report and then read his final comment—"Difficult as this case is for reaching a clear-cut surgical procedure, I agree that Dr. Quaine has chosen the only proper course." Doctors were always guarded in these things. Lynne knew it was full endorsement. The others, of course, would be the same or similar, she told herself.

But the second report was not so forthright. Dr. Anton Berger stated rather doubtfully—"In my opinion, in accord with the Heinemann-Baker theory of spinal injuries,

there is a question whether Dr. Quaine's method is for the best. However, I have no alternative to offer."

Lynne smiled. A fence sitter, as he had always been. All his confirmations in consultation diagnosis or prognosis were weasel-worded, probably because the man hated to commit himself and thus leave himself no out if something went wrong.

But her smile faded as she went through the third report of Dr. Alfred P. Henderson. His diagnosis held significant differences from Quaine's. And the end statement in his scratchy handwriting leaped at Lynne like a blow in the face.

"I am forced to go on record as being *against* Dr. Quaine's proposed operation on the broken body of Renolf LeClaire. I do not see the need for spinal foreshortening which will leave the patient a hunchback. I believe the case should be taken out of Dr. Quaine's hands for his faulty diagnosis and his totally erroneous surgical plan. The patient need not become a deformed cripple in order to save his life, as Dr. Quaine claims. His operational procedure would be little better than that of a *quack*."

*Quack!* Her face drained of color, Lynne sat frozenly and stared at the damning word—the word LeClaire had used all along. One doctor for, one doctor unsure, and one doctor against. Not a good record for a diagnostic consultation. A majority opinion counted, but was this a "majority"? The doubtful doctor could be put on either side. And under those circumstances, Quaine should *not have operated!* It wasn't exactly medically unethical, but *personally* unethical.

Lynne groaned. Her wonderful Dr. Quaine a "quack" after all, at least in this one case? Renolf LeClaire right all the time that he *could* have been saved from a hunchback's degrading life?

No . . . no! There must be some mistake. Some explanation. Lynne jumped up, snatching up the complete folder, and going out with it. She signed a receipt for it, for the head nurse, then took an elevator and marched to Dr. Endersby's office. She'd have it out with him. After

all, it was the chief administrator who made all final decisions on controversial medical cases.

Dr. Endersby's receptionist politely informed a crestfallen Lynne that he had been suddenly called out of town on an important matter. When he would return was not known.

Biting her lip in vexation, Lynne thought of confronting Quaine in his lab and asking for his story—but no. She quailed at the thought of being the instrument of suspicion against him. It would be almost like her being a messenger for the Hunchback Horror. She had to think this over.

See Dr. Henderson himself? Ask if he really had meant what amounted to a condemnation of Quaine? But Lynne was too heartsick at this moment to confront anybody. She went to her room with a sick headache, her temples throbbing agonizingly.

She almost screamed as she saw the black envelope lying on her bed. Another note from the hunchback? Her fingers shook as she ripped the envelope open. She sat down limply on her bed as she read the blood-red message:

Well, Miss Carlyle? Convinced? If not, check with Dr. Endersby, when he returns, about something else. It's been hushed up but notification of another malpractice suit has been received—against Dr. Quentin Q. Quaine. The middle initial stands for "Quack," of course! There is a xerox copy enclosed.

—The Mad (?) Hunchback

Lynne fumbled in her haste to unfold the other sheet of xerox paper. She did not doubt it was genuine. With his ability to creep anywhere in the Clinic, through his maze of access tunnels, he could easily slip into an office to rifle its files and use its Xerox machine.

It was a poor copy with somewhat broken lettering. But besides the official phrases one name stood out below—*Quentin Q. Quaine*. The doctor against whom the malpractice charge was made. She also noted the date of the original operation, over a year ago when Quaine was still

doing surgery and before he had been assigned to medical research. In fact, the date was only a week before the operation had been performed on Renolf LeClaire. As for a year going by before the patient sued, that was because complications had set in slowly and built up before the patient decided to claim malpractice.

Suddenly, Lynne was suspicious. She had always been Dr. Quaine's chief nurse's aide at that time, during operations. She recalled no patient named—what was it?—Anthony Starcher. But then she remembered, with a pang, that her father had been seriously ill that week and Dr. Endersby had given her time off to rush to his bedside. Her father had fortunately recovered and when she got back, Quaine had casually mentioned that during her absence he had done some minor surgery plus one major job. The major job, on a broken pelvic bone, must be the one named in the suit for malpractice as charged by Anthony Starcher.

Then there was no doubt about it. Not only one doctor's strong dissent from Quaine's proposed method of operating on LeClaire, but a previous operation now called malpractice. Was Quaine, unknown to her, a careless or inept surgeon who had kept his deficiencies under cover? It had been done before by certain unscrupulous doctors who were later exposed and disbarred from further medical practice.

Lynne sat still for long minutes, holding the red-lettered black note and the Xerox sheet in either hand, staring at them. Her world seemed to turn over. She felt as if someone were trampling over her heart.

With a sob, finally, she let the papers drop from her nerveless fingers, threw herself across the bed, and let the tears flow.

Meanwhile, in his laboratory, Quaine jumped back as sparks flew from the electrical connection that fed power to his vacuum pump. The pump stopped, delaying his crystallization of Substance X. Impatiently, Quaine phoned the maintenance chief of Clinic Center, who promised to have a man there in ten minutes. When the

electrician came and checked, he turned, shaking his head.

"Not just a bad plug or a circuit-breaker that popped here in the lab. That pump takes lots of juice. Seems an overloaded cable or voltage transformer must have blown, down in the main electrical system."

The man began to unfold a sheet. "I'll have to check this blueprint and figure how to get there . . . hmm. Looks like on the first floor there's a trap door in a supply closet, leading to the electrical conduit I want."

"Let me look at that," demanded Quaine, snatching it away and poring over it eagerly. "Does it show all the connecting repair passageways?"

"Naw," said the electrician. "It's only for electrical repairs here in wing number one where your lab is."

Disappointed, Quaine handed it back. It was not the key to LeClaire's maze, only a tiny part of it. But still, if Quaine explored, it might give him a general idea of how the tunnels were linked together. Tossing aside his lab coat and pulling on his turtleneck sweater, Quaine followed the electrician down to the first floor.

When the repairman swung open the trap door, Quaine crawled in after him. They were unable to stand upright in the circular tunnel crammed with electrical cables, and had to move forward with knees bent and heads lowered. The electrician's flashlight illuminated the way.

Further on, where another electrical conduit joined this passageway, the electrician checked his blueprint and nodded. "This is it." He pointed to a square metal transformer. "Lead-in cable is frayed. That's what made it short-circuit and shut itself off. Only take a minute to repair it."

While the repairman busied himself with tools slung from his belt, Quaine peered down the other tunnel and wondered if it connected up with the entire system of repair passageways. Now was his chance to find out.

When the electrician was finished, Quaine said, "Let me borrow your flashlight. I'll light your way back to the trap door."

The man was astonished. "What are you going to look for down here, doctor?"

"A rat," said Quaine tersely.

The electrician caught on. As he stepped from the trap door, he spoke seriously. "If you're looking for a rat with a humped back, be careful. That guy's dangerous."

"I'll take my chances," said Quaine shortly. He went back to the juncture of the two passageways and followed the second one. Then he came to another and stopped, perplexed. This one was a main "crossroads" with branch tunnels going in various directions. Mentally, he oriented himself, then chose one tunnel that would take him to the hub of Clinic Center—he hoped. He met more branch-offs and depended on intuition to follow the right ones.

He was elated, even if somewhat dizzy, when he finally emerged into a larger chamber which seemed to be the central meeting point of all electrical power, and led to the access passageways of all five wings. Luckily, the tunnels were labeled and he chose the one to wing number five—the next logical place for the Hunchback Horror to strike if he was following his schedule of terrorizing each wing in turn.

The flashlight lit his way as he crouched and followed electric cables deep into the heart of wing number five. It must be dark outside by now—the time for the hunched marauder to arrive. Quaine kneeled and held himself stock still, breathing as quietly as he could. All sound was sealed off from the hospital area around him. Sounds within the passageway itself should carry a long distance.

Quaine stiffened. He heard a faint shuffling sound far away. It must be LeClaire, somewhere in the maze!

Eagerly, Quaine moved toward the sound, pausing at times to listen. At a juncture of tunnels, the sound came louder from the left and he turned into it. At the next turn he made a mistake and almost lost the sound. But racing back and choosing the right branch-off with care, he was once again on the trail.

It was a strange game of stalking. Two men in a vast system of interconnecting passageways, one hunting the other. Quaine took off his shoes and went on in his socks, fearing LeClaire might hear his footsteps.

Quaine's pulse hammered in excitement as his quarry's



footfalls sounded loudly from a cross passage just ahead, coming his way. Quaine quickly switched off his flashlight. Then he saw it, the glow of another flashlight from the cross tunnel. Quaine sped forward in his stocking feet. At the cross tunnel, he flattened himself against one curving wall and waited.

A moment later a black-clad hunched figure stepped into the junction. Quaine had his flashlight upraised and poised as a weapon. But the hunchback was swinging his flashlight around as if to see where he was and the beam struck squarely into Quaine's eyes just as he swung his flashlight down—and missed. The flashlight slipped from his hand and went out as it hit the floor.

LeClaire had instinctively jerked back. "Quaine!" he snarled in great surprise. "Well, I'll fix you!" Quaine felt the hard flashlight striking his head. He went down with a groan. But it had been a hasty glancing blow and Quaine's head quickly cleared.

Before the hunchback could club him again, Quaine rose halfway and launched himself forward bodily. He grabbed LeClaire's legs like a football tackler and threw him heavily, hearing the hunchback grunt as he crashed to the floor.

He lay flat as if knocked out and Quaine relaxed. But suddenly, the hunchback's feet shot out, hitting Quaine in the chest and hurling him back.

"Hah!" gloated LeClaire. "You'll hit that transformer and take a jolt of two thousand volts!"

Barely in time, Quaine twisted himself as he fell back and avoided the black box of death. It was a dangerous arena for a fight with surging voltage all around them. Quaine gathered his strength to leap at the hunchback again, who was getting to his feet. But suddenly, LeClaire's flashlight flicked out and total darkness surrounded them.

"Your own flashlight went out when you dropped it," came the chortling voice of the hunchback. "I'll keep mine off and slip away. You don't know these tunnels like I do. If you blunder after me, you might touch a high-voltage line and get electrocuted!"

With that, Quaine heard the hunchback scuttling away down the left-hand passageway. On his hands and knees, Quaine dared not move in the pitch darkness. Would LeClaire get away—again?

An idea flashed into Quaine's mind. He groped and found his fallen flashlight. It was useless with the glass lens shattered and the bulb cracked. But it was a metal flashlight and Quaine had another plan. Feeling the side wall carefully, to estimate which way the tunnel extended, he hurled the dead flashlight through the air.

Suddenly, a shower of sparks half-filled the tunnel, limelighting the running figure. LeClaire halted in alarm, flinging an arm before his face as the electrical sparks sprayed dazzlingly around him from where Quaine's flashlight had lodged between two cables.

His blind toss had luckily done what he had hoped, created a short circuit. Automatic circuit breakers clicked and the sparks stopped. But LeClaire, in his startled panic, had dropped his flashlight which survived the fall and still shone forth its light. Light by which Quaine sped to him. The hunchback frantically grabbed up the flashlight as a weapon, but a moment too late. Quaine was upon him with a tremendous blow at his jaw.

With a short yelp, LeClaire fell, out cold.

Panting, Quaine looked down at him a moment, then took the flashlight out of his limp fingers. He slung the hunchback over his shoulder and trudged down the passageway, the flashlight lighting his way.

For a moment, in delayed reaction, Quaine sweated at the thought of how close he had been to high-voltage death during their fantastic battle among electrical cables. But then elation filled him at the thought of the limp captive on his shoulder.

The terrifying career of the Hunchback Horror was over!

## Chapter 11

After the all-out blow Quaine had delivered, LeClaire would not come to for quite a while, long enough for Quaine to find his way out of the maze. After a number of cross tunnels, he saw the typical arrow indicator that indicated a trap door leading into the Clinic itself.

He emerged by pure chance in a broom closet, somewhere in wing number one and figured that some of the passageways lay underground. He had thus crossed from wing five to the adjacent wing one. He stepped out into a room holding spare wheeled carts for transporting patients. The room was dark and Quaine switched on the lights. He lowered the slack form of the hunchback onto one of the carts fitted with straps. He carefully strapped LeClaire down.

He began wheeling him out, but then stopped as he saw fresh blood dripping onto the floor. His own blood. He felt his head and winced as his fingers met the gash there from the blow of LeClaire's flashlight before.

Quaine left the hunchback strapped on the cart and went out. Better to get first aid and stop the blood flow first, and then bring an armed guard to arrest LeClaire. Even if the hunchback came to, he couldn't break loose from the tough leather straps designed to hold down a hysterical or maniacal patient, if necessary.

After Quaine had disappeared around a corner of the corridor, quiet at this time of the night, a white-clad girl walked along the tiles. Lynn Carlyle was on her way to see if Quaine had returned to his apartment. She paused, hearing a moan beyond a closed door. Pushing it open,

she stared dumfounded at the black-clad figure strapped to a cart.

"Renolf LeClaire!" she gasped. "How did you—?"

He raised his head and saw her, his eyes clearing. "Ah, Miss Carlyle!" he exclaimed, quickly recovering his wits. "Listen, there's no time to lose. Dr. Quaine captured me down in the passageway system. He'll return soon with guards to arrest me. But you know the truth, Lynne—that he's a *quack!*"

Lynne winced, wetting her lips. "But I'm not sure. . . ."

"What?" barked LeClaire. "After the proof you saw? Not only in my case, but that second malpractice suit against him. What more do you need to be convinced?"

"I . . . I . . ." Lynne was confused, her thoughts and emotions all in a tangle.

"Lynne, let me free," LeClaire pressed on rapidly. "You know Quaine is really responsible for my becoming the Hunchback Horror. If I looked for revenge, can you blame me? Let me free, Lynne!"

"Please," cried Lynne, "It's not my decision to make. If Quaine is guilty of malpractice with you, let it come out. Then you'll have sympathy on your side. And with good psychiatric care—"

"No, no!" exploded LeClaire. "It won't work that way. Quaine will throw his weight around and win out, don't you see? He's covered up his former mistakes. He'll hush up this whole affair about me and I'll end up being punished in full while he goes free. It isn't fair, Lynne, and you know it!"

"Oh, God!" wailed Lynne, her feelings torn, her mind in a whirl. Sympathy for the pitiful hunchback lying there pulled at her. And though she could never stop loving Quaine, she seemed to see him in a new and terrible light as a man who had committed medical misdeeds, but hid behind a false shield of honor.

Oh, it was all mixed up, she thought to herself. What was the right thing to do?

Shrewdly sensing her mental turmoil, LeClaire put plaintive appeal in his voice. "Look, Lynne. I'll give up

my campaign against the Clinic and go away. I'll start up a new life under a different name. Give me that chance. Give me a break. Don't let them drag me through the hell that Quaine will create for me. Hasn't he done enough harm? And haven't I suffered enough at his hands?"

The last shred of reason and objective judgment fled from Lynne's tortured mind. Without a further word, she began unbuckling the straps, choking down sobs at the thought of how disloyal she was being to Dr. Quaine, her boss. And to Quentin, her lover.

Right and wrong were all mixed up now. She only felt great pity for the deformed wretch whose life had been twisted into doing deeds of horror, but through no fault of his own. She released him as she would release a rabbit from a trap.

The hunchback leaped nimbly off the cart. "Thanks," he said briefly, glancing around. "But there's no window in this room. I'll have to go out the door and. . . ."

Glancing out cautiously, he quickly jerked back and closed the door. "They're coming down the next cross corridor," he whispered. "Quaine and a guard. I saw their shadows. How can I get away?"

"Back on the cart," snapped Lynne. "Hurry! I'll get you away."

Divining her plan, the hunchback threw himself back on the cart lying face up. Lynne was already yanking a white sheet off a shelf and arranged it over him, covering him completely from head to toe. "Don't make a sound," she hissed, opening the door. Then she wheeled the cart out, closing the door quickly.

Outside in the corridor, she firmly wheeled the cart straight toward Quaine and the guard hurrying along. Lynne kept her head down, banking on the fact that they would be too anxious to pick up their captive to even glance at her face.

She was right. They both rushed past her, assuming that she was a nurse wheeling a patient who had just died to the elevators to take him down to the morgue. A common sight to them both.

Lynne wheeled the cart into a sunroom deserted at

night, with windows all around. She pulled off the sheet and the hunchback leaped off and quickly made for the window. Since **this** was the ground floor of wing one, he could easily leap to the ground.

Before he vanished in the dark, he turned and waved at the girl watching from a window. Then he was gone.

At first, watching him go, Lynne felt a sudden panic. What had she done? Was it right or wrong that she had helped the notorious Hunchback Horror escape? Had he hoodwinked her, played her for a fool? But the hunchback had shown no sign of mockery or gloating, as if he had deceived her or used her as a cat's paw. And he had seemed utterly sincere in promising to go away and not upset the Clinic any more with his demoniacal deeds.

It almost seemed, in fact, that he had come to his senses and "wakened" from his psychopathic madness. And the previous evidence he had uncovered, showing Quaine in a new light as a sort of Jekyll and Hyde. . . .

Lynne shivered as if an icy wind had blown upon her. Now she had to face Quaine. She straightened her shoulders and marched out of the sunroom and back down the corridor, steeling herself for what was to come. As she expected, Quaine and the guard came tearing out of the storage room.

"Where's LeClaire?" Quaine was half-shouting, swinging his eyes both ways down the corridor. "How could he escape after I strapped him down—?"

"I helped him escape, Dr. Quaine," said Lynne in a low voice, stopping in front of him.

Quaine's blue eyes held shock. "Are you serious?" he gasped.

She nodded wordlessly.

"But why?" raged Quaine, his whole body trembling. "Why?"

Quietly, Lynne told the whole story, starting with the first black-paper letter and its red-blood writing. Quaine stood listening like a man turned to stone.

Her voice was bewildered at the end. "Why, Quentin? Why did you ignore Dr. Henderson's opposed evaluation? Why did you go on and perform an uncertain operation on

LeClaire, dooming him to a hunchback's miserable life?"

Fuming anger died away in Quaine's eyes. He took her hand gently. "Lynne, dear. It so happens that Dr. Alfred Henderson was discharged from the Clinic a year ago—for incompetence."

"Indeed!" said Lynne coldly. Through her mind raced what LeClaire had said—*cover-up, cover-up, cover-up!*

"Furthermore," went on Quaine, "Dr. Henderson was never consulted about LeClaire's operation."

"I saw his signed report in the files," reminded Lynne firmly.

"It must be a forgery," Quaine said. "A plant. . . ."

"But there have to be three consultant-doctor reports," pursued Lynne relentlessly. "If Dr. Henderson's is a false one, where is the third doctor's report? What was his name?"

"Why . . . uh . . . let me think," muttered Quaine. "Oh, it's slipped my mind." He looked sheepishly at the girl.

Lynne's heart sank. Every one of Quaine's claims could be manufactured. Glib readymade excuses. A blatant cover-up. She had to go on all the way.

"What about this new malpractice suit against you by Anthony Starcher, a pelvic operation that went wrong?"

"Starcher . . . Starcher," mumbled Quaine. "Can't quite remember him, or his operation. So long ago."

Weasel words. Circumlocutions. Quaine was trying to slip out of the trap that threatened to close on him, proving him closer to a quack . . . as LeClaire had claimed . . . than a top-notch surgeon. All hope had died within Lynne that he could clear his name to her satisfaction.

Quaine was suddenly peering at her sharply. "Why all the questions, Lynne dear? There's an explanation for everything. Don't you believe me? Trust me?"

He took a step toward her, but she drew back with tight lips. "Why do you think I released Renolf LeClaire?" she answered icily. With that, she turned and strode away without glancing back.

Quaine stood with slumped shoulders, his face as gray as putty. His eyes were dull and filled with a deep inward

pain as he watched her trim figure vanish down the corridor. Like a zombie, he left and headed for his rooms. He had lost his girl and his captured enemy, at the same time.

Meanwhile, the guard who had been with Quaine had not been idle all this time. He had pulled out a walkie-talkie and quickly informed the guards outside that the Hunchback Horror had just escaped.

Unaware of this, the hunchback reached his jeep, hidden among the trees, and swung out onto the two-lane highway that led to Tarlton. Halfway there would be his turnoff for the Devil's Playground and his secret cave hideout. But suddenly he noticed a pair of headlights following him and gaining. It was a police prowler car with its red swivel light revolving on top and its siren wailing.

Hunched over his wheel, LeClaire knew he was in a bad spot. He could not turn off into the fields on either side of the road, for there were ditches on both sides. Then he saw the sign ahead and desperately swung the wheel, taking an entry ramp to the broad turnpike that ran past Clinic Center. The turnpike was always loaded with traffic and the hunchback skillfully spun his jeep from lane to lane, dodging behind cars. With three one-way lanes to play with, he could hamper the police car from catching up.

The game kept up all the way to the Tarlton turnoff. LeClaire made a swift decision. He took the turnoff and sped down side streets with sharp turns, holding his own with the police car whose tires screeched at every turn that the jeep took easily.

The police driver of the prowler car grinned expectantly. "He can't keep this up indefinitely. He'll get slowed down and tangled up in traffic soon. We're getting near the main part of town." He dug his elbow into his companion's ribs. "Looks like we get the credit for nabbing the Hunchback Horror!"

Ahead, suddenly, the jeep braked to a stop on a side street, in front of a small house. The hunchback leaped out and dashed around the side of the house to a back door. It was open and he rushed inside.



The two policemen pounded right behind him. "Don't lose him, Tom. He's trying to hide in there. I'll stand guard here and you search the place."

The other policeman ran in. He saw a wall switch and snapped it on. He moved cautiously past a basement door, gun in hand. Whatever room the hunchback had chosen would be searched.

But down in the basement, a black-gloved hand pulled the main electrical switch. All the lights went out. The searching policeman yanked out his flashlight, mumbling at the delay. But it wouldn't save LeClaire from capture, he thought.

A streetlight shone into the window of a living room and the officer clearly saw a black silhouette with a humped back. Tom turned off his flashlight and crept forward, finally leaping to seize the figure's arm. "All right, LeClaire. Come quietly."

Despite squeals of protest, the big policeman dragged his prisoner to the back door. "Got him, Sam."

Sam trained his flashlight full on the prisoner. "But that's not the Hunchback Horror. That's *another* hunchback!"

"Yes, I'm Timothy Jones and I live here," squeaked the little deformed man. "I was reading inside when the lights suddenly went out." And Tom could plainly see that he wasn't dressed in a black suit, but ordinary clothing tailored to fit his twisted form.

"Tricked!" growled Tom in realization. He turned to run toward the front of the house. But too late. He was only in time to see the jeep zooming away, with the hunchback grinning back. "While you were nabbing the wrong hunchback," came his mocking yell, "I strolled out the front door!"

By the time the two policemen had dashed to their car and swung it around, the jeep was far ahead, following a through street that led out of the city. The prowl car pursued at reckless speed, but only to see the jeep reach the city limits and turn off across a rough field. Trying to follow, the jouncing prowl car finally hit a rut and the front wheels slewed around, almost overturning them.

"No use chasing him," grunted Tom. "Only another jeep could follow him. Hmm," he mused. "Could his hideout be in the Devil's Playground? He was heading in that direction. We'll notify headquarters to set up a search through the Devil's Playground, tomorrow in daylight."

"He's going to be tough to find there," shrugged Sam. "But wouldn't you know that hunchbacked devil would have a hideout in the Devil's Playground?"

The next morning, Lynne slowly walked into the lab, her eyes looking hollow from a sleepless night. Quaine was already there. He turned, his face rigid. They stared at each other for a moment, as if from opposite sides of a gulf.

"Lynne, I hope you have thought it over," said Quaine through tight lips, "and given me the benefit of the doubt."

Lynne said nothing in answer.

Quaine flushed in humiliation and ran a nervous hand through his hair. "Lynne, I'm not going to beg you to listen to me. But surely you realize I have a right to be angry at your unproved accusations."

"LeClaire's accusations," cut in the girl in an uncompromising voice. "But they can't be dismissed just like that."

For a moment, a heartsick look came over Quaine's face. "Lynne, please. This is all a nightmare of misunderstanding. What's come between us? You're the girl I love and—"

He broke off and regained his composure. His sea-blue eyes bored into hers.

"Do you actually believe everything LeClaire told you?" he asked, unable to keep a trace of bitterness out of his voice. "The word of a psychopath?"

"You yourself said once he wasn't entirely psychotic," reminded the girl quietly.

"But how," floundered Quaine, "how can you turn against me like this?"

"Because I'm not sure your story hangs together," said Lynne coldly. "Before I came here, I went to the office where personnel records are kept. The clerk in charge

showed me the record sheet on Dr. Alfred Henderson. It was only stamped RELEASED BY REQUEST. There was no notation that he was 'incompetent,' as you claimed."

"But Lynne," protested Quaine, "that was only the formal release. Such matters are kept confidential. But I know that his full report revealed that he had taken to drink. After that were listed a dozen definite cases of malpractice, incompetence, and failure to show up for duty. One of his absences resulted in a patient's death. In a private hearing, the Medical Association disbarred him from further medical practice and 'released' him from the staff. Actually, the word should be less polite—'ejected'."

"Where can I see that report?"

Quaine shook his head. "Dr. Endersby would never show it to anybody but a doctor or qualified authority. You'll have to take my word for it."

Lynne, stricken for a moment, wanted to with all her heart. She wanted to rush into his arms and cry out her love for him. But a barrier stood between them in her mind. It was LeClaire's word against Quaine's and she wanted to give the hunchback underdog the benefit of the doubt wherever possible. She hated to think that Quaine could possibly have made major surgical errors, but what about the *two* suits against him? Not to mention Dr. Henderson's adverse evaluation in LeClaire's case? All that plus the mystery about Henderson's departure, which *could* all be a contrived story on Quaine's part.

Lynne choked down a sob and put a hand to her forehead as if to stop the squirrel cage of confused doubts and crawling suspicions tormenting her mind.

Quaine noticed her swaying a little. "Look, Miss Carlyle—" he was back to that again!—"you're not feeling well." And there was no tenderness in his tone. His attitude had abruptly turned as cold as hers. "I suggest you take the day off. I can handle the crystallization of Substance X myself."

When she hesitated, Quaine pushed her by the shoulder, none too gently, toward the door. "I insist you go."

For a moment, Lynne wanted to turn and babble that she did trust him. That this difference between them was all a ghastly mistake. That her emotions had mixed up her mind to where she couldn't think straight and she was sorry for her ridiculous accusations.

But she hesitated too long and found herself out in the corridor, with Quaine quietly closing the door behind her. Feeling as if a leaden anchor had taken the place of her heart, Lynne dragged herself to her rooms.

## Chapter 12

Inside the lab, Quaine's face was drawn, his eyes reflecting misery over Lynn's distrust. Quaine saw the whole thing now—how LeClaire had cleverly built the damning web against him. He had simply extracted the third doctor's opinion—the *real* one of Dr. Amos Allyn that fully backed up Quaine—and substituted the trumped-up report of Dr. Henderson.

But Quaine was puzzled. Only a bona-fide doctor could have filled out the details of the form with its complicated medical terminology. LeClaire couldn't have faked it himself. Quaine's thoughts made an intuitive deduction.

Therefore, LeClaire had contacted Dr. Henderson and somehow inveigled him into making out the adverse report, with a blank form the hunchback had pilfered from the files during his night prowlings.

To clear himself in Lynn's eyes—and he couldn't really blame her for her confused state of mind—he had to find Dr. Henderson. But where was he?

Quaine set his jaw and ripped off his lab coat. He would have to track Henderson down, somehow. Checking the vacuum pump to make sure it was working on the green solution that held the precious Substance X, Quaine then strode out of the lab.

He spent an hour talking with various office clerks who kept personnel and other records. Nobody knew just where Dr. Henderson had gone after his dismissal from the Clinic, a disgraced and broken man. With his M.D. license revoked, he couldn't be practicing medicine any more—except *sub rosa*. Which would make him a

“quack” in the eyes of the medical association and subject to prosecution if discovered.

Quaine gleaned only one bit of information, that Henderson had lived in Tarlton a year ago at a certain address. But when Quaine checked the city's telephone book, his name was not listed at all. But chances were that he was still somewhere in Tarlton, or else how would LeClaire have found him to make out the bogus report?

Of course, Dr. Endersby could have verified Quaine's claim about Henderson's false report. But the administrative chief was still away, and his deputy assistant had no authority to check into such matters.

Feeling frustrated, Quaine went out to the parking lot and drove away. He took the turnpike to Tarlton and reached the city hall. A check of the city directory produced no name of Henderson at all. Could he still be in town, however, under an assumed name? Quaine vaguely remembered a newspaper story months ago about police trying to track down a plastic surgeon who helped criminals change their features and thus escape arrest.

That sounded like just what the unscrupulous Henderson would do. But under what name? Where was his hidden office? To locate him out of one hundred thousand citizens was hopeless, like searching for one particular grain of sand at the beach.

A tantalizing thought leaped into Quaine's mind on the drive back. The only one who could lead him to Henderson was—LeClaire, the hunchback! So why not hunt him down, solving two problems? Not only locating Henderson and clearing himself to Lynne, but also ending once and for all the Hunchback Horror's campaign of terror at Clinic Center.

One thing swung Quaine to this decision. The police had reported that twice, when vainly pursuing LeClaire's jeep, he had last been seen heading toward the Devil's Playground. If he had a secret hideout there, that narrowed down the hunt to some extent.

The next morning before dawn, true to his new plan, Quaine slipped out of a side exit of wing number one and drove away in his car. He was dressed in his most casual

clothes—heavy shirt, leather jacket, denim trousers with leggings that fit inside sturdy boots.

He had left no note behind, no clue to where he was going or why. Let them surmise whatever they wanted.

Quaine had another purpose in this secrecy. The hunt might take days. Why not at the same time “*disappear*”? He was sure that LeClaire, if his main target for revenge were gone, would no longer have reason to harass and plague Clinic Center with his terrifying tricks. His only purpose in creating chaos there had been to ruin Quaine’s career, in time. So, for the sake of the Clinic, why not “vanish” as he secretly carried on his hunt for the hunchback’s unknown hideout?

Quaine knew that Lynne would be the most alarmed—despite their falling out—at his mysterious disappearance. But he couldn’t give her any clue either without ruining his plan to save the Clinic from further attacks by the Hunchback Horror.

He drove to Tarlton, hired a jeep at a U-Drive place, and left his car parked there under an assumed name. Then he stopped at a grocery store to buy a stock of canned and packaged foods to last several days. Finally, he took the road that led to the Devil’s Playground. When the gravel road petered out in the wilderness, he jockeyed the jeep across stony flats until the tall cliffs frowned down upon him.

A cave hideout. That was the only logical supposition for the Hunchback Horror. He parked the jeep under a rock overhang where it would be sheltered from storms, also from view. Then he swung a loaded knapsack on his back, took out a pocket compass to keep his bearings, and began his search.

His plan was simply to search any and all caves or secluded grottoes he came across. With binoculars, he swept his gaze across each new cliff face for the black holes of caves or deep clefts. Some were high up and inaccessible to anybody but a human fly. LeClaire would have chosen one more convenient to reach.

Still, it was hard work clambering up to rock ledges and peering into caves with a flashlight. All empty. Late in the

afternoon of the first day, Quaine stiffened as he saw movement out of the corner of his eye. Flattening himself against an upright flat rock, he cautiously peeked around the edge. Had he stumbled on LeClaire by sheer luck, outside of his cave?

Quaine muttered in disappointment. It was another man—in a dusty uniform with a silver star pinned to his chest. He had heard that the sheriff had set up a search of the Devil's Playground with his own men.

Quaine kept out of sight. The police searcher must not see him or his "disappearance" from the Clinic would no longer be a mystery. And any report of Quaine searching the Devil's Playground would come to LeClaire's ears and alert him to be wary. Or even incite him to stalk the stalker.

Quaine's grim manhunt for the Hunchback Horror must be his secret alone, or he wouldn't have a chance against his cunning and ruthless enemy.

When she opened the lab the next morning, Lynne removed the latest batch of crystallized Substance X from the vacuum-pump assembly, which had automatically shut off when its work was finished. She put another dish of the raw green liquid in the bell jar.

Despite the split with Quaine, duty held her to this job. No matter what else Quaine might have been in his previous surgical career, he was still a genius in medical research. And it was important for Substance X to be purified and tested on a human subject. They were approaching the mark of the ten milligrams needed.

All the while she worked, Lynne steeled herself for Quaine's arrival. It was not easy to work in the same room with a man you loved, yet who was under a cloud of suspicion over the LeClaire affair. She set herself to look calm and aloof, concealing the emotional turmoil within her.

But as time passed, she became puzzled. Where was Quaine? She had not been in the lab all day yesterday and maybe Quaine had taken the day off, too. But he wouldn't skip two days in his lab work. She glanced at the clock again and again, vaguely worried. By noon, she was defi-



nately alarmed. She left the lab and checked at Quaine's apartment. He wasn't there.

After inquiries among various doctors and nurses, she found out nobody had seen Quaine since two evenings ago. His car was gone from the parking lot, when she checked there. Panic slowly rising within her, she finally notified the assistant administrator that Quaine was missing. He was shocked.

By nightfall, the word was all around the Clinic that Dr. Quaine had mysteriously disappeared. A reporter who had been hanging around for any further news about the Hunchback Horror rushed to phone his paper. The next morning's edition featured the headline—**DR. QUAINÉ, CLINIC GENIUS, VANISHES!** Below, the text reviewed the whole vendetta the Hunchback Horror had carried on against him. The implication was plain, that the vendetta had culminated in death. Or that Quaine had fled to escape that fate.

In his cave hideout at the Devil's Playground, Renolf LeClaire was making himself breakfast on his small propane-gas stove. After his clash with Quaine in the passageway system at the Clinic, and his narrow escape through Lynne Carlyle's efforts, he had skipped going to the Clinic for two nights. His nerves had been a bit shaken.

"But I'll be there tonight," he vowed grimly. "I've still got plenty of ways to terrorize the Clinic and make life miserable for Quaine."

The hunchback stopped. The radio was on and the announcer was saying: "Startling news! Dr. Quentin Q. Quaine, top medical researcher at Clinic Center, has been missing for almost three days. There is not the slightest clue to his whereabouts. Dr. Quaine, of course, was the chief target of the vengeful hunchback, Renolf LeClaire, known at the Clinic as the Hunchback Horror. There is a rumor that Dr. Quaine, his nerves shattered over the duel with the mad hunchback, has fled from the Clinic to escape further attacks of his enemy."

LeClaire snapped off the radio, his face stunned.

Quaine gone? Deserted the Clinic? The hunchback kicked at an empty food can, cursing aloud. To him, that was the worst news possible. Had Quaine slipped out of his hands, to hide and escape all further retribution?

"That upsets all my plans!" raged the hunchback aloud. "What's the use of plaguing the Clinic if he isn't there? I wanted him to suffer each time I pulled some sabotage at the place where he works. Now, that's pointless."

LeClaire clenched his fist. "I've got to find him. Track him down somehow." Then, almost petulantly, "The coward! Couldn't take it, eh? Slipped out to save his own skin. . . ."

The hunchback stopped, his thoughts shifting gear. He went on shrewdly to himself. "Wait! That's not like Quaine at all. He wouldn't sneak away like a scared rabbit. Hmm, instead of my hunting for him, maybe he's hunting for me—right now! That would fit much truer to Quaine's character."

A slow leer spread over the hunchback's face. "Two can play that game. And if he's here in the Devil's Playground, he's played right into my hands!"

Forgetting his breakfast, the gloating hunchback left his cave to begin his own search.

But it was not easy to find a lone man in the badlands all around, stretching for miles in every direction. At the end of the day, LeClaire was ready to give up, figuring he had guessed wrong about Quaine's plans.

But suddenly he stooped at the side of a bubbling spring that gurgled out of a gash in a rock cliff. Soft soil lay around a shallow pool of the spring water. Bootprints stood out clearly as if someone had stopped there for a cooling drink.

LeClaire knew that the sheriff's men were combing the Devil's Playground, having spied one of them the previous day. But these were not the distinctive markings made by police boots, which LeClaire had seen.

Then they must be Quaine's bootprints! LeClaire's hunt would go on—for the hunter.

Two men stalked each other in a stony wilderness. Three days went by as the deadly game continued.

Quaine paused, the third day, to sling his knapsack off his back and sit in the coolness of a rock overhang. He had lost at least ten pounds, sweating and straining to climb bare rock and leap across raw fissures in the ground. Sometimes he had had to cross a gulch and struggle through briar bushes whose thorns drew blood on his face and hands.

Worst of all, very few shade trees grew in this sterile region and it was hellishly hot as the sun's rays reflected dazzlingly from the stony ramparts all around.

He munched without appetite on a crust of bread. His knapsack's supply of food was running out and his canteen of water, too, filled at the last spring. If he didn't find the hunchback soon, he'd have to return to his parked jeep and give up. Quaine hated the thought, but he realized that one could search for weeks through the twisted canyons and hidden gullies of the Devil's Playground without locating another person. Maybe he'd been a fool to even try.

He had one satisfaction, however. Tuning in his pocket-sized transistor radio, he heard the newscaster say—"Dr. Quaine is still missing from Clinic Center, in one of the most baffling disappearances ever known. Clinic Center, in the meantime, has not had any further visitations by the Hunchback Horror."

Quaine grinned. At least that part of his plan had worked. But then, he sobered and glanced around carefully. If LeClaire was not harassing the Clinic, what was he doing? Was he just lying low? Or had he added two and two and guessed that Quaine was after him? In which case, Quaine had to keep his eyes peeled—or else.

Quaine sighed. But he might have to give up this useless hunt and leave the Devil's Playground. That would mean he could never capture LeClaire and learn where Dr. Henderson lived under an alias. And he would have to return to the Clinic with no direct proof for Lynne that LeClaire had cunningly framed Quaine as a "quack."

Quaine got to his feet with renewed energy. He would make one last stab at finding the hunchback before sundown today. He followed a narrow rock ledge across the

face of a sheer cliff, darting his eyes in all directions for a hidden cave. If he could only glimpse the hunchback from a distance somewhere and then track him down. . . .

Quaine was unaware of two gleaming eyes peering through a cleft in the rock, some fifty feet higher. LeClaire barely kept himself from uttering a triumphant cry as he spied the toiling figure of Quaine, his hated enemy.

"I'll quit playing around with half measures," the hunchback told himself. "I'll finish him off once and for all!"

Poised to leap down at a rock ledge near Quaine and take him by surprise, LeClaire checked himself cautiously and eased back. He had no wish to tangle with the powerful medical scientist in man-to-man battle. There must be a smarter and safer way to do it. . . .

The hunchback's eyes narrowed, taking in the sheer drop of the cliff below Quaine. At the bottom a narrow stream gushed through a deep cleft. Jagged rocks stuck up everywhere in the wild torrent. Any man or creature who fell into that raging white foam would never come out alive.

For that reason, its name was quite appropriate—the Styx. The River of Death in mythology.

LeClaire also saw the perfect way of surprising Quaine. He swiftly uncoiled a nylon rope from his belt and tied one end firmly to a jutting stone. He lowered himself silently, hand over hand, until his feet touched a loose boulder perched on a narrow shelf of rock. Timing it carefully, he kicked hard and the rock tumbled down—toward Quaine on the rock ledge below.

Quaine heard the slight scrape of the rock as it was loosened and glanced upward sharply, aware of danger. But the sun was in his eyes and he misjudged where the tumbling rock would land. Quaine's trigger-fast leap out of the way was not far enough and the heavy stone struck his shoulder. Losing his balance, Quaine tried desperately to keep from falling off the rock ledge. He teetered at the edge for a moment.

Then, with a despairing cry, he plunged over, falling

down toward the roaring stream and its wildly turbulent waters.

Above, LeClaire clung to his rope and leaned over to watch. "Good-bye, Quaine!" he hissed. "You've really 'vanished' now—forever! They'll never even find your broken body."

But another pair of eyes saw Quaine's death plunge. One of the sheriff's men detailed to search the Devil's Playground for LeClaire had happened upon the scene. But from where he stood on one of the cliff's rock pathways, the hunchback had been hidden from him. He had only seen the rock, as if accidentally dislodging itself, strike Quaine and send him over the edge to doom.

Horried, the lawman had clapped binoculars to his eyes and saw who it was as Quaine's body tumbled over and over in the air to land in the torrent of water. The splash was hardly visible through the violent spray thrown up as the river smashed itself against sharp rocks nearby.

"Dr. Quaine, the missing man," muttered the lawman, slowly lowering his binoculars. "He'll never return to Clinic Center alive."

The lawman pulled a walkie-talkie from his belt and sent out a call. "Dawson reporting, sector five." He described Quaine's fall in terse terms, then added, "He must have been searching for the Hunchback Horror himself—but never found him."

He did not realize the irony of his words, that in reality Quaine had found the hunchback and death at the same time. Remaining hidden from the lawman's eyes around a bulky bulge in the cliff, the hunchback climbed his rope and headed back to his cave hideout, still glowing at having had his final revenge against Quaine, the doctor whose bad surgery had made him a deformed hunchback—as his deformed mind believed.

At Clinic Center, Lynne was faithfully crystallizing more of Substance X. Her face was haggard, her eyes shadowed. Quaine had been missing for almost a week now—why? Had he vanished deliberately? Or had some-

thing happened to him, something bad? Yet even though she asked herself that last question in dread, she was not prepared as the floor nurse came bursting in the door, her expression distraught.

"Lynne!" she cried. "Have you heard the news over the radio? I . . . I don't know how to break it to you any other way. One of the sheriff's men, in the Devil's Playground . . . oh, it's awful!"

"What? *What?*" demanded Lynne, grabbing her arm fiercely.

"Dr. Qu-Quaine—the man saw a big rock come loose and knock the doctor off a ledge on a cliff. He fell down into the *Styx!*"

"The *Styx?*" echoed Lynne, catching her breath. "The River of Death . . ." Then she stood like a statue with slow horror creeping into her eyes.

"Gee, I'm sorry I was the one to bring you the news, Lynne," stammered the nurse. "Are you . . . all right, honey?"

"Yes . . . yes," murmured Lynne. "Please leave me alone."

The other girl stared at her in tearful sympathy, then ran out.

Lynne's eyes were dry. This was beyond tears. She stared around the lab—the lab in which she and Quaine had worked for over a year. She stepped over and touched the switch for the vacuum pump that was crystallizing Substance X. The switch he had so often touched. Moving as if in slow motion, she went over and ran her hand down his lab coat. She glanced at the chair he had sat in, before his desk—at the telephone his hand had so often lifted—at all the apparatus he had set up in the lab.

Her eyes jerked from item to item. Her body whirled to take it all in. She whirled—and whirled—faster and faster—and then sank to the floor in a faint.

## Chapter 13

If Lynne Carlyle's life had been tragically changed for the worse, Renolf LeClaire's life had taken a turn for the better. Or had it? The hunchback was not sure himself.

I'm almost sorry Quaine's done for, he thought glumly. "I had to finish him off, of course, or he would have tracked down my hideout and exposed me to the police. But I had really planned to let him live and *suffer*. Suffer as I ruined his career, his love life, and everything else. And it was *exciting*, matching wits with him and beating him at every turn."

He heaved a sigh, then shrugged. "Forget it. The thing to do now is skip before the police hunt me down. I'm a wanted man around here. What reason have I got to hang around and plague Clinic Center, now, with Quaine gone?"

In his cave hideout, he began packing a few things and loaded them in his jeep. He had packed away his black suit and hooded cape, in which he had performed as the Hunchback Horror. He wore ordinary street clothes. It was night now and nobody would get a good look at his scarred, ugly face in Tarlton.

He drove to the city, keeping out a watchful eye for prowl cars or patrolmen on their beat. They would, of course, halt any hunchback and check if he was Renolf LeClaire or not. But he was unmolested as he drove to the seamier side of the city where dilapidated old brownstone houses marched row on row. It was the slums, a good place for people to live who had reason to keep themselves in obscurity.

LeClaire paused at a certain two-flat building, turned into an alley, and parked in the rear. He stepped out cautiously, looked around, then went to the back door. He tapped three times, paused, and tapped twice more. At this code, he heard footsteps slowly approach and stop on the door's other side.

"R.L." he whispered as the door opened a crack. "The H.H."

The door opened wide and LeClaire stepped into a dimly lit hallway. The man who let him in was tall and gangly, with unkempt clothes and tousled gray hair. He weaved slightly on his feet and peered at the hunchback owlishly.

"Doc Hend . . . I mean, Colfax," said LeClaire, staring at him in disgust. "Drunk again?"

"Whoosh drunk?" retorted the tall man indignantly.

"Never mind!" snapped LeClaire. "But you'll have to sober up and stay that way for the next few days."

"Huh? Why?"

"Because you're going to do a plastic surgery job on me, that's why. I'll explain in your office."

In an untidy office holding a battered desk and several worn chairs, the tall man reached for a drawer at the bottom, half-drew out a bottle, then dropped it back when LeClaire hissed, "No!"

The hunchback sat down and leaned forward on the desk. "Look at my face, doc. I want it changed, fixed up, so I look entirely different. I'll pay you even more than I did for that job of forging a medical document, with your signature as Dr. Alfred P. Henderson."

"Shhh," said the other much too late, putting a shaky finger to his lips. "Don't say my real name. I'm disbarred as an M.D. and if the authorities find out I'm doing plastic surgery, I'll be arrested and jailed."

"Yeah," grinned LeClaire maliciously, "especially since you do jobs for criminals. That's how I found out about you. One day at a cheap bar I overheard a couple of tough men talking about 'face lifting'. One of them wrote down your name—Doc Colfax, that is—and address. I was at



the bar next to them and leaned over casually, just enough to see the writing."

"I don't know if I'm glad," scowled Henderson—or Colfax. "You're the hottest client I have, after all the things you did at Clinic Center. Makes my blood run cold." He shivered. "If I'm caught and pinned down for forging that medical paper you wanted, I'll go behind bars for a long time. Now you're back for a face job."

"Yes," broke in LeClaire. "Then I'm going away, far away. You'll never see me again."

Doc Colfax sat up briskly at that, making no attempt to hide his relief. "Really? All right, I'll fix your face, but the price is steep. I want one thousand dollars. Cash. In advance."

"You're gouging me," accused the hunchback, glaring at him. "Well, okay. But you'll only get half of it now, the rest when you're done."

Doc Colfax opened his mouth as if to object, then closed it and nodded.

LeClaire already had his wallet out and opened it to where his paper money was—or should be. "Empty!" he exploded, surprised. Then he rapped his knuckles against his forehead. "The one thing I forgot to take along, from my hideout, was my money. I had it stashed away in my—at the special place where I lived."

Doc Colfax spread his hands, his drunken face turning hard. "No money, no cosmetic surgery."

LeClaire didn't argue. Muttering curses, he said he'd be back soon, and left. He was still cursing as he drove the jeep away. A trip all the way back and forth again. What a waste of time, and all because of his own stupidity. And it meant taking chances again of running across patrolmen or prowler cars, during the round trip.

But luck was with LeClaire. He got out of the city without trouble and was soon safely in the countryside. Within an hour he was entering the Devil's Playground and wound his bumpy way along the steep inclines that led to his cave.

Once there, he went in the cave with a flashlight.

Deeper in the cavern, where he had to carefully step over fissures in the rocky floor, he stopped and shone his light at the wall. It was filled with many indentations and holes. Reaching his hand into one hole, he withdrew a small metal box. He took out a sheaf of paper money and stuffed it in his wallet, tossing the empty steel box away.

Hastening out, he jumped in his jeep and turned the key. The engine turned over several times, but didn't start. Puzzled, he tried again. The starter ground away, but nothing happened.

"Having trouble, LeClaire?" said a soft voice from the side.

The hunchback froze. No, it couldn't be! Hearing that voice was impossible! He jerked his face around and gave a loud gasp.

Standing on a rock nearby was a big brawny figure in tattered clothes. The moonlight clearly showed his face.

"Quaine! Dr. Quaine! But . . . but how can you be—?"

"Alive?" said Quaine for him. "It's a long story. . . ."

At that moment, the hunchback leaped out of his seat on the other side of the jeep and began running. He could easily escape in the dark, knowing the bleak surroundings as well as he did. But he had only gone ten feet when his ankles met something and he flew off his feet. His startled yelp was cut off as he fell face forward on the rough ground.

Quaine loomed over him. "I was expecting that, my slippery friend. I pulled one of your own tricks. When I got here before, I searched your jeep and found a coil of nylon rope. Tied it between rocks here, knowing you'd dash this way."

Quaine had more nylon rope in his hands and busily began tying up the hunchback's arms behind him, also his feet. Then, with hardly an effort, Quaine picked up the bound man and deposited him in the right-hand seat of the jeep.

"I'll drive," said Quaine. "But first, I'll put back the distributor cap I took out before." After finishing, he

slammed down the hood and sprang into the driver's seat. The engine started instantly and Quaine drove away.

"The way I found you, of course," he said, grinning at the helpless hunchback, "was by hearing the sound of your engine when you arrived. By chance, I wasn't too far away and easily traced the sound to your cave. I waited until you went in, then took out the distributor cap and got the nylon rope. All clear?"

"Yeah," growled LeClaire, "except my other question." His voice was still unbelieving. "How did you escape that death-plunge into the Styx?"

"By sheer luck," admitted Quaine. His eyes reflected some of the ghastly experience he had undergone some hours before. "My body twisted in the air during the long plunge. I knew I had a slight chance to survive if I hit the water in a dive. Somehow, I managed to twist around and get my arms straight down, splitting the water like a diver. I had lots of practice in college as a high diver, you know."

LeClaire said nothing, waiting for the rest.

"Still, it was almost a killing shock," grunted Quaine, wincing. "I've still got pulled muscles. And I blacked out, too. But the cold water quickly revived me. Not that that did me any good. I was being swept along like a cork in that frightfully powerful stream. My body missed smashing into several huge rocks sticking up, but I knew my luck couldn't last."

He peered ahead. "Which way from here, LeClaire? The route out of the Devil's Playground to the city. And it's no use keeping it a secret. You'll just stay tied up for hours, or days if you're stubborn, without food or water—while I help myself to your jeep supplies."

The hunchback didn't argue and gave directions.

"Now, to continue my story," said Quaine. "I suddenly felt a sideways pull, as if the stream was going to branch ahead, somehow. Then I saw it through the foam—a black opening into which part of the stream poured, separated from the main river."

Quaine asked for more directions as they came to giant

boulders, then went on. "It was still a struggle. The main stream tugged hard at me. I wanted to turn into that side stream, which looked less violent and take my chances where it led. I didn't really swim—who could? I sort of lurched my body sideways, again and again. Finally, I won free of the main stream's grip and was caught up by the side stream."

Quaine shuddered a bit.

"I wasn't sure, but what I had traded one kind of death for one even worse. For the side stream took me into the black hole and then I was in pitch darkness, being swept along at great speed through a natural rock tunnel. I kept bumping into the side walls, hard. Nearly got knocked out. Then, I thought the end had come when the tunnel became narrower and water filled it entirely."

"We know it wasn't the end," growled LeClaire. "You came out alive. Quit the melodramatics and come to the point."

Quaine chuckled. "Well, I thought the story would entertain you during the drive to town. Or would you rather talk about what charges the police will bring against you, after I turn you over to them?"

LeClaire only cursed vehemently.

"You'd rather hear my story, I surmise. I was underwater for what seemed ages. My lungs were almost bursting as the stream kept filling the entire tunnel. But suddenly, the force of the current eased off and I could see light above. I struggled to the surface and met heavenly air, open air. It was a big pool fed by the underground stream. The excess water dribbled over the sides of a huge cuplike hollow in which the pool lay. I was saved. All I had to do was drag myself to one edge and climb out."

"Rotten luck," spat out the hunchback, "for me."

"But my good fortune. You know, the Devil's Playground is largely unexplored and unmapped. That pool is completely unknown. I'll report it to the land-survey office, later."

In the headlights, Quaine saw the crude road that lay ahead. "We're emerging from the Devil's Playground into civilization. Roads will lead now to Tarlton." He turned to

stare at the hunchback with grim lips. "What you're going to do first is lead me to Dr. Henderson—by whatever false name he's under now. And if you do, maybe you won't go to the police."

LeClaire stared back in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"It's still not too late to try my plan" murmured Quaine, as if to himself. "It's the same offer I tried to make you a couple times before, but you wouldn't listen. You see, my idea is to have you . . . how can I explain it?"

Quaine shook his head. "No, I can't explain it. It would sound too fantastic. You'll have to take me on faith. The deal is that I think I can get the police to put you in my custody . . . if you agree."

"Huh. You mean have the head shrinkers work me over and mentally rehabilitate me, I suppose!" snapped the hunchback.

"Partially that," said Quaine slowly. "But more than that. I won't say any more except that it's for your own good. Is it a bargain?"

"It's like a blind date," rasped LeClaire. "Or buying something sight unseen." He hesitated, intrigued. "Well, I'll think it over."

They came to the outskirts of Tarlton and the hunchback gave directions to Dr. Colfax's place. When they stopped, Quaine untied LeClaire's feet, but left his arms pinioned. He had a good grip on the hunchback, who led him to the back door and told him the code knock. The tall, disheveled man opened up and blinked at Quaine, then tried to slam the door shut.

Quaine had his foot in it and shoved back hard. Dr. Colfax-Henderson stumbled back and almost fell.

"Not a nice welcome, Dr. Henderson!" barked Quaine. "I've got LeClaire prisoner. Now lead the way to your office. I want you to sign a certain confession."

Henderson tried to speak, but the words were strangled in his throat. His shoulders slumped and he led the way to the office. Quaine shoved LeClaire into a chair, then turned to Henderson.

"Sit down at your desk and write that you filled a false

form, claiming you were a consultant for LeClaire's operation and completely dissented with my surgical plan. Obviously, LeClaire paid you to fill out and sign that bogus form. Go ahead, write out the confession."

Henderson shrugged hopelessly and pulled open a drawer. "Pen and paper in here," he mumbled. But when his hand jerked out, it held a snub-nosed revolver.

"I was expecting that." At the same time, Quaine was upending the desk so that it struck Henderson just as he tried to shoot. The bullet went wild and the half-drunken ex-doctor flopped to the floor as his chair toppled over. The gun flew from his hand.

Quaine quickly leaped and snatched it up. Whirling, he faced the door, expecting to see LeClaire taking advantage of the struggle.

LeClaire grinned. He was leaning back in his chair, against a rickety cabinet. "I wasn't even thinking of making a run for it," he drawled. "I've decided to accept your offer, Quaine."

"Good," said Quaine. But he kept them both covered as he told Henderson to write the confession. Henderson had meanwhile struggled to his feet and pulled his chair upright. Quaine turned the desk right side up again and Henderson now meekly pulled out paper and a pen and began writing.

When he was done, Quaine read the confession and nodded, putting it in his pocket—the only pocket left intact in his tattered clothing. Then he pulled Henderson's desk phone to him and lifted the receiver, dialing the operator with the same hand while keeping the gun in his other hand.

"Hello. Police headquarters? This is Dr. Quentin Quaine of Clinic Center. Come to this address for a double arrest."

But Quaine had not noticed that while the hunchback's chair was tipped backward, his tied hands were within reach of a few rusty surgical instruments on a shelf of the cabinet behind him. It was clumsy work with the scalpel he had seized, but now his bonds were cut through, freeing his hands.

Before Quaine could give the address on the phone, LeClaire grabbed the telephone cord near him and yanked. The phone was jerked out of Quaine's hands and slid across the desk to the hunchback. Quaine was still off-balance as LeClaire grabbed up the phone and hurled it. It struck Quaine in the chest, making him stumble back and drop his gun.

The hunchback was already streaking out the door. Quaine started to leap after him but then saw, out of the corner of his eye, that Henderson was diving for the gun on the floor. Quaine was forced to turn back and beat him to it.

"Sit down, Henderson," panted Quaine. "You, at least, will go to jail." But his voice was subdued as he heard the sound of the jeep outside, roaring away.

His main quarry, the Hunchback Horror, had again slipped out of his hands.

But a slight lift came into his voice as he patted his pocket. "Anyway, your confession will clear me with Lynne Carlyle."

## Chapter 14

Lynne reached the door of the lab the next morning and began putting her key in the lock. She started as the door opened by itself. Then her beige-brown eyes widened in shock at the tall form waiting there, wearing his lab coat.

"Hallucination!" she whispered. Her eyes began to roll.

"Don't faint on me," boomed Quaine's voice, his arms catching her. "I'm real. I'm alive. I'll tell you the whole story in a moment."

Lynne recovered herself, but still looked dazed as Quaine led her in and made her sit down. Then he handed her a sheet of paper. "A confession written out by Dr. Alfred P. Henderson, admitting he made out that false consultant report for a handsome fee paid by Renolf LeClaire."

Lynne stared a moment. "Just to trick me," she murmured.

"Now, where's that Xerox of the malpractice suit of Anthony Starcher?" demanded Quaine.

Mechancially, Lynne opened her handbag and took it out.

Quaine unfolded it and squinted at it closely. "Just as I suspected. Take a good look at the doctor's name, Lynne." He held it close to her eyes.

"But it does say 'Quentin Q.—uh—*Quinn*?'"

"Exactly," nodded Quaine. "LeClaire made sure a bad copy came out so that the name *Quinn* has cracked letters and could be mistaken for *Quaine*, at a quick glance. It's like that parlor trick of showing someone three Scottish



names and asking which is false—MacGregor, MacHinery, or MacReilly. Most everyone promptly says the last one because Reilly is so definitely an Irish name and wouldn't fit with the Scottish 'Mac'. But the right answer is the middle one. It's the word machinery."

Quaine tapped the Xerox paper. "What sort of hypnotized you was seeing that the first name Quentin and then what seemed to be three 'Q' initials. But if you look closely, the middle initial is really a smudged O, or a Q without a tail. That tricked your mind into immediately interpreting the last name as *Quaine* instead of *Quinn*. Quentin is not a rare name and the suit happens to be against a Clinic doctor named Quentin O. Quinn, you see, not me at all."

Lynne's head hung now in miserable shame.

"Oh, what can I say?" she mumbled, twisting her hands. "If I try to say that I had already thought it over and realized it was all LeClaire's trickery . . . well, it would seem like a cheap lie."

Quaine chucked her under the chin. "Just tell me one thing that isn't a lie, I hope . . . do you still love me?"

The girl jumped up and flew into his arms. "Oh, Quentin! Just hold me . . . hold me tight," she sobbed. "I . . . I thought you were d-dead and I could never forgive myself for mistrusting you."

After they had both calmed down, Quaine told the whole story from the time he had "disappeared" to the events at Henderson's office.

"Would you believe that LeClaire escaped from me again?" finished Quaine in disgust at himself.

A happy smile spread over Lynne's face. "I'm not even dismayed at that. I'm too happy at having you back alive, darling. And guess what? I kept crystallizing Substance X. . . ."

"Loyal you," interrupted Quaine, kissing her.

She broke away. "And we now have almost the full quota of ten milligrams!" She turned and picked up a small glass vial partly filled with sparkling crystals. "We can crystallize the last batch by tonight."

Quaine's face almost magically changed from frustration over the hunchback to the glow of a scientist who has nearly reached his goal.

"Enough for the first human test will be ready by tonight," Quaine breathed, as he held the vial in his hands. "Then, if it proves out, as it did with animals, this bit of medical matter is the most *valuable* thing on earth!"

"Priceless!" agreed Lynne.

That word drifted up through the lab's air vent and to the ears of a black-clad figure above the ceiling in a passageway.

"Priceless, eh?" he thought, eyes gleaming. "Then that's something for the Hunchback Horror to grab, now that I'm back on the job! The job of robbing Quaine of fame and glory over his new medical discovery!"

LeClaire rubbed his gloved hands together, leering. "Tonight will be the time to strike, when they finish making the full ten milligrams."

The lab lights stayed on into the night. It was close to midnight when Lynne snapped off the vacuum pump and valved in air. Quaine carefully took out the small dish of glittering crystals and added them to the vial.

"This was more work," said Quaine, pretending to wipe sweat from his forehead, "than Madame Curie processing tons of uranium ore to extract a tiny amount of radium. We had to synthesize Substance X, molecule by molecule, to get that first raw green solution, then crystallize it out pure. A year's labor."

Listening through the air vent, the Hunchback Horror grinned. That was his cue. He lit a fuse, then crawled away along the repair tunnel nearby. From there, the network of passageways soon let him out in a supply closet down the corridor from the lab. Waiting for a few nurses and internes to pass, LeClaire found the corridor empty when he next peeked out. Midnight was a slow hour in the Clinic's activities.

He swiftly sped to the lab door and placed his ear against it, listening. Suddenly he heard coughing inside. Chuckling, the hunchback took a gasmask from his belt

and slipped it over his face. Then he opened the door and barged in.

"A smoke bomb," he announced to Quaine and Lynne, who were surrounded by white fumes and coughing miserably. "Planted in your ventilation inlet."

Quaine tried to rush at him, but sank to his knees suddenly, overcome by the smoke fumes. Laughing, LeClaire went to the already sprawled form of the girl and dragged her to a window. He opened it and propped her on the sill with her head outside. As the fumes thinned out and her lungs took in fresh air, she revived.

The hunchback pulled her back in. Her eyes focused on him. "You again, you monster?" she choked. She turned in alarm. "Dr. Quaine! If he isn't revived—!"

"Don't worry," cackled LeClaire, pulling off his gas-mask with fresh air blowing into the open window. "He'll live. The fumes he breathed will only keep him knocked out for a while—long enough for me to nab Substance X. Where is it?"

Lynne suddenly laughed. "All right, I'll show you." She led him across the lab and pointed at a square steel safe in the corner. "It's in there. And only Dr. Quaine knows the combination."

Snarling, the hunchback seized the safe and tried to lift it.

"It weighs ten times more than any man can lift," informed Lynne mockingly.

LeClaire glared around wildly. "All right, it's only a delay. I'll wait till Quaine comes to in about ten minutes. And don't try using the phone to call guards," he warned Lynne.

She didn't need to use the phone. She merely leaned back against Quaine's desk, her hands behind her. Her finger found the pushbutton concealed under the edge. The secret alarm had been installed during the day, at Quaine's request, expressly to foil the Hunchback Horror in case he struck.

The hunchback was kneeling and busily tying up the limp form of Quaine before he awakened. Suddenly he

stiffened. "I feel vibrations in the floor through my knee." He quickly bent and put his ear to the floor. "Footsteps—running! Must be guards that you somehow signaled."

With a last venomous glance at the girl, LeClaire ran and leaped headlong out of the open window onto the fire-escape landing, just before the door swung open and guards crowded in with drawn guns.

"The Hunchback Horror!" cried Lynne, pointing out the window.

A guard peered out. "No sign of him out there in the dark. And the sheriff pulled off all the outside guards during the past week, while Dr. Quaine was missing and the hunchback didn't show up. Nobody to stop him."

"But Dr. Quaine can lead the sheriff to LeClaire's cave hideout in the Devil's Playground . . ." began Lynne, then shook her head. "Naturally, LeClaire would switch to another cave."

The guard nodded. "And nobody could guess which one out of hundreds more there."

Quaine sat up, bewildered. Lynne explained what had happened.

"Anyway, LeClaire didn't get away with Substance X," she finished. "That's something to be thankful for."

"Amen," agreed Quaine fervently.

"Well, that was quite a hectic week at the Clinic while I was away," remarked Dr. Endersby, chief administrator. His pouchy eyes looked from Quaine to Lynne. They were in his office the next afternoon after the abortive smoke-bomb raid of the Hunchback Horror.

Dr. Endersby turned sternly to the girl. "Miss Carlyle. I understand you aided Renolf LeClaire in escaping, after Dr. Quaine had captured him. That he had fooled you into actually believing that Dr. Quaine's operation could have been an error, and that LeClaire was justified in calling him a quack. Is that true?"

Lynne did not hang her head, though a painful flush came to her face. She stared back and said quietly, "It is true. I have no defense."

Dr. Endersby frowned heavily. "Then I must impose

some penalty on you, such as removing you as Dr. Quaine's aide. . . ."

"No," said Quaine in a low but firm voice. "I won't allow it, sir. First of all, she's invaluable to me. Second, LeClaire had used such extreme cunning in planting what looked like bona-fide evidence against my surgical abilities that anyone would have had strong doubts. Even you, perhaps. Therefore, I contend the matter should be forgotten."

"You question my authority?" snapped the chief, his white mane of hair seeming to bristle in anger.

"No, sir. I merely appeal to your sense of fair play. And to my real need for a capable assistant in my lab work. She knows all about Substance X, which is ready for human testing, as you know. When the trial of Substance X comes up, any other nurse than Miss Carlyle would undermine my confidence, which would be bad in such a delicate operation for the first time. Furthermore—"

"All right, all right," said Endersby with a chuckle, throwing up his hands. "I surrender. The matter is officially forgotten."

His face became grave again, as he picked up some papers. "Your report of how you 'vanished' from the Clinic, in order to hunt down Dr. Henderson, is hair-raising to say the least. Especially the chances you took trying to track down the Hunchback Horror and your near death in the Devil's Playground."

He folded his hands and looked reprovingly at Quaine. "It was all . . . uh . . . highly irregular . . . unethical . . . oh, words fail me. I should lecture you at length but. . . ." He shrugged philosophically. "Ah, well. Who can tame genius? That will be officially forgotten, too."

"Thanks twice," said Quaine, his lips twitching a bit. "Both for calling off the dogs, and for your undeserved compliment. The line between genius and madness they say—" he went on whimsically—"is a hairline. Maybe you should order me put in a strait jacket."

Endersby tried to keep his face straight, but finally his mouth split into a grin and he laughed. Then his face once again turned serious as he went on.

"Now, on a matter of much greater importance—finding a test subject for Substance X. At your request, we sent notices to ten large hospitals, informing them what kind of patient is required. And that if the patient agrees, to have him or her transferred here into your hands, as the surgeon in charge."

Endersby waved a hand. "The moment we get a response from any of the hospitals we will notify you, Dr. Quaine. Of course, it has to be a *terminal* patient. A non-terminal patient's life cannot be risked with a new and untried drug. Agreed, doctor?"

Quaine nodded. "I prefer it that way. If Substance X can pull a patient from death's door, and cure his ailment entirely, it will prove its worth without question." He got up to go.

"Oh, by the way," said the chief, standing up at his desk. "We couldn't take a chance on the Hunchback Horror attempting again to seize Substance X, so I requested the sheriff to post three guards in your lab, all day and all night, in shifts."

Quaine was frowning. "That bodyguard did no good," he reminded.

"Don't get your pride up," said the chief amiably. "After all, it's not just for you but for Substance X. Isn't that worth protecting?"

Quaine grinned back. "I surrender this time."

"Also," continued Endersby, "they have installed a loud burglar alarm, in case the secret button cannot be pushed. The alarm will go off if any unauthorized person attempts to enter your lab, either by the door or windows. If you want to let anyone in, the alarm can be momentarily turned off."

"When is the National Guard due?" said Quaine dryly.

The chief laughed and waved dismissal. Walking down the corridor, Lynne was excited. "We may hear of a test patient being available any moment, dear. Then we'll have the thrill of using Substance X to save a life and cure a previously incurable ailment of the nervous system."

"If it works," amended Quaine quietly.

"Pooh," said Lynne. "After successful tests with hun-

dreds of animals of three species, including chimps, is there any doubt? You had better start thinking of a name for it, once it proves its worth. It can't be called Substance X forever."

"How about The Handy Dandy Nerve Potion?" quipped Quaine.

"Oh, you!"

When they reached the lab door, an armed guard halted them with an upraised hand. "One moment, doctor."

"What for?" said Quaine, surprised. "This is my lab."

Lynne nudged him. "The burglar alarm has to be turned off, Dr. Quaine."

"Oh, yes. Life is getting complicated for us."

The next moment the guard waved them in. As soon as they had entered and the door was closed, another guard within the lab closed a concealed switch in a wall niche. The alarm was back on. The third guard stood with folded arms in front of the steel safe that held Substance X.

"If the Hunchback Horror can get through all those anti-theft barriers," grinned Quaine, "he'll have to use black magic." He became serious. "Lynne, now that we have the test sample ready, and while we're waiting to hear of a test patient, we can fill our time writing up the exact method of synthesizing Substance X. Once it proves its worth, the formula and data will be turned over to the food and drug people, thence to pharmaceutical companies for manufacture in large quantities. Eventually Substance X will be available to any doctor or hospital to cure or alleviate a wide range of nervous-system ills."

"It's really on a par with the introduction of antibiotics," said Lynne enthusiastically.

"It won't have *that* wide a range of application," said Quaine matter-of-factly without false modesty. "But it will plug one small gap in what were previously incurable cases."

"Small gap?" Lynne said scornfully. "The understatement of the century. Don't you believe in statistics? One out of eight people suffers from ills of the central nervous system. Millions upon millions of them, around the world. If Substance X cures only fifty percent of them—well,

Pasteur, Fleming, and others in medical history will have to move aside and make room for you."

"Lynne, darling, you're prejudiced," Quaine said sternly. "And what if it goes to my head? Better think it over. Would you want to be married to an insufferable, pompous egotist who is sure he's the second greatest genius on earth?"

"Who's the other one?" demanded Lynne.

"He's dead." Quaine lost his grin as the phone rang. It was Dr. Endersby. His voice was excited.

"Dr. Quaine, your test patient is ready, at Montgomery Hospital in the East. Terminal case—too terminal, so to speak. He is too weak to be moved or sent here, unfortunately. So that means you would have to go there in order to try out Substance X on him."

Quaine bit his lip at the thought of performing his great pioneering experiment in a new and unfamiliar place. He questioned the chief closely, but found all the other factors ideal for the test.

"One last thing," said the chief. "The Montgomery doctors in charge point out that the patient might expire within twenty-four hours. That means you would have to drop everything and rush there right away."

"All right," agreed Quaine, thinking rapidly. "Hmm . . . suppose we do it this way. Have an ambulance ready in an hour to drive us to the Tarlton airport. Miss Carlyle will call there and charter a private jet plane to fly us to Montgomery Hospital."

"Charter a plane big enough to include an armed guard," insisted Endersby quickly. "Carrying along Substance X will be like carrying a bag of the world's biggest diamonds."

Quaine grimaced, but said nothing. Putting down the phone, he muttered, "Armed guard! What for? How in the world would the Hunchback Horror even know about this unless he can read minds?"

Not far off, in a conduit crammed with a tangle of wires, the black-clad hunchback grinned ghoulishly. "I don't read minds," he chortled to himself. "But I heard every word between Quaine and Endersby!"



Renolf LeClaire now put down a tapper's phone that he had been holding at his ear. Scouting and noticing the armed guards in the lab that day, he had returned with the proper equipment and tapped Quaine's telephone. Thus he had heard everything during the chief's call. And the plans for taking Substance X to another far-off city.

Quaine, you're going to get the surprise of your life, during that trip, he promised silently. One way or another, I'm going to get hold of Substance X and prevent you from making headlines all over the world for saving that dying man's life. You won't be a hero—but a goat!

## Chapter 15

Quaine and Lynne rushed to their separate apartments in Clinic Center to shower, dress in fresh clothes, pack, and grab a bite to eat at a coffee shop—all in haste. Before the hour was up, they were back in the lab. With the three guards on the alert, Quaine kneeled at his safe and worked the combination.

From inside he withdrew a sealed plastic container shaped like a small thermos bottle. Within, packed in cotton, lay the tiny vial holding the precious crystals of Substance X. It would be dissolved and used as a hypodermic shot when they reached the patient.

Outside, promptly on time, the newest and speediest ambulance of the Clinic rolled up. The driver came in and gave a half salute to Quaine, out of sheer awe.

"Ambulance ready, sir. I'm Todd. Dr. Endersby has arranged for you and Miss Carlyle to sit in the back, where the stretcher has been removed and seats installed. You will, of course, carry Substance X with you. An armed guard will also be in the back with you, and one in the front seat with me. Ready, sir?"

Quaine was already halfway out of the door, with a valise which held the plastic container of Substance X. Lynne was right at his heels, not in her lab outfit but in a trim black-and-white-checked suit. She would change, as would Quaine, into starchy white uniforms after they arrived at their destination. After a three-hour trip, the operation would be performed sometime that night, as soon as they had arrived and finished all preparations.

It was getting dark already as they stooped to enter the double back doors of the ambulance, which the guard had swung open. The two guards and driver took their seats front and back, and the powerful vehicle roared away, leaving the Clinic's drive and taking the two-lane highway to Tarlton. It had been decided that the turnpike was too crowded for even an ambulance to make good time.

What traffic there was on the side highway melted away like magic in front of the speeding ambulance, with its siren screaming and its revolving red light flashing peremptorily. Soon after, it started to rain, slowing up even the ambulance. Quaine fretted at the bad weather, then shrugged in resignation.

A phone rang in the back of the ambulance, via a radio-wave hookup. The guard passed it to Quaine.

"Dr. Endersby here," the hearty voice said. "Just wanted to wish you good luck, Dr. Quaine."

Quaine repeated the message to Lynne, who sat nervously.

"Why so jittery, honey?" he asked softly.

"That operation coming up," confessed the girl in a voice that trembled a bit. "So much depends on it. Oh, don't worry, I'll get over the shakes before we arrive."

Quaine patted her hand soothingly. "I'm a bit nervous myself," he admitted. "This is almost worse than waiting for the Hunchback Horror to strike."

Lynne smiled. "Well, at least we don't have to worry about *him*."

If they could have peered through the darkness around them, they would have been startled to see a jet-black form, misshapen but agile, that was clambering to the tip of a rocky knoll overlooking the road. At this spot, midway between the Clinic and Tarlton, the highway had a SLOW sign where a patch of unserviceable concrete had been removed, leaving an uneven stretch of bare dirt that was to be repaved. Even the ambulance would have to slow down, or risk skidding and perhaps turning over.

Knowing of this spot under repair, the driver was already pulling down his speed drastically, knowing that the

rain would have created a dangerous and slippery mud patch there. Even then the vehicle skidded upon meeting the dirt road and the driver slowed down to a crawl.

"Luck's with me," gloated the Hunchback Horror as he watched the headlights approaching his position. He wore a black raincoat and waterproof boots. "Now's the time!"

He put his shoulder to a huge round rock at the top of the knoll. Straining, he felt it move a little. He had tested it before and knew it would. One powerful heave and the rock left its perch and began rolling downhill.

"The timing is perfect!" the hunchback told himself. "And it's a blinding rain now."

Keeping an eye on the rolling rock, the black figure seized the end of a rope hanging from a tall tree. Swinging like a pendulum, he dropped on his feet near another tall tree, where he had planted a second dangling rope. And again he swung to a third tree and a third rope.

He moved almost as swiftly down the slope as the lumbering boulder. Now it was gathering speed and about to lurch onto the muddy road squarely in front of the oncoming ambulance.

Both the driver and guard peered through the pelting rain to barely make out the road ahead. The headlights could scarcely penetrate the sheets of water pouring down. The guard twisted his head as the revolving light on top briefly lit up the hillside next to the road.

"Look out!" he yelled. "Big boulder rolling into the road!"

The boulder rolled down at an angle and its path would bisect that of the ambulance in seconds. The driver tried to jam on the brakes and swing the wheel, but the mud only made the vehicle slew crazily from side to side. Finally it shuddered to a halt.

But this did not save it from the crash as the boulder struck the front bumpers squarely in the middle. The jarring crash was felt all through the ambulance, jerking the necks of the driver and guard back violently. So violently that the back of the guard's head struck the hard partition and he blacked out, while the driver felt a blow that made him dizzy.

In the back of the ambulance, the three passengers had not seen the rolling rock and were totally unprepared. The guard, nearest the back, was catapulted into the rear doors with enough force to knock out his breath. Lynne flew against his body a second later, cushioned by his yielding flesh from a bad blow, but making the guard's senses reel even more.

Quaine's split-second reflexes saved him from the worst. As he felt the sudden stop that would send him flying, he instinctively put his head down so that he made a somersault. It was his feet and not his head that struck the doors in back, with enough of a jolt to spring the catch and fling them open.

The sliding glass panel separating the front and back of the ambulance slowly opened and the driver's dizzy face peered into the back. "Big boulder," he gasped. "Rolled downhill and struck bumper . . . loosened by storm, I guess."

Lynne, the only one with her senses intact, widened her eyes as a grim thought instantly lanced through her mind.

*The storm? Or some human agency—like the Hunch-back Horror?*

The driver spoke again, quaveringly. "The guard here . . . knocked out."

Alarm sprang up in Lynne. She shook the guard in back, still stupefied by shock. "Are you all right?" she cried. He stared at her blankly a moment, then sat up and slid his feet out the back end. He stood up in the rain and let the water drench him, helping him to recover. Quaine was only now raising himself on his elbows, in a half-bewildered fashion.

Lynne shook him too. "Substance X!" she said frantically. "The valise was resting at your feet. What happened to it?"

The valise and plastic bottle were nowhere in sight. "Must have flown out the back end," hazarded Quaine, "when my feet knocked the doors open."

Lynne glanced out sharply and pointed. "There it is! The valise slid out like a shot, then fell open. The plastic bottle kept rolling across the mud for fifty feet."

"I'll go get it," said the guard. But his legs were wobbly and he slipped in the mud a couple of times.

Lynne suddenly screamed, pointing out the ambulance's back end. "That tree . . . look! Somebody's swinging from a rope. The Hunchback Horror!"

The guard swung around wildly, yanking his gun from its holster. He let out a startled yelp at the weird black-clad figure swinging toward him at great speed. He took quick aim and his gun barked, but the driving rain in his eyes made the shot go wild.

The next instant the hard boots of the swinging marauder struck him in the chest and sent him flopping backward. His head struck a stone and he lay still. At the end of his swing, the Hunchback Horror now let go of the rope and landed on his feet with a splash, near the plastic bottle lying in the mud.

Watching all this in silent alarm back in the ambulance, Lynne pulled at Quaine's arm, pointing through the rain. "Oh, Quentin! LeClaire is going to make off with Substance X!"

That wiped the last shreds of dizziness from Quaine's mind. He leaped out, got his sense of balance in the mud, then began running, faster and faster.

At that moment, the hunchback was picking up the plastic bottle and wiping the mud off hastily. "Substance X! The most valuable thing on earth right now!"

But then he heard a hoarse shout and turned. The big broad-shouldered figure of Quentin Quaine was charging toward him, churning up mud that flew in all directions.

The hunchback stuffed the plastic bottle in his belt and grabbed the end of the dangling rope, which had swung back after he let go. He hoisted himself off the ground and began swinging away. But Quaine made one last desperate leap and caught his legs. The rope snapped somewhere above under the double weight and they both fell into the mud.

"I want that Substance X back," Quaine was yelling. "A man's life depends on it!"

Lifting the hunchback up in his arms, Quaine slammed him to the ground. The plastic bottle was jarred loose-

from LeClaire's belt and fell at Quaine's feet. He turned to pick it up with a glad cry, unaware that the soft mud had cushioned LeClaire's fall to the ground. The hunchback was already scrabbling to where the fallen guard's gun lay.

Seizing it, LeClaire swiftly leaped and used the gun as a club to give Quaine a vicious blow on the back of his head. Quaine crumpled up with a groan and the plastic bottle slipped from his nerveless hands.

LeClaire stood panting and grinning. The guard and Quaine both out of action. The other guard in the front seat knocked out, as he had seen while swinging past. The driver still dazed from the collision with the boulder and sitting helplessly.

"Nothing to stop me from leaving with the loot!" he thought triumphantly. He turned leisurely to pick up the plastic bottle, only to see a slim white hand grab it up first.

It was Lynne. She had run there, too, following Quaine. LeClaire grabbed her arm before she could run away. "A mere girl can't stop me," he grated. "All right, hand it to me."

But quick-wittedly, the girl swung her free arm and her hand let go of the plastic bottle. It was a good long throw and the bottle sailed to the side of the road where a thick tangle of thorny bushes grew.

"If you want it, you'll have to find it!" she taunted.

Muttering furious curses, the hunchback seemed about to strike her in rage. But then, realizing he had no time to waste, he plunged into the thicket to search for the plastic bottle.

Lynne knew that her trick of flinging the bottle would not harm Substance X, well protected by cotton padding within the plastic container. Now, if the Hunchback Horror didn't find it too soon. . . .

Seeing that Quaine was sprawled face up and in no danger of drowning in muddy water, Lynne dashed back toward the ambulance. She shook the dazed driver. "Snap out of it!" she yelled. "Use the ambulance police-call radio . . . quick! Get the police here as fast as they can make it!"

And so it was that the cursing hunchback, hampered by

the thorny bushes and the spattering rain in his eyes, straightened up as he heard the wail of a distant siren. And he still hadn't found the plastic bottle! He frantically searched another few moments, savagely trampling down bushes. But then, as the screaming siren grew louder, he gave up with a final loud curse and scuttled away.

Before the headlights of a state trooper's car lit up the mud road, the hunchback was plunging through a growth of small trees and on up the knoll where he had first stood. From there on, he could easily escape in the darkness if the troopers tried to track him.

Two more police cars came up and Lynne explained what had happened. "It's no use trying to nab the Hunchback Horror," she ended. "Just help us find that plastic bottle, then remove the boulder, and let the ambulance go on to Tarlton Airport."

While a couple of the policemen attended to the guard and Quaine, both knocked out, the others began hunting the thicket with flashlights and before long one of them yelled, holding up the plastic bottle.

"Thank heaven!" breathed Lynne. "Put the guard and Quaine in the back of the ambulance and I'll take care of them. Take the guard in the front seat along with you, he's still out. I think the driver has recovered by now."

The troopers carried out her instructions. Before long, three husky men were rolling the boulder out of the road. "Only a dent in the bumper," they called. "Go ahead and we'll give you an escort, front and rear."

Soon, with police cars ahead and behind, sirens screaming, the ambulance sped on toward Tarlton after regaining the paved road. In the back, Lynne was expertly bandaging the bruises of both the guard and Quaine, who had regained consciousness. When she told the rest of the story, Quaine took her hand in admiration. "Talk about genius! That's what it was when you threw Substance X in the thicket, foiling LeClaire."

Lynne smiled back impishly. "Well, if we're both geniuses, our kids will be, too, no doubt." She suddenly turned sober. "That mad hunchback! What if he tries again to snatch Substance X?"



"How can he?" said Quaine with an air of relief. "He can't possibly drive to the airport in a jeep . . . or any car . . . as fast as this ambulance. We'll take off in our plane before he can ever get there, if he tries."

But fate seemed against them again. At the airport, the rainstorm had temporarily grounded all aircraft. Wide pools of water lay all over and the downpour had continued, making it hazardous for any pilot to take off. In the terminal, Quaine phoned the control tower and pointed out the importance of his mission. But the tower officials adamantly refused to lift the ban.

"The best we can do, doctor," said a crisp voice, "is give you first takeoff clearance the moment conditions improve."

The pilot of the chartered plane came up. "Dr. Quaine? As soon as the rain lets up a bit, we can all go aboard the plane and be ready the moment we get the go-ahead for takeoff."

Quaine fretted as the hands of the terminal clock crept around and another twenty minutes went by. Lynne was also worried. But both of them had forgotten about the hunchback. Their concern was over a patient who needed a critical operation at the earliest possible moment. Would they make it in time to save his life and at the same time prove the worth of Substance X beyond any doubt? Much hung on this mission of mercy.

At last, ten minutes later, the rain slackened. They all made a dash for the plane. The armed guard from the ambulance was with them. The pilot led them to a small trim private plane with twin jet motors. Inside it was comfortable, with sitting room for four people besides the pilot.

They heard the whine of jet motors starting up and then their steady low pulsations, as the pilot warmed up the engines. He had earphones on, in contact with the tower.

"We got the go-ahead," he called over his shoulder.

"Give it all it's got," pleaded Quaine. "We've got to reach Montgomery Hospital soon."

"Okay," said the pilot and the next moment their necks

were nearly snapped off as the powerful jet plane spun down the field and lifted off at a steep slant.

"I'll keep in touch with the weather stations and try to avoid any storms which would delay us," said the pilot.

The jets began drumming with smooth, rising power. Quaine and Lynne settled back. The worst was over. Quaine had the plastic container in his hands with a firm grip. The valise had been left behind. The armed guard sat across from them, watchfully. But what could happen up here in a sealed plane?

They knew the grim answer as something scraped in back of the double seat where Quaine and Lynne sat. The lid of a big, square storage compartment, for luggage, swung open and up popped a black-clad figure like a jack-in-the-box.

Taken completely by surprise, neither Quaine nor the guard could react before the hunchback leaped out and snatched the guard's gun from its holster. Then he backed up and held them all at gunpoint, including the pilot.

"How did you—?" Lynne was gasping.

"Get aboard?" leered the deformed man. "The weather, of course, was on my side. The delay in lift-off, which I banked on, allowed me to reach the airport in my jeep. The pouring rain then covered me as I crept out on the runway to this plane, the only private plane around. The pilot, expecting you long before, had left the door unlocked. So I came in and hid in that storage box. Simple, eh? That's all the planning I need," he finished sneeringly, looking at Quaine, "when I deal with simpletons."

His harsh mocking laugh made Quaine wince and grind his teeth.

"Now," snapped LeClaire, "kindly toss that plastic bottle to me, Quaine."

Quaine set his lips and tensed. "Ah, ah!" warned LeClaire, pointing the gun straight at his heart. "One move and you get drilled. I couldn't miss at this close range."

With a frustrated growl, Quaine tossed the plastic bottle to the hunchback. With his free hand he tucked it in a

deep pocket within his cape. "Mine, all mine!" he gloated. "The most precious treasure in the world."

"But a dying man's life depends on it!" cried Lynne. "Haven't you any heart at all?"

"No, just a hump on my back," snarled LeClaire. "Let him die, then his troubles will be over."

"But what are you going to do with Substance X?" demanded Quaine. "It's a medical drug, not gold or diamonds. You can't sell it anywhere."

"No, but I have other plans for it," grinned the hunchback, "which are none of your business."

"LeClaire, listen," said Quaine tensely. "There is something you should know about Substance X that might change your mind about all this."

"Silence!" shouted the hunchback. "You can't smooth-talk me into giving up my loot. One more word out of you and I'll shoot. No, not your heart but your leg where it'll hurt. Understand?"

Quaine gave a resigned sigh and kept silent.

LeClaire lifted his gun slightly, toward the pilot in front. "You," he commanded. "Turn the plane around. We're going back to Tarlton Airport. Fly low and cut your speed, so the tower's radar won't spot us. We can make a sneak landing at the edge of the airport where I can jump out and reach my jeep." LeClaire added, "Just call me the Hunched Hijacker!"

Nobody joined in his malicious laugh. The pilot had no choice and obediently swung the jet around, swinging lower and cutting his speed. "I'll have to go as low as two thousand feet to avoid radar," he informed LeClaire.

"Who cares?" said the hunchback. "Just don't pull any tricks. I can see the altimeter from here."

A calculating gleam came into Quaine's eyes, as the plane kept slanting downward. He knew that jets and airliners always flew at high altitudes up to seven or eight miles, where the air was calm. At two thousand feet, there was always turbulent air that made for a rough ride in any plane.

*Did LeClaire know that?*

## Chapter 16

Quaine tensed. He glanced out the window and saw lights below. They must be getting close to the two-thousand-foot level. Suddenly the plane began bumping as if it had landed on a rutted road. But it was merely air that was full of crosscurrents and alternate updrafts and down-drafts.

They all had to grab hold of the bars at the sides of their seats to keep from being jounced around. The hunchback, still on his feet, took it in stride and also gripped a bar on the wall.

But he was not prepared for the sudden violent lurch that the plane made as it hit a "pocket" in the air and dropped like a swift elevator.

That was when Quaine leaped, as the hunchback staggered back and his gun was no longer pointed at them. Before LeClaire could recover, Quaine had grabbed his wrist and gave it a powerful twist.

With a painful yowl, the hunchback dropped the gun. A furious struggle followed as they both tried to reach the weapon lying at their feet. In the narrow cabin, Quaine could not exert his full strength and the wiry hunchback held his own.

The guard leaped up to help Quaine, but again the plane made a sickening swoop in the air. The guard was thrown flat on his back in the short aisle leading to the pilot's cockpit, and lay stunned.

But the plane's dive was also LeClaire's undoing, sending him reeling against one wall. With quicker reflexes, Quaine managed to crouch and hold on to the bars on both

sides. Then, as the plane stopped bouncing, the medical scientist sprang from his crouch and delivered powerful blows in the hunchback's face. In retaliation, LeClaire desperately lowered his head and butted Quaine in the stomach. Quaine grunted and fell back onto a seat.

The hunchback then darted for the gun, which was sliding down the aisle. Eager to seize it, he wasn't watching and stumbled over the sprawled guard, at the same time that the plane made a sudden drop in the air. With a wild cry, LeClaire was hurled off his feet into the cockpit, and against the pilot himself. As the pilot momentarily lost control of the plane, it gave a sideward jerk. This time LeClaire was flung straight toward one side of the plastic bubble which enclosed the cockpit.

With a wild cry, the hunchback crashed through the plastic wall and was gone.

The pilot quickly took over his controls again, staring down with an utterly stunned face. "Lord!" he gulped. "He fell out of the plane—without a parachute! He'll never survive the fall—two thousand feet." He shuddered and turned his eyes away, looking sick.

Quaine and Lynne stared at each other in stark horror, and for two reasons.

"That's the end of the Hunchback Horror!"

"And of Substance X!" The last was a groan from Quaine. He looked down and vaguely made out the landscape below in the dark. "Wild land below, and a few lakes. They may never find his body—or the plastic bottle."

He sat and held his head in his hands, the picture of utter dejection at this final blow of fate.

Lynne patted his shoulder, unable to think of a single soothing word. To Quaine, this was like the world dropping out from under his feet, losing the product of his great medical discovery on the eve of its hoped-for triumphant debut. And on top of that was added the heart-breaking thought that the patient at Montgomery Hospital would die and nobody could help.

When the guard came to and heard the story, he wearily picked up his gun, holstered it, then sat down and kept

shaking his head. The pilot meanwhile was the only one busy, fighting to keep the plane from going out of control because of the blast of air coming into the broken plastic bubble.

Fortunately, they were back near Tarlton and he was able to glide down and make a jolting landing on the airport runway, after yelling a radio warning to the tower. An airliner taking off stopped just in time to avoid a collision.

The four people staggered from the plane and headed slowly for the terminal. Inside, Quaine headed for a phone booth with a face that reflected all the tortured thoughts whirling in his mind.

"I'm going to call Dr. Endersby," he said to Lynne in a dead voice, "to report the end of Renolf LeClaire, the Hunchback Horror. And the loss of Substance X along with him."

Lynne was weeping. Not for LeClaire, but for Quaine.

Quaine put down the phone later and said, without emotion, "Ironically, Montgomery Hospital called that the test patient had died while we were still flying there. We couldn't have saved him anyway."

Lynne felt a little gladness in her heart that this burden had been lifted from Quaine. And also that he would no longer be the target of the sadistic deeds of vengeance planned by LeClaire.

The Hunchback of Horror was gone—forever.

Lynne was wrong.

As his body crashed through the plastic-bubble wall of the plane's cockpit, ice seemed to flow through LeClaire's veins. Down and down he dropped in thin air, tumbling with flailing arms and legs, screeching in wild terror. Two thousand feet . . . a killing drop that would turn him into bloody pulp when he landed on the hard ground.

But then his eyes caught a glimpse of something sparkling below in dim moonlight. The storm had broken and clouds had started to clear away. As his revolving body tumbled around again and his eyes could focus downward, he saw now that a lake lay below him.

Water! If he could land there, he had a chance of surviving. Filled with wild hope, he forced panic out of his mind and began thinking swiftly. Then he gripped his cape at either corner and slowly began to spread it.

Rushing air tugged powerfully as if to rip his hands away, but he clung to the cape. It began to act as a brake to his plunge, slowing him down more and more each second. Now he was able to guide himself to fall in almost a horizontal position, cutting his drop speed even more as his body and cape both offered the most air resistance possible.

It was a daring, desperate gamble. But what did he have to lose? And only his training at the Devil's Playground, toughening his muscles into whipcord, made it possible for him to hang onto the cape and battle the ferocious wind pressure.

Like a huge bat, the black figure sailed downward, now at considerably less speed than a free-fall drop. He had a fighting chance to survive the plunge into the lake below. For a moment all seemed lost when he saw that he was dropping toward one shore of the lake and would miss the water.

Conquering panic, he grimly pulled at one corner of the cape, so that it turned slantwise. Then, like a huge kite, his whole body glided five feet forward . . . ten feet . . . fifteen feet . . . twenty-five feet. Now he knew he would safely land in the water offshore and not on the hard shore itself.

Safely? That depended on his final maneuver and split-second timing. When he began to see little waves on the water, he let go of his cape, jackknifed his body downward, and extended his arms like a high diver.

The fleeting thought went through his mind that Quaine's dive into the Styx River had been on this same order. Diving from any great height, the impact on water could be just as bad as on hard steel, if you landed any other way than in a precise dive. Despite the trick of using his cape as a drag to slow himself, he was still plunging down at what could be a killing speed—if all went wrong with his dive.

The uprushing water filled his whole view. Now was the crucial moment!

It seemed as though his arms would split when he struck. His head received a stunning blow, too, and for a moment he blacked out. But the cold water instantly revived him as he went down rapidly from the force of his high-speed fall. But this was near the shore. He had to convert this to a shallow dive.

It took all his remaining strength to turn his arms and body and execute a swooping turn from vertical to horizontal.

And just in time. He sensed rather than saw how close he had come to hitting bottom. He even felt the edge of a stone scrape one of his feet as he turned upward for the surface. His head popped out of the water and he gulped in fresh air.

He had done it. He was alive!

Feebly, almost spent, he paddled his way to the nearest shore and dragged himself up on a pebbly beach. He sprawled flat on his back then, panting and groaning at the pains in his arms and shoulders from the dive. A few minutes later, when he began to shiver, he realized his danger from shock and fever in his wet clothes.

He stumbled to his feet and forced himself to trot away. There were no lakeshore homes here, for this region near the Devil's Playground was an undesirable wasteland. Poor soil filled with many rocks made it shunned by farmers, too. Few souls, if any, lived anywhere near.

But he remembered what he had passed one day in his jeep, when exploring for any escape routes from his hide-out, if police were chasing him. Getting his bearings from the stars and moon, LeClaire turned and finally saw it looming ahead, a dilapidated old shack once used by trappers but now abandoned. Inside there was little left except broken-down furniture, but that was all he needed, for he also found a few scattered matches, the long stick kind. With a blazing fire going, his shivering stopped. He could safely rest here until his clothing dried out, then a walk of no more than ten miles would bring him to the Devil's Playground.



It was his first chance now to check on his stolen prize. He reached in his cape pouch and pulled out the plastic bottle. It was unharmed, to his relief.

"Substance X, I've got it!" he murmured triumphantly, holding it up in his clenched hand. "Grabbing this was like ripping the heart out of Dr. Quentin Q. Quaine! And I know just how to use it to give him another crushing blow!"

Quaine's sea-blue eyes looked bleak the next morning, in the lab, as he stared with slumped shoulders at the vacuum pump where Substance X had been so laboriously crystallized.

"Don't take it so hard, darling," Lynne admonished softly. "Search parties and planes left at dawn, hunting for LeClaire's body. If they find it, chances are our Substance X will be with it intact."

"But if they don't find the body?" Quaine waved a weary hand.

"Well, the formulas and data that we turn over to the pharmaceutical companies will soon have them producing Substance X in quantity. . . ."

"Soon?" burst in Quaine savagely. "Designing and setting up the equipment will take at least a year, you know that."

Lynne could think of nothing to say.

"And if we go through our own lab process, we might cut it down to six months to produce another test batch of Substance X . . . if we killed ourselves."

A pained look came over Quaine's haggard face. "The irony, the real irony of this whole thing, is that LeClaire would never listen to my proposition."

Lynne jerked up her head in curiosity, as he stopped. "What proposition, Quentin? More than once you told me you had wanted to make some kind of deal with him. What was it?"

Quaine looked at her hollowly. "Too late now, of course. And I didn't want to tell you, or anybody, about it before. It was a sort of wild idea . . . a long chance. But here's what I had in mind. . . ."

Quaine talked quietly for ten minutes. Lynne's eyes grew wider and wider. At the end she sat down, dumfounded. "I see," she whispered. "I see. It might have worked. Oh, darling, I'm so sorry that plan blew up in your face, too."

"Forget it," muttered Quaine. "It's all over and done with now. If the searchers find LeClaire's body, it'll be a miracle. But keep calling Dr. Endersby for any reports."

When night fell, Dr. Endersby gave the bad news over the phone in Quaine's apartment. "They combed the area, but found nothing. As you know, it's sort of arid semi-desert region that borders the Devil's Playground. The land is a stony wilderness overgrown with scraggly shrubs. There are treacherous potholes, beds of quicksand, twisted gullies, and pits. Even the lakes hold brackish water and sites are too unattractive for any summer homes. The search parties had a difficult time today, but will try tomorrow again at my request." His voice sounded hopeless. "But a dead body could lie there for months or years without ever being found."

"I know," sighed Quaine, hanging up. To Lynne, waiting for the final word, he muttered, "Substance X, that batch of it, is lost forever."

"No, it isn't!" contradicted Lynne with a gasp, holding a piece of black paper with blood-red writing on it.

Quaine whirled in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"This note," said Lynne in astonishment. "I just noticed it poking out from under a vase on the end table, where it escaped your notice. It must have been left here while you were at the lab. It's from the . . . *Hunchback Horror!*"

"Ghosts don't write notes," Quaine half-snarled, glaring at her as if she were playing a practical joke on him.

"Look for yourself," breathed Lynne, handing him the note. "It's the same kind of notes I got from him before. Black paper, red ink. And it's LeClaire's writing!"

Quaine was already reading it, his jaw sagging in utter disbelief. The note said:

Greetings QQQ! I'll tell you the story of how I survived the fall from the plane someday. But the key

thing is that I'm alive—and I have your Substance X, unharmed.

You can have it back—for a *ransom!*

The amount I demand is one million dollars. The money must be brought by Lynne Carlyle—*alone*. She is to bring the payment in one valise to the Devil's Playground and meet me at the top of the hill where the landmark called Satan's Tower stands. Do not try any trickery. If you or the police try to surprise me, they will fail—and Lynne will die!

Our meeting time is tomorrow at sunset.

—Renolf LeClaire  
alias the Hunchback Horror

"Incredible!" said Quaine, looking staggered. "How could he survive a fall of two thousand feet, first of all?"

"I agree it seems impossible," whispered Lynne. "But somehow it happened. I . . . I don't know whether to be sorry or glad. Sorry that he's alive, or glad that Substance X can be retrieved."

"But at a fantastic price for the Clinic, who would have to pay, of course. A million dollars!" Quaine glanced at the girl with haunted eyes and his voice went down. "And at a fantastic price to me . . . if you came to harm."

Lynne had her answer ready. "I'm willing to risk it, darling."

Quaine looked at her and measured out each word slowly. "But that scheming hunchback has no scruples at all. And the price might be the highest of all for you . . . your *life*."

Lynne felt the shock of the words. When she felt sure her lips wouldn't tremble, she said, "I repeat: I'm willing to risk it."

"But am I?" groaned Quaine, jumping up to nervously pace the floor.

"We *must*, dear," said Lynne firmly. "For the sake of all the thousands who need Substance X. One life for thousands, if the worst happens. It's a bargain we can't pass by."

She went to him and took his hand, smiling. "You know we could never face ourselves again, if we didn't do it."

Quaine shrugged helplessly. "I guess you're right. But the million-dollar ransom I'll have to leave to Dr. Endersby."

Quaine picked up the phone, asking the switchboard for Dr. Endersby. As the Clinic's administrator heard the message, a series of amazed grunts came back from him.

"I don't know what to say, sir," finished Quaine in a dull tone. "I can hardly expect the Clinic to somehow round up that money and pay the ransom, or whether it's even worth it. Lynne and I, with some extra helpers, could probably synthesize another test sample of Substance X in six months and—"

"While hundreds of people die who might have been saved?" roared back Endersby. "No! Substance X must have its trial debut now, not six months or even six weeks from now! Now don't argue, Quaine, I know how you feel. But this difficult situation is no fault of yours. And it so happens that the Clinic was well endowed with reserve funds by generous foundations. I'll call an emergency meeting of the board and rush a bank draft through tomorrow." He paused. "A million dollars . . . hmm. To be carried in one valise, by a girl, it will have to be in high-denomination bills. I'll take care of it."

Quaine reflected that Endersby was a true doctor, faithful to his Hippocratic oath and the principles of doctoring—that human lives, even one life, must be saved at all costs.

But then a hard edge came to Quaine's voice as he said, "One thing, sir. I want it understood that the sheriff and the police are *not* to interfere in any way. Lynne's life will be at stake. And trying to trick LeClaire is far too risky. Is that clear, sir?"

The chief hesitated for a moment, but then said softly, "Yes, I understand, Quaine. We just have to take the loss of the money on the chin. One question . . . uh . . . will Miss Carlyle come back safely even if the money is delivered to that mad hunchback?"

"He made no promise," admitted Quaine, swallowing. "But Lynne is willing. So am I."

"Your decision was tougher than mine," murmured Dr. Endersby, with deep respect in his voice. Then he hung up.

Quaine and Lynne looked at each other. There was fear in both their eyes. But also a certain pride. They kissed silently, not wanting to talk about what lay ahead tomorrow. . . .

## Chapter 17

At sunset, the lone girl's figure trudged into the periphery of the Devil's Playground. She was dressed in slacks, a warm jacket, and boots. She had driven herself to the end of the usable road. Now, continuing on foot, she carried a valise that weighed her down on one side.

She had been briefed, on a map, where to find Satan's Tower. She spied it beyond a copse of gnarled growths—an uprising mass of natural rock with angular sides and a flat top, leaning precariously. It stood at the top of a low but steep hill which was barren. Anyone standing at the top near the strange rock formation would be able to see in all directions and avoid any ambush.

LeClaire had chosen his site with cunning.

Lynne paused at the foot of the hill and looked up. She could see nothing of the hunchback in the fading twilight. Was he hiding behind the stone tower? Lynne began to climb the slope, her boots slipping at times in loose rubble. It was a hard climb and she was panting when she reached the top.

She set her valise down and leaned back against the tall rock, filling her lungs with fresh air. Then she circled the rock, calling out, "LeClaire? Renolf LeClaire? Are you here?"

But she met no one when she came around to where her valise rested. Puzzled, she peered through the gathering darkness around the hill, wondering if he would appear and start climbing.

"I'm here, my dear," came a cackling voice above her. Lynne jumped and swung her eyes upward. There was

a large dark gouge in the rock tower, and out of its shadows stepped the hunchback. "I kept myself hidden," he explained, "until I was sure no police had secretly followed you. Or Quaine, your lover."

He leaped down lightly beside her and grabbed up the valise.

"Let me check if the ransom is here in full. And in good money." He shone a small flashlight into the valise and pulled out a packet of one-thousand-dollar bills.

"Don't worry, it's all there," Lynne said sharply. "One thousand one-thousand-dollar bills. Legal tender, no counterfeits. Old money, random numbers."

"The bank probably made a complete list of the numbers anyway," grinned the hunchback, "hoping to nab me when they are cashed. But it's simple to mail them to Switzerland and have them credit me with the full amount. Then I can draw foreign bank drafts on it, using any name I choose. The Swiss are not fussy and they protect every client from identification. No government can pressure them into violating their clients' confidence."

Lynne was impatient. "We've fulfilled our end of the bargain. Now give me Substance X."

"Oh, I haven't got it along," said LeClaire, leering. "Too valuable to carry around. It's back at my hideout. You'll have to come there with me to get Substance X." He seized the valise and turned.

Lynne felt a cold chill running down her spine. What kind of game was the Hunchback Horror playing with her? Would he really turn over the precious drug to her, or—? Lynne shuddered, but dared not pursue those thoughts. She would have to hope he had enough shreds of honor left to fulfill his end of the ransom deal.

Without a word, she followed him down the hillside, using a flashlight of her own to see the way. Even so, she almost stumbled once for a bad fall. But LeClaire's gloved hand grabbed her arm and steadied her.

"For you," he said with a satyrlike grin she did not like, "I can be gallant."

At the bottom of the hill, the hunchback led the way around a stand of gnarled trees that grew some fifty feet

high. LeClaire stopped suddenly, listening. "Do you hear a sound . . . a sort of whirring sound?"

Lynne nodded, puzzled at what it could be. The sound rapidly grew into a loud clatter. The girl was just as startled as the hunchback, as a helicopter came swinging around the trees, flying low, with its searchlight limelighting them. Lynne could see the police insignia on its side.

"Treachery, eh?" snarled LeClaire. "You and Quaine conspired with the cops to waylay me this way . . . the only way they could take me by surprise."

"No!" cried Lynne. "I swear it. Neither the doctor nor I knew anything about this. I—I don't know how it happened."

"Hah!" That was all the answer the hunchback took time for. He was yanking her by the hand toward the trees, as if to hide there. But as the helicopter swooped down and hovered only ten feet above, two uniformed figures dropped to the ground. Guns were already in their hands.

In a flash, LeClaire swung the girl in front of him, one arm encircling her waist tightly. "Halt!" he yelled. "If you shoot you'll only hit her!"

The two policemen stood still for a moment, then began to separate to come at the hunchback at two sides. But meanwhile he had quickly slung the valise onto a clasp on his belt. One arm still held the girl, but his other hand now pulled a gleaming knife with a long blade from his belt. He put the long sharp blade in front of Lynne's throat, where the policemen could not miss seeing it.

They stopped as if they had struck an invisible barrier.

"That's right!" hissed the hunchback. "You'll do only as I tell you or the knife does its job on the girl's throat. Toss away your guns!"

The officers had no choice and obeyed. The scene was fitfully lit at times by the helicopter's searchlight as it circled slowly.

"Now back up," commanded LeClaire. "Back, I said."

Puzzled at what he was up to, the police backed up, step by step. LeClaire advanced step by step, with his girl hostage. "Keep backing up, you two, until I reach the



point where I can give you the slip. Back . . . back . . . back. . . .”

The two policemen backed up, but warily kept their eyes on the girl and her captor. That was their undoing.

In the gathering darkness as the searchlight above flicked away erratically, they were not aware that behind them was a narrow gash in the ground. One fell over the edge with a wild yell. The other whirled and backed away in alarm. But the hunchback let go of the girl and swiftly ran to him, lifting his foot to the policeman's back and giving him a shove. He, too, went screeching over the edge into the dark pit.

Lynne moaned at the sheer brutality of it. It looked like a deep pit where two broken bodies must now lie, lifeless. She looked at LeClaire in utter loathing. “You filthy beast! Your heart is as black as your costume!”

The hunchback pretended to be shocked. “You misjudge me, lovely one. That's no bottomless pit if that's what you're thinking. It's only about twenty-five feet deep. They might suffer a few broken bones, but they can be rescued alive.”

And now Lynne heard groans intermixed with curses drifting up out of the pit. She was relieved that at least they had not lost their lives.

“They can't climb out of the pit themselves . . . sides are too steep.” The hunchback was talking and running at the same time, dragging the girl with him. “The helicopter is checking on them first, but it'll come after us then. That's our cue to skip.”

When Lynne heard the drone of the whirlybird, she and her captor were a good distance away, weaving their way among giant stones that cut off the searchlight's glare and kept them hidden from the flyer's eyes.

LeClaire had previously snapped off his flashlight and stuck it in his belt. Lynne had hoped to suddenly flash hers up into the sky as a signal, but the hunchback was too quick for her. He grabbed it away from her, grinning in the dim moonlight, and tossed it aside.

“I don't need a light to see by,” he told her. “I know the trail by heart. Those helicopter police will never track us

to my hideout." He held the valise in one hand and with his other hand pulled the girl along.

"I have the million dollars in cold cash," he said smugly. "And I have *you*." The leer in his voice sent a wave of uneasiness through Lynne.

She spoke, trying to keep her voice from trembling. "I don't know what you mean. As soon as we reach your hideout, you'll give me Substance X and I'll leave. After all, Dr. Endersby paid the million dollars you demanded."

"Yes, but he also tried to double-cross me by secretly conspiring with the sheriff. They sent the helicopter to ambush me. So I no longer have to honor the agreement, you see?"

Lynne wondered what those ominous words meant. But she didn't ask. There was nothing for her to do but go with him and see what happened. Even if she could break loose from his grip, how would she find her way out of the Devil's Playground alone, at night? She could get lost and wander for days.

It seemed like hours that LeClaire wound through the stony wilderness—skirting giant rocks, crossing dry gullies, and circling around cliffs. Finally, LeClaire pulled her up a natural stone staircase, crude but easy to climb, that led to the dark mouth of a cave. But it was completely hidden by bushy growths which the hunchback pulled aside. A door of steel gridwork covered the entrance. LeClaire pulled out a key and unlocked a padlock.

"Enter my parlor," he said in mock politeness. But it sounded too much like what the spider said to the fly and Lynne shuddered as she stooped and went in. The low entrance broadened out into a wide rock chamber, outfitted as living quarters just as LeClaire's first cave hideout had been.

The hunchback lit a kerosene lamp and waved for the girl to sit down in a crude wooden chair. She waited with bated breath as he then went to the back of the cave, rummaged around a moment, then came back with the plastic bottle.

"Substance X!" said Lynne, in relief. Nobody actually

knew, up till then, whether LeClaire really had it intact or whether he had lost it during his long fall from the plane and his miraculous escape from death. She extended her hand.

"Pah! What good could Quaine the quack do with this?" He said scornfully, pulling back the vial.

"Dr. Quaine is not a quack!" shot back the girl in instant anger. "How can you still believe he performed a bad operation on you, when you yourself had to *frame* him with that false report of Dr. Henderson? And the malpractice suit you had me read was for another doctor entirely. That proves—"

"That proves nothing," cut in the hunchback, waving a hand as if to sweep her words aside. He turned to where he had propped a big mirror on the cave wall. He stared at his reflection with smoldering eyes. "Look! Look at my twisted spine . . . my ugly hump. Only a *quack* could do that, I tell you!"

Lynne opened her mouth again, then closed it. It was no use. She recalled now a talk they had had with Dr. Saunders, the psychiatrist, about LeClaire.

"A clear case of a schizophrenic paranoid," he had said. "He ignores the truth, or reality, and really believes Dr. Quaine performed a quack operation that caused his deformity. It's a fixation, an obsession. Evidence to the contrary means nothing to him."

"It's childish," Lynne had murmured.

The psychiatrist nodded. "Exactly. And that also accounts, you see, for his melodramatic manner of speaking . . . his acrobatics with a rope . . . his fantastic deeds against Quaine and the Clinic. He's playing a part, dramatizing himself, holding the center of the stage. It's all immature, a reversion to childhood tactics . . . but exceedingly dangerous at the same time."

That had explained a lot about the Hunchback Horror's mad antics. Lynne's thoughts snapped back to the present at a loud word from LeClaire . . . "Look, my dear!"

The hunchback held the plastic bottle up before her eyes. Lynne watched in silent dread as he eagerly opened

the plastic container and pulled out the cotton packing. From that he withdrew the final tiny vial filled with shiny crystals.

He held it up in his fingers in the lamplight, his eyes gleaming fiercely. "I'm going to rob Quaine the quack of both his wonder drug . . . and his girl!"

Lynne put a hand to her mouth to keep from crying out hysterically. Now she knew that the hunchbacked madman had hideous new plans of his own.

"A double blow for him." His voice sounded like a dozen snakes hissing. "I'll smash this vial under my boot! As for you, my dear, you'll stay here as my guest!"

He cackled insanely as Lynne put her hands to her face and moaned at the ghastly threat. Would he destroy the fruits of Quaine's genius in one brutal moment? And what about her? Being his unwilling "guest" conjured up thoughts of terror that she could not even pursue.

"Now watch!" commanded the madman. "As I drop the vial to the stone floor and stamp on it . . ."

"No, you can't!" cried Lynne desperately. "That drug—and the first human test will prove it—can cure thousands of people!"

"Who cares?" chortled LeClaire, in utter callousness. "I just don't want Quaine to achieve that triumph, at least with this batch of Substance X. Here goes!"

He dropped the vial to the floor. Being plastic, it bounced without breaking and rolled a bit, then stopped. The hunchback poised his heavy black boot above it, making sure that Lynne's stricken eyes were watching. He was deliberately stretching out his evil deed to torment her. His boot began to descend.

"Wait!" said Lynne in such a sharp tone that LeClaire paused and turned in surprise.

Lynne now stood up, the lamp light highlighting her taut face. "Do you want to know the truth about Substance X? Do you want to hear just what kind of ailments it will cure? Now is the time for you to hear. You wouldn't listen when Quaine kept asking you to listen to his proposition."

"I wondered about that," admitted LeClaire. He with-

drew his boot, letting the vial lie unbroken. "All right, let's hear the rest of it."

Lynne paused. She hadn't meant to reveal this to the hunchback. It seemed too cruel. But maybe the shock would turn his mind away from destroying Substance X. Or would it only put him in a greater rage against the drug? Lynne made an agonized decision.

"From the first," she said, dropping her bombshell, "Quaine wanted *you* to be his initial human test subject."

"Me?" echoed the hunchback. A blasting thought leaped into his mind and he gasped, "You don't mean that—?"

Lynne nodded. "Yes, Substance X has the power to loosen the entire spinal column, even making the bone structure *flexible*. Operations on the spine, you know, are the most dangerous kind. Substance X would take away the danger and make it possible to get at the main nervous system within the spine, resulting in cures for broken backs and broken necks that would otherwise be fatal. Also any other kind of damage to the spine and its central nerve cord. Thousands of people formerly doomed to wheelchairs or to die from nervous ailments and diseases, while doctors stood by helplessly, can then be saved. And Substance X can do one more thing—"

"Yes, go on," said LeClaire hoarsely, steeling himself as if for a knife to stab him.

*"It can make a bent spine so flexible that even a hunchback can be turned back into the tall, straight man he was before!"*

Renolf LeClaire staggered back as if the knife had pierced his heart. All color drained from his face. In his eyes grew a horror greater than any of his victims had known.

"Then . . . then . . ." he choked, unable to bring it out.

"Yes," whispered Lynne, almost pityingly. "If you had listened to Quaine *before* you started your mad campaign of revenge . . . before you committed crimes of assault and destruction . . . you could have been operated on again to have your spine straightened."

"I—I cut my own throat!" gurgled LeClaire in an agonized tone, and his hand clutched at his throat, symbolically. "Oh, God! Why did I do it? Why did I escape from the hospital to start my vendetta against Quaine?"

Lynne nodded grimly. "Every move you made from then on, every fiendish feat you performed to terrorize the Clinic, only added to your criminal record. It's at the point where today, even if you were given the cure and became a normal man, you would go to jail for life probably, even though you never killed anyone. But the long list of your other atrocities would put Renolf LeClaire, the former architect, behind bars to stay."

The hunchback made no reply, his face working. He turned slowly and slumped to the floor with his back against the cave's rock wall. He put trembling hands to his face. For an hour, groans and moans came from him as the full ironic tragedy of the situation struck him. A fire seemed to sear through his brain, momentarily clearing up the nightmare of delusions in which he had lived.

All his burning desire for revenge against Quaine, for his supposedly "bad" operation, had been a false illusion in his mind. His terrifying sabotage of Clinic Center had steadily alienated him from the law. Each gloating laugh and mocking speech he had made marked his sinking into a pit of crime.

And he could have been cured by his avowed "enemy," Dr. Quaine, and Substance X. If he had only known! If he had only known! Now it was too late. Lynne was saying something and his head jerked up.

"Listen, LeClaire," came her soft voice. "Dr. Quaine told me to tell you this, if I had to reveal the secret about Substance X. If you voluntarily give yourself up to the police, he will arrange to have you put into his custody. Now that the patient at Montgomery Hospital is dead, you can still be the first test case. Of course you're not a terminal case as usually required, but you can *volunteer*. Then you can leave the hospital after recovery as an undeformed man again—"

"Leave the hospital," snarled the hunchback, "and walk

straight into the arms of the police to be sent up for life? No, thanks!"

Lynne shrugged. "What you did can't be undone. It was your own fault that you decided Dr. Quaine was a quack. And by the way, that other malpractice suit against him by a woman was dropped. Her lawyers finally advised her to withdraw all charges or Quaine could, in turn, sue her for defamation of character and false charges against his professional integrity. The case was clear-cut in Dr. Quaine's favor."

A compassionate note of appeal came into her voice. "Now, as to your decision, think of this. Which is better—to remain a hunchback and *still* be hounded by the law or become a wanted man who is *normal*? What can you lose, even if you don't gain your freedom? That's lost in either case."

The hunchback stared back at her, his eyes gleaming as a sudden plan leaped into his mind.

"Ah!" he hissed. "I can have *both* . . . the operation *and* freedom from arrest!"

Lynne stared blankly, then shook her head sadly. "That's sheer insanity."

"Is it?" said LeClaire in oily tones. "You'll see." He pursed his lips as his thoughts worked busily. "Substance X will be returned to Quaine at the Clinic by *me*, as well as you. But not until I've made certain preparations."

He broke off and turned a hard face to the girl. "But meanwhile, you still have to stay here . . . not as my guest but my prisoner. I can't afford to let you go and tell them where this hideout is. I need perhaps a full week to complete my plans."

The girl shrank back in dismay at the thought of spending a week in the dismal cave, with a misshapen man whose mind still worked in twisted ways. And who hated her lover.

But LeClaire's expression was impersonal as he went on. "Don't worry. I'm not in the least interested in you as a woman now. You'll be unmolested. There are far greater things to think about. I have plenty of canned foods and

water. You may miss the sunshine and fresh air for a week, but outside of that you'll return unharmed."

Somehow, Lynne knew he was sincere about that. She sighed in relief. But then another worry began nagging her—what was his unknown plan this time? How could he induce, or force, Quaine to perform the operation, lie weeks in the hospital recuperating, and then walk out without his hunched back—as a *free man*? A daydream . . . delusion . . . wishful thinking. So Lynne hoped.



## Chapter 18

The next morning, LeClaire locked the steel gate behind him, with Lynne a prisoner, as he drove to town in his jeep. He was not dressed in the black costume that was the trademark of the Hunchback Horror. He returned hours later with many mysterious packages. In the cave he opened them and took out various tools, electrical meters, and enigmatic electronic equipment. He set up a table at the side of the cave and began working at something.

"Did you know," he asked Lynne, "that in college I took up advanced electronics for a time? I almost decided to take it up as a career, but architecture won out. But now with my electronic know-how, I can make my big plan work."

He never revealed even a hint of his plan to Lynne. She would have been bored and jittery, except that he had brought back a boxful of the latest books. She was surprised as well as delighted.

"No, it's not a generous gesture," leered the hunchback. "I'm not softening up. It's just to keep your mind occupied with reading, so you won't cook up some scheme to sneak out or even stop me."

As it was, LeClaire sat at his table, cautiously facing her at all times. Also, he had a heavy wooden stick near his hand which he could easily snatch up. He was taking no chances that a resourceful and courageous girl like Lynne Carlyle would try to escape.

At night, he locked her in and slept outside on a mattress he had placed under a rock overhang that sheltered him from bad weather. Lynne gave up trying to think of

any way to surprise him and escape. She resigned herself to eating, sleeping, and reading, while the hours and days dragged by.

Already on the second day, LeClaire informed her that a manhunt was on for her. "Or a woman hunt," he amended chuckling. "Police and hired searchers are crawling all over the Devil's Playground. Helicopters and small planes keep flying over. Quaine pulled out the stops and got the sheriff to go all out."

Lynne's surge of hope died quickly as the hunchback laughed derisively. "All their efforts are useless," he boasted confidently. "I won't have to drive into town for any more equipment. My jeep is now parked in a shadowy gulch, well camouflaged with shrubs all over it. When I go out to sleep, it's dark night. The entrance to this cave is invisible from the air because of an abutment on the cliff just above it. Search parties would only see bushes that hide the cave mouth, and pass right by it. How much chance do your rescuers have of finding you?" he finished mockingly.

Lynne had hopes the third day when she faintly heard the clump of boots and the shouts of men outside in the distance. She dashed to the steel-grid door, ready to screech at the top of her lungs. But a black-gloved hand quickly clamped over her mouth. A strong arm dragged her back.

"I'll hold you like this till they go away," hissed LeClaire. Soon after, the sounds died away and with them Lynne's hope of rescue. The hunchback released her and went back to his work with a chuckle. He did not even seem angry.

On the fourth day, LeClaire held up a small black box made of hard plastic, with a lid and a small knob outside. Within were intricate electronic circuits and fine wires. A second device rested beside him, another black box but bigger, with five thick wires or cable leads sticking out of it. On top was a large clock dial.

"Now, I have a job to do at Clinic Center for several nights," said the hunchback briefly. "I'll gain entry in my usual maze of passageways and work secretly."

At dusk, he packed his electronics devices in the jeep,

plus other mysterious packages. When darkness fell he was ready to drive off, without lights. "I know the exact route by heart," he called back to the girl at the locked steel-grid door. "I can follow it even in the dark, in case helicopters come searching at night. Their noisy engines would mask the sounds of my motor. And the search parties aren't around. They can only hunt and climb in the daytime in these dangerous wilds."

He had it all figured out, thought Lynne. She wondered how Quaine was taking her disappearance. She knew in a way, from the heartaches she had suffered when Quaine had vanished. Perhaps it had been worse for her, for he had seemingly died. At least Quaine could hope that the hunchback was keeping her alive as a prisoner, even though it must tear his nerves to wonder how she was being treated.

Actually, Quaine should be worried more over the hunchback's new plot—if he only knew about it. Lynne sensed with growing dread that her captor, twisted in both body and mind, was arranging some fearful threat or catastrophe for Clinic Center. And for Quaine? What frightful web of horror could it be?

LeClaire returned each morning at dawn and drove to the Clinic each night. He explained nothing to Lynne except to mention his "big coup" was approaching zero hour, and then laughing maniacally.

It was after a full week of imprisonment that Lynne saw the hunchback pick up the plastic bottle in which he had repacked the vial of Substance X in its cotton cocoon. He was dressed in his black costume as the Hunchback Horror. "Let's go," he said tersely. "Tonight is the start of my big coup."

All the electronic gadgetry was gone from the jeep, Lynne noticed, as he drove her through the dark unerringly. He emerged from the Devil's Playground and took the highway to the Clinic.

"Up to now," said LeClaire, "I've parked my jeep secretly among trees, then slipped into the Clinic without being seen. But tonight I'll drive right into the parking lot and ask to see Dr. Quaine at the front doors."

He paused dramatically, then said, "Because from now

on, *they'll all be helpless to oppose me*—Quaine, Endersby, the armed guards, the sheriff, everybody.”

Was he deluding himself? Or could he make this daring prediction come true? Lynne shivered. She would soon find out.

Boldly, LeClaire stepped out of the jeep, giving Lynne a hand. The staff of armed guards had been pulled off duty in the past week, with no known depredations by the Hunchback Horror. There was only one guard at the main entrance. He saw the two figures approaching—the black-caped hunchback and the graceful girl—and went into action.

“Th-the Hunchback Horror and Lynne Carlyle!” the guard exclaimed.

“And we’re bringing back Substance X, too,” drawled the hunchback.

“Halt!” rang out the guard’s voice as he jerked out his gun. “Renolf LeClaire, you’re under arrest!”

“Hold it,” snapped the hunchback, flinging up a hand. “First, let me go and see Dr. Quentin Quaine. After I have a talk with him, I think you will change you mind about my arrest.”

“Huh?” said the guard, taken aback. “Oh, you’re bluffing or trying to pull some trick.”

This time Lynne broke in. “I think it would be wise, officer, to do as he says. It can’t do any harm for him to see Dr. Quaine. He can always be arrested later.”

The guard hesitated, then stepped aside. “All right. But I’ll notify the sheriff and we’ll have the whole Clinic surrounded in a few minutes.”

“Pah! That doesn’t worry me in the least,” snorted LeClaire as he marched in with Lynne.

He kept marching down the corridor. A nurse came along, gave them a glance, then shrieked and threw up her hands. “The Hunchback Horror! Help! Help!” She ran away screaming.

“What has she got against me?” grinned the hunchback in mock indignation, as they took an elevator to the eighth floor. Lynne said nothing. She just wondered what gave him the tremendous nerve to walk in here, for the news

would soon be all over the Clinic that the notorious Hunchback Horror was there in plain sight, ripe for arrest.

LeClaire seemed not in the slightest concerned. He stopped and opened the door of Quaine's lab. As they walked in, Quaine turned around. He stared, stunned. His face lit up like a Christmas tree as he stepped forward to take both of Lynne's hands, squeezing until she winced.

"Lynne, darling! You're back. Thank heaven. Are you—?"

"I'm perfectly all right," she assured him quickly. "I was LeClaire's prisoner for a week, at his hideout. But he treated me well and I have no complaints."

"Lucky for you!" barked Quaine. He was already facing the hunchback, frowning bleakly. "And now, have you decided to give yourself up voluntarily? Is that why you openly walked in here?"

"No, I'm not surrendering," LeClaire said airily.

"In that case," said Quaine, spitting out the words forcefully, "I'm not letting you walk out again!" Quaine bunched his hands into fists and was straining to leap at him.

LeClaire flung up a hand. "Hold it!" he commanded in such a decisive voice that Quaine fell back in surprise. "Do you think I'd be fool enough to walk right into your hands, and the hands of the law, without having some plan that will stop you all from having me arrested?"

Quaine peered at him closely, as if to see the signs of absolute insanity in LeClaire's eyes. But his eyes were clear and self-assured. "You're bluffing," grunted Quaine uncertainly. "Dr. Endersby will hear of this and the sheriff will surround the Clinic with an army of guards. You won't be able to shoot your way out, even if you had a gun."

"Nevertheless, I will not be arrested," replied the hunchback with utter aplomb.

Quaine glanced at Lynne, but she was bewildered, too. How could LeClaire be so certain he was safe from capture?

"I know what you're thinking," cackled the hunchback. "But I won't go into that until Dr. Endersby and the

sheriff show up. Then I'll convince them that the law can't touch me." He faced Quaine. "By the way, I have something of yours." He pulled the plastic bottle out of his belt and handed it over.

"Substance X!" cried Quaine, hastily opening it and pulling out the cotton, to see the vial of crystals unharmed. He turned baffled eyes on the hunchback. "Why are you returning this so . . . so meekly?"

LeClaire smiled and walked over to a glass cabinet, which reflected his misshapen form. He flipped back his cape to expose his humped back clearly. "That'll be gone soon, after you operate on me!"

Quaine started, then composed himself. "So that's it. Lynne must have told you what Substance X could do. And you accepted my offer to be the first human test subject. I'll do it, of course, and that may stave off arrest until you recuperate. But after that—"

"I'll walk out of here, a straight man again—and a *free* man." LeClaire said it so positively that Quaine felt a chill of apprehension steal through him.

A strange thought struck Quaine. "But if you're so sure I'm a *quack* who first made you a hunchback, why would you put yourself in my hands for another operation? I might bungle it and make you worse than before."

"You're not a quack," retorted LeClaire evenly. "You see, when Lynne Carlyle told me the truth about Substance X, I realized how I had dug my own pit by not listening to your proposition at the start. The shock of that thought straightened it all out for me. Cobwebs seemed to drop away from my mind. I saw clearly then that you were not a quack and not responsible for my condition. Aren't you happy about that?"

"Not very," muttered Quaine. "In other words, the scales of psychotic blindness have dropped from your eyes. You see things straight now. But you *are* crazy if you think that after the operation, you can escape all the criminal charges against you. Or else hope for an insanity plea which will still incarcerate you for life in a mental ward, and . . ."

At that moment, the door was flung open and an armed

guard rushed in, his gun aimed at the hunchback. Behind him came the sheriff, holding a pair of handcuffs. With him was Dr. Endersby.

They all stopped, apparently amazed to see LeClaire standing there quietly, as if meekly submitting to capture. Dr. Endersby stepped forward, staring curiously at his strange black-caped costume.

"Renolf LeClaire, the Hunchback Horror!" he exclaimed. "Put the handcuffs on him, sheriff."

"You can't, sheriff," hissed the hunchback, as he pulled something from his belt. Lynne's eyes widened. It was the small black box she had seen him put together.

"Now listen to me, all of you!" thundered LeClaire. "This little black box is an electronic device. The dial on the lid is a lock and only I know the combination to open it. Inside is a microwave transmitter that can send out a certain signal."

He swept an arm around. "During the past few nights, I crept into Clinic Center and planted a string of bombs in each of the five wings. Each string of bombs is powerful enough to wreck one wing."

His listeners had all turned pale. Dr. Endersby glanced around fearfully, as if expecting an explosion any moment. "You . . . you foul fiend!" he managed to gasp. "Then you could wipe out the Clinic. When do you plan to set off the bombs?"

"Never, if you are all good boys and girls," chortled LeClaire. "If you agree to my demands nothing will happen. If you don't, the Clinic goes up in smoke and flames!"

The sheriff had carefully edged his way back of Endersby. Now he darted forward and snatched the black box from LeClaire. "Got it," he panted. "Obviously, the mechanism inside this device can send out an electromagnetic signal in the microwave range, to set off those five series of bombs. But if I smash it. . . ."

The sheriff was already kneeling on the floor, ready to swing his steel handcuffs and smash the small plastic case.

Oddly enough, LeClaire had made no move to leap at the sheriff and try to wrest the box away. Now he spoke,

ominously. "If you smash it, sheriff, that will *insure* the Clinic blowing up."

"Huh?" The sheriff paused, thunderstruck.

"You see," went on LeClaire as if giving a lecture, "those bombs are *time bombs*, set to go off at a certain hour. And only the signal from the black box can *prevent* the bombs from going off. Give it back to me, you idiot."

The sheriff stared at the black box as though it were a snake. Obediently, he got up and handed it over.

"Now let me give you the full story." LeClaire glared threateningly at them all. "The five strings of bombs are set to go off in twenty-four hours unless this signal defuses them, so to speak. It turns off a clock mechanism that controls all the bombs. But then the master clock *resets itself for the next twenty-four hours.*"

"God!" breathed Quaine, now guessing ahead.

"Right, Quaine," leered the hunchback. "You don't know *where* I've planted those five sets of bombs. I hid them in my maze of repair passageways, and I alone know them all."

He went on mockingly at a sudden gleam in the sheriff's eyes. "No, it won't do any good to send a thousand men to search out the whole system, sheriff. I've installed sensitive sound detectors in the passageway system. The moment the sounds of searchers are picked up, those sonic devices will send a signal and set off an alarm here in my little black box. Then, if I wish, I simply open my black box and send out a signal *overriding* the master clock. The bombs all go off in the faces of your men . . . and the Clinic blows sky high."

He nodded with a crafty expression. "Yes, I know. I would be blown up, too, in that case. But I don't think you're going to let your guards and hundreds of nurses, doctors, and patients all meet death . . . just to get me."

The sheriff blanched and his body slumped.

"So I can assume," continued LeClaire smugly, "that nobody will dare to sneak through the passageway system, trying to locate the planted bombs. Not even you, Quaine. My sonic detectors will pick up even the faintest footfalls or a man's breathing. Understand?"



Quaine nodded wearily. "It means your bombs can't be touched. We can't search for them and remove them."

"Right," snapped the hunchback. "Thus, the Clinic is under *constant threat*. Remember that." He held up his little black box. "And every day, within twenty-four hours or less, this device's signal *must* go out to turn off the master clock that can trigger the multiple bombs. But then the clock is reset immediately for another twenty-four hours."

He turned to Quaine, his lips twisted devilishly. "Don't you see how I've got you stymied, all of you? Suppose you secretly scheme to dope me with a paralyzing drug. Then I won't be able to work the combination lock to open the box and send out the signal stopping the clock. Then boom! The Clinic crashes into ruin."

He paused for emphasis. "It will be Quaine's duty to see that I'm awake and in possession of my faculties every day, to send that signal. And it would be silly to take the black box from me when I sleep. None of you knows the combination of its lock. And if you try to pry it open, it has a tiny bomb inside that will be set off, wrecking the interior mechanism. Then there will be *nothing* to prevent the clock master for the five series of bombs from reaching the zero point . . . and again the Clinic is doomed."

It was diabolically clever, reflected Lynne Carlyle, as she looked around at the helpless faces of the others. LeClaire had cunningly made it foolproof. It was really a "fail-safe" setup, wherein only LeClaire had the power to keep the five bomb strings immobilized. Any interference with him and there would be nothing to stop the time bombs from going off.

The hunchback now stared arrogantly at Dr. Endersby, waving at Quaine. "Now there is nothing to stop me from having Quaine operate on me. I'll be lying sick and helpless for days after while healing, but you can't do a thing to me. Quaine will have to see to it that my little black box is in my hands, every day. So get out, Endersby, and don't come back. Out!"

## Chapter 19

His face burning with humiliation, the chief administrator hung his head and shuffled out.

LeClaire sneered at the sheriff, now. "And you, flat-foot. No matter how many weeks it takes, I'll someday be all healed from the operation. I'll be a tall, straight man again, without a hump. And I'll walk out of here, and out of your hands, a free man."

The sheriff started guiltily, as if he had been thinking to that day far ahead.

"The five sets of bombs will *still be there*," reminded LeClaire in warning tones. "They will still explode in that twenty-four hours, if you arrest me . . . in which case I'll *refuse* to send the signal. So you'll have to let me walk out free. I'll go somewhere else, change my name, and enjoy the million-dollar ransom the Clinic paid me for Substance X. I'll no longer be a conspicuous hunchback easy to track down, but a normal man who can use his wits and cover all traces of his whereabouts."

"But after you walk out free," said the sweating sheriff, "what about the Clinic?"

"Don't worry," grinned the hunchback. "My little black box has a range of ten miles and can turn off the bombs from that distance. By then, if you haven't treacherously followed me, I'll be able to skip and head for parts unknown."

"But twenty-four hours after *that*?" burst out Lynne. "You'll be out of range of your black box. No signal will come back to turn off the five strings of bombs and—and—" She gulped in mute horror.

For a moment the hunchback simply stared back at her mockingly, as she mentally pictured the terrifying scene of the Clinic exploding violently.

"Relax," said LeClaire then. "I'll leave the black box at the Tarlton post office, or some public spot, where it can be picked up. The combination will be written out. Someone can open it and turn off the bombs again. Then, following a blueprint I'll leave, the bombs can be located and removed. So once I'm free and clear of the Clinic, your danger is over." He added, as if to himself, "After all, letting the Clinic blow up would set off a tremendous nationwide hunt for me, on an all-out basis, probably including the F.B.I. I'm not thinking like the Hunchback Horror now. There will be no hunchback any more. What I'll want then is obscurity in my new life as a rich man."

He paused, then said to Quaine, "There's another reason I won't let the Clinic blow up after I'm gone. Thinking about it, it would rob you of any incentive for doing my operation the best way you know how. I think you can understand that." He added, with a bright smile, "You see, I'm no longer a madman."

"No," agreed Quaine, biting out the words. "But you'll be getting away with all your previous crimes as the Hunchback Horror. You'll escape the law and never pay for your atrocities."

"And there's not a thing you can do about it," mocked the hunchback. He turned to the lawman and pushed him to the door. "Nor you, sheriff. Good-bye."

LeClaire slammed the door shut and turned to Quaine and Lynne.

"Now let's get down to business, Dr. Quaine. You have complete operating facilities here, that you used for your animal subjects. Can a human patient be handled just as well?"

Quaine nodded wordlessly.

"You will, of course, arrange for the necessary anesthetists and other aides, besides Lynne Carlyle as chief nurse." An eager light came into the hunchback's eye. "How soon can you operate? I don't want to wait an hour longer than necessary."

"You'll have to have blood tests and the other preliminary check-ups," said Quaine, rubbing his jaw. "Say three days from now."

"Sooner," demanded LeClaire. "After all, in emergency operations . . . like mine last time . . . you start right away without any delay. Make your tests tonight and tomorrow morning. We'll set the operation for noon tomorrow. Agreed?"

Quaine threw up his hands. "If you insist. Tomorrow at noon. Lynne . . . uh . . . Miss Carlyle, notify the internes on the night shift and start the blood-test procedures now. Speed it all up."

She left and Quaine turned. "LeClaire, you undress and put on that hospital gown hanging in the closet."

As LeClaire began to strip off his black cape and costume, he looked at his reflection in the glass cabinet. "It'll be gone soon! I'll be a man without a crooked back. And one thing, Quaine, do your best." He glared at the doctor. "If I die, I won't be able to send out my black box's signal. And nobody else can either. Then, within twenty-four hours. . . ."

"You don't have to rub it in," snarled Quaine. "You've got me . . . all of us . . . hogtied." He held up the vial of crystals. "My Substance X has to be used to give a human monster freedom from his monstrous crimes . . . and I can't help it."

"Flattery will get you nowhere," laughed LeClaire harshly. "And I'm really doing you a big favor, Quaine. My operation will dramatically prove the worth of Substance X and bring you fame. Aren't you thankful?"

Quaine muttered fiercely under his breath and began making a sterile solution of Substance X, trying to ignore the mocking chuckles behind him.

Quaine's thoughts were a jumble. He was completely under the thumb of this cunning plotter and his evil but ingenious coup that made him untouchable to the law. Try as he would, Quaine could see no slightest loophole in the hunchback's master plan.

The little black box could not be taken away from LeClaire, or smashed. That would doom the Clinic irrevoca-

bly. Nor could he himself search the passageways for the bombs, and remove them, for that was also guarded against. The hunchback held the whip hand, period.

The only slight consolation in this cabal, reflected Quaine bitterly, was that curing a hunchback was the greatest challenge Substance X could meet. Success in the operation would ring around the medical world.

And it had to be success. Failure was unthinkable, for it meant the end of Clinic Center and every soul within its walls . . . wait! A sudden thought lanced through Quaine's mind. He hoped LeClaire didn't notice the trembling of his hands as hope arose within him.

But then, as if the hunchback was a devil who could read minds, he said leeringly, "And don't think of having the Clinic quietly *evacuated* before my operation, so that there would be only you and Lynne left, with you two willing to sacrifice your lives along with me." LeClaire's voice rang out sternly. "You will open the door for me, periodically starting tomorrow morning. If the usual hum and bustle of the whole place starts to die down, I'll know what's up. And remember, I can open my black box and set off the signal that bypasses the time-bomb clock, and *immediately* trigger off the explosions. Clear, Quaine?"

Quaine suppressed a groan. That faint last hope died, too.

He now stepped over and opened a sliding glass door leading to a sterile white room with an operating table at one side and a bed at the other. "You'll sleep here, LeClaire."

Clad in a long, shapeless hospital gown, the hunchback nimbly climbed under the covers.

"Ah, after the blood tests and such," sighed LeClaire comfortably, "I'm going to sleep good." He placed his little black box on the bedside table. "And I won't even worry about my electronic gadget. It had better be there in the morning . . . or else!"

Quaine stared at it, shuddering. Strung somewhere throughout the five wings of Clinic Center were powerful bombs, timed to go off unless that tiny black box stopped

the master clock. Quaine turned to leave, one dismal thought circling endlessly in his mind.

*There was simply no way to circumvent the wily hunchback's great coup, whereby he would gain everything and lose nothing.*

During the night, black clouds gathered over the pentagonal winged structure with the golden dome. By morning a violent thunderstorm burst over Clinic Center. Jagged lightning bolts stabbed down here and there.

With thunder in his ears, Quaine showed up at the lab's operating chamber at ten the next morning. He had had a few hours of sleep, but his eyes were still puffy. Lynne was already there and turned, letting go of LeClaire's wrist.

"Pulse normal," she reported mechanically. "Respiration rate good. Blood tests and all else optimum for the operation. The anesthetist will be here on time."

"Good," nodded Quaine though he used the word with distaste. "I'm going to check now with consultant doctors as to my operating procedure . . . not that they can contribute much. Straightening the bent spine of a hunchbacked man is something unprecedented. Unique. The only one with experience is myself, using the technique with animals, including chimps." He waved. "Be back at eleven-thirty."

"Wait, Quaine!" called LeClaire from the bed, sitting up. Quaine turned at the door, quizzically. The hunchback picked up his black box. He twisted the small outside dial this way and that, according to tiny numbers on its rim.

With a faint click, the lid came open. Inside was a complex spider-webbing of wiring, transistors, and other miniaturized electronic wizardry.

"I'm setting the master clock to make the bombs go off at noon," he warned Quaine. "That's just to make sure you show up . . . or else I will neglect to send the signal to reset the master clock for another twenty-four hours. So noon today is your zero hour. Do I make myself clear, doctor?"

Quaine nodded with tight lips and left the lab.

"Now, nurse. Get the operating equipment ready," said LeClaire leeringly to Lynne.

"You don't have to tell me my duties," snapped Lynne shortly.

"Temper, temper," admonished the hunchback, obviously enjoying his kingpin status with everyone under his thumb. "Don't make any mistakes . . . intentional or otherwise."

Lynne gave him a scornful glance. "Regardless of who you are, each patient receives the full and best attention of our medical team."

"See to it that I do," chortled LeClaire. "Remember, little black box is watching you."

Lynne curled her lip and kept on working.

The hunchback watched the clock and became excited as the time drew near. At eleven-thirty, LeClaire began to frown. "Where is Dr. Quaine?"

Lynne also turned a worried face toward him. "I—I don't know."

LeClaire held her attention by pointing at his little black box, a threatening look in his eyes. "Try to locate him, nurse," he barked. Lynne turned pale.

"Please," she begged, her voice trembling. "Don't be hasty. Let me ring Dr. Endersby."

She snatched frantically at the phone. After the connection went through, she asked about Dr. Quaine's whereabouts. As she listened to the reply, an astonished look came over her face.

"What is it?" demanded LeClaire, sitting up in bed.

"Dr. Quaine was called away—" She gasped.

"What?" exploded the hunchback. "But that's exactly what I warned him not to do, pull any trickery. Didn't he believe what I said about the bombs being planted in the five wings? They'll go off at noon unless he shows up and I reset my black box."

"I—I know," said Lynne. "But I hardly know how to explain Dr. Quaine's absence!"

A loudspeaker in the corner of the room suddenly blared.

CODE 21 . . . CODE 21 . . . CODE 21. . . .

"Hear that?" said Lynne. "That's the official announcement. It happened by sheer coincidence. Just a few minutes ago, there was an explosion in a chemical factory in Tarlton. It was caused by the thunderstorm and lightning we've had all morning. The place is ablaze and hundreds of people are injured or dying. In an emergency like that, the nearest hospital always rushes its available help to the tragic scene, leaving just a skeleton staff to handle the Clinic. Doctors, nurses, internes, paramedics, aides—all of them drop everything and rush there to save as many lives as possible."

LeClaire was staring open-mouthed. "You mean Dr. Quaine went too, leaving me here waiting?"

"He had to," pleaded Lynne, anxiety in her voice. "Don't you understand? He couldn't help it that a violent lightning storm came up and caused the disaster, just this day and just this hour. And he left a message for you . . . that he would definitely perform your operation *tomorrow* at noon."

"Tomorrow, at noon?" echoed LeClaire, still sitting stiffly, stark suspicion in his eyes.

"After all," Lynne went on, rushing out the words, "what does a little delay of one day matter to you?" She glanced in fear at the little black box. "Aren't you going to send the signal and stop those bombs?"

The hunchback looked at the clock . . . 11:35 A.M. Twenty-five minutes to the frightful deadline. But he made no move for the black box.

"Is this a trick?" he hissed, eyeing her narrowly.

"No, I tell you! It's an act of God, so to speak. A disaster that nobody could predict in advance. Come here to the window and see for yourself."

LeClaire hopped out of bed and joined Lynne at a window. He looked out, startled, seeing a scene of almost fantastic activity. Pulling on raincoats hastily, doctors with black bags were dashing out into the rain, followed by nurses, internes, paramedics, aides. Cars pulled up at a curb and loaded them in like sardines. A big ambulance



also came and the Clinic people were stuffed into the rear compartment.

It was all done with an air of frantic haste, almost as if the end of the world had come.

"There!" said Lynne. "Is that trickery?" And again the loudspeaker buzzed and blasted out.

CODE 21 . . . CODE 21 . . . CODE 21. . . .

"Code 21 is like a red alert at radar stations watching for enemy missiles," informed Lynne. "It means a big catastrophe involving hundreds of lives. Doctors, nurses, paramedics are all rushing to the scene. They'll set up portable field equipment for emergency operations. Surgeons are needed most of all in these tragic events. And being a top surgeon, Dr. Quaine simply had to go, under orders."

To Lynne's infinite relief, the hunchback eased back a little. "I hate to wait another twenty-four hours for my operation," he complained almost like a petulant child. "For the miracle of being turned from a hunchback to a straight man again. What rotten luck! Blast that disaster!" He glowered for a moment, then slowly reached for his black box with a sigh. "Well, what can I do about it? Bad luck, that's all."

Lynne pointed at the clock. "Twenty minutes to the deadline," she cried with an hysterical edge to her voice. "Don't let it go to the last second, please!"

LeClaire grinned at her. "Don't be so scared. My timing mechanisms are all accurate to the split second." Unhurriedly, he worked his tiny dial and opened the lid. He started to use his fingernail on his secret cut-off controls. Suddenly, he sat bolt upright, staring intently within the black box.

"The signal's pilot light in here," he gasped. "It went out!"

"Out?" echoed Lynne tremulously. "What does it mean?"

"It means the signal isn't going out to reset the master clock," he said in a strangled tone. "And the bombs will go off at noon! What's wrong with the signal circuit? Did it short and burn out?" At a peal of thunder and a blinding

flash outside, he muttered, "Maybe that electrical storm did the damage."

He shook the black box viciously, as if trying to shake it into operation.

"No use!" he shouted, and now fear began to show in his eyes. "But I don't want the Clinic to blow up any more than you do. I want to have that operation tomorrow. Only one thing to do—go and turn off the master clock manually. Quick, give me my black cape to cover my hospital gown."

Lynne handed it to him and he swept it around his shoulders, pulling the attached hood over his head. He jammed the black box into his cape's pouch, thinking of repairs later. Running to the door, LeClaire gave a last glance at the clock. His face was ashen as he called back, "Fifteen minutes to go! It's going to be close—very close!"

With that, he sped out in the corridor. The place seemed deserted, because of the Code 21 call, he thought, and nobody would see him as he darted into a small supply room. Standing on a carton within, he reached up to a trap door and hoisted himself up into a passageway. He snatched up a flashlight he had previously planted there, as at many strategic spots.

Knowing his way by heart, he raced down the round tunnel and took several turns into branch passages.

Here and there he winced, seeing the bombs that he had planted, taped to the wall. They were flat squares of a super-powerful plastic explosive. Wires led away from them. Those wires were all linked to the master clock, which was ticking away inexorably.

## Chapter 20

Frantic thoughts drummed in his mind. Hurry! Hurry! Only ten minutes left now as a guess. If I don't make it in time, the Clinic blows up. But I've got to stop it. I want that operation to take place tomorrow. God, why did my black box have to fail me at this crucial moment?

He timed himself by the length of the passageways he traversed. Five minutes to go!

His feet flew faster. Now he was nearing the central core of Clinic Center, from which the five wings branched out. And up above, under the cupola of gold, was where his hidden masterclock lay.

Reaching the core section at the eighth floor, the same level as Quaine's lab, the hunchback took a spiraling tunnel that carried him upward.

Two minutes to go!

The ninth floor . . . the tenth floor . . . and then into the passageway that led under the cupola. Now he could hear the crash of thunder from the storm outside. Another panicky thought lanced into his mind . . . if a lightning bolt hit the golden dome, it might short-circuit the whole wired system and set off the bombs ahead of time!

One minute to go!

The black-caped figure squeezed into a narrow passageway outfitted with steps that led to a roomier space under the very peak of the cupola. At last he was there and swung his flashlight beam around the space. There it was, in the corner . . . a big black box that hummed with a clock dial on top that ticked away silently.

Gasping and wondering if his time estimate was off and

it was really the very *last* second, LeClaire knelt over the clock dial.

Twenty seconds left before the fatal hour of noon! Wheezing in his haste, LeClaire unhooked the plate-glass cover, flipped off a gear-lock switch, and grasped the minute hand of the clock. Slowly and carefully, he pulled it back—back from the noon position.

When the hands read eleven-fifty, LeClaire sat back on his knees and wiped the sweat from his brow. That gave him enough margin now to open a hatch in the big black box itself. He fumbled inside until he found the master control and switched it off.

"Now the clock is stopped dead," he muttered aloud in his relief. "The bombs will never go off until I reset the clock and switch on the live trigger circuit." He pulled the little black box from his belt. "And that gives me time to fix my faulty signal box, so that I can once more return to Quaine and hold the entire Clinic under threat—"

The hunchback broke off as a sudden quiet spell came between thunderclaps, and he heard a scraping sound behind him. Too late he tried to turn. Two big hands gripped his shoulders and yanked him back, making him drop his little black box. It smashed to pieces.

"Now that your master clock is turned off," grated Quaine's voice, "you'll never turn it back on again. All your planted bombs will just be duds."

"But Quaine," stammered the hunchback in bewilderment. "How can you be here? You were away . . . on the Code 21 emergency."

"Was I?" grinned Quaine, facing LeClaire around and taking an iron grip on his arms. "There was no disaster, no emergency."

"But I heard it over the loudspeakers!"

"Code 21," informed Quaine, "is a rehearsal for a big emergency. A similar dry run for a disaster is held in every hospital, once a year or so. Doctors, nurses, paramedics, and internes go through the actual motions—supplies loaded, ambulances roaring off, blood-transfusion apparatus tested—the works. It's all to keep them on their toes in

case of a real emergency involving a disaster that threatens many lives.”

A sick look had come into the hunchback’s eyes, as Quaine went on.

“I saw how Code 21 was the one chance of beating your big coup, LeClaire. I secretly conferred with Dr. Endersby and he instantly agreed to set a Code 21 rehearsal for eleven-thirty this morning, timing it just right to make it seem that I was legitimately called away on emergency duty. Lynne of course played her part well, first allaying your suspicions, then leading you on to use your black-box signal to turn off the master clock. But your little black box didn’t work, did it?”

Quaine had a mocking smile on his lips.

“You?” croaked the hunchback, in sudden intuition. “You *caused* that?”

“Sure,” nodded Quaine. “I took no part in the Code 21 rehearsal, as we had planned. Instead, I was hidden in a small supply room holding surgical equipment, just off the operating room you were in at my lab. I had consulted some electronics experts who handle the computerized system that keeps tabs on the condition of patients at all hours in the Intensive Care Unit. They rigged up a microwave *interference* device that I used to send out electromagnetic waves through a hole in the door. Those phased waves were a half beat off your signal wave, causing the well-known beat-note interference. This canceled out your signal and the pilot light went out.”

The hunchback stared down bleakly at where his little black box lay shattered. “And the reason you made it fail was because. . . .”

“Yes, to make you press the panic button and rush to turn off this master clock,” filled in Quaine. “The moment you ran out on that mission, I slipped out of the supply closet and followed you. I knew you would be too busy in your race with unwanted doom for the Clinic—including yourself—to even think of anyone trailing you. And the noise of the thunderstorm nicely covered up any sounds I made chasing you through the passageways.”

"Oh, to be tricked like a baby!" wailed LeClaire. "Your whole plan was aimed at getting me to stupidly lead you to the master-clock mechanism that controlled all the bombs."

Quaine grinned. "You almost had us *licked*. And it was tough to turn the tables. I not only had to nullify your *little* black box, but I also had to fool you into leading me to this *big* black box and the master clock. I had no idea it was here, under the golden dome. It could have been anywhere in the Clinic."

"The end of my big coup!" faltered LeClaire with a long bitter sigh. His shoulders slumped and his head hung. He was the picture of a beaten man.

Quaine relaxed his grip on his arms—and that's when the hunchback sprang into life.

"That fooled *you*," gloated LeClaire, as he put his head down and rammed Quaine in the middle with vicious force. As Quaine automatically doubled up in pain, LeClaire jerked up his hard knee and clipped the medico on the chin. Quaine's head snapped back and he sprawled out flat.

The hunchback stared down at his limp form. "Out cold," he muttered, but with no elation in his voice. "Now that my little black box is smashed, and the master clock device is known to him, my bomb threat can't be used to blackmail Quaine. I won't get the operation, utilizing Substance X, the miracle drug."

His voice broke and an infinitely sad look came into his eyes. "I'll remain a hunchback the rest of my life!"

Then towering rage came into his ugly face, making it a tortured mask of evil. He leaped to the master clock and reached below into the big black box.

"I'll turn the master control back on!" he hissed in deadly tones. "There, the master clock is activated again! Ten minutes is all I need to leave here and reach safety, then watch the Clinic blow sky high!"

His mad laughter rang out as he got to his feet—only to find a strong hand gripping his ankle "Quaine! Blast you! You were out cold!"

"Only a short time," barked Quaine. "I came to, but

kept my eyes closed and lay still, in order to gather my strength. Now you had better turn off the master clock—or you'll go up with it. You're my prisoner."

Suddenly, the hunchback's flashlight beam stabbed into Quaine's eyes, making him involuntarily release his grip. LeClaire sprang free and hurled the flashlight at Quaine, but he ducked instinctively.

Cursing, LeClaire now sprang away and darted into a short down-slanting passageway that led from the dome's peak to the lower outside rim of the huge golden cupola. Quick as he was, Quaine was quicker and leaped right after him.

They emerged on a wide balcony that surrounded the cupola, with a heavy guard rail all around. The roll of thunder and stabs of lightning filled the air. Quaine grimly tried to land a one-two punch, but was hampered by wind-swept rain that stung his eyes.

Dodging the blows, LeClaire turned to grab the railing, then kicked back with his feet, getting Quaine in the chest. As he staggered back, the hunchback reached up to grab the curled-up edge of the cupola and swung himself up like a gymnast.

Quaine recovered only in time to see the black-caped figure agilely using all fours and climbing the slanting surface of the golden dome, though it was slippery from rain.

Quaine hated to do it, but he had to let his quarry go and dash madly into the interior space holding the deadly black box. LeClaire had reset the master clock for a countdown of only ten minutes—to the zero of a launch into limbo.

There could only be a minute left—or less!

Quaine's heart stopped beating as he bent over the clock dial—*ten seconds to go!*

Too late to attempt turning the clock hands back, or to try fumbling within the black box for the master control. Quaine saw the five cables that led out of the black box and went in different directions. LeClaire had obviously drilled holes in the floor and led the wires to five different passageways, one for each wing.

Fateful seconds were slipping by. . . .

Quaine did the only thing left. With his right foot, he kicked swiftly, ripping the first cable loose. There were sparks and a momentary jolt of high-voltage electricity jerked his body. But if he kicked fast enough to avoid receiving a full dose of power, he could avoid electrocution.

Another kick—a searing tingle through his foot—but the second cable broke loose.

The third kick—sharp pain plus the faint smell of burning flesh—and that cable whipped free of the black box.

With the fourth kick, Quaine was slowing down and this time a shower of sparks burst forth and his foot went numb, even though the cable broke.

One more cable to go! And to Quaine's horror, his numb leg failed to support his unbalanced weight and he fell heavily. Groaning in an agonized effort, and knowing only a second remained, he kicked out with his other foot. . . .

That went numb, too—but the sound of the fifth cable snapping came to his ears.

A split second later there sounded the click of relays as the master clock's trigger went off harmlessly. It would otherwise have sent current through the five cables, setting off the five strings of bombs meant to wreck Clinic Center.

Quaine lay panting, sweat all over his body. The danger was over. There were only five dead cables leading to what were now only dud bombs. Workmen could later trace all five wires and remove the bombs, ending their menace for good.

Quaine sat up and noticed his trouser legs in charred tatters up to his knees. The bare skin of both legs held black blotches that would require skin grafts later. His shoes were both smoldering as if about to burst into flame.

Quaine yanked the shoes off and heaved himself to his feet with a groan. He swayed a moment, but the numbness in his legs was going away. He staggered through the outlet passageway to the cupola's outdoor balcony. There he swept his eyes up the slope of the dome of sparkling gold. At the peak stood LeClaire the hunchback, arms folded, as if calmly awaiting the bomb blasts that would spray debris



all around him and snuff out his life—but not before he saw Clinic Center fall into rubble.

“Disappointed?” yelled Quaine, after waiting for a thunderclap to die down. “I ripped loose the power cables. Your bombs won’t go off.”

LeClaire stared down, startled, mouthing livid curses.

“All right, you won, Quaine!” the hunchback yelled back. “But at least I can now escape capture! I can slide down the other side of this golden dome and gain entry to one of a dozen passageways, giving you the slip!”

His eyes gleamed redly in a nearby lightning flash, and his satanic face leered evilly down at Quaine, who shuddered at the chilling words he next heard.

*“Clinic Center hasn’t seen the last of the Hunchback Horror!”*

Back to where it all started, groaned Quaine to himself. He had no chance or strength left to climb up the slippery slope of the dome in time to nab LeClaire. He could only watch as the hunchback turned, ready to slide down the other side and vanish, while his mad laughter rang out mockingly.

Suddenly, the gloating laugh broke off to be replaced by a gurgling scream of agony.

Seared into Quaine’s eyes a moment before was that last scene as lightning had struck the hunchback. The arms and legs of the black-caped figure had been jerked wide, like a puppet, by the surging bolt of killing power. An aura of electric sparks had momentarily surrounded the electrocuted form.

Then only a blackened corpse slowly tumbled off the golden dome’s peak and slid crazily down the slickened slope of metal, to gather speed and plunge clear past the balcony and fall into the obscure rain beyond—with the ground waiting ten stories below.

Quaine stared a long time at where the lifeless body tumbled out of his vision. The rain beat down into his face as a queer phrase rang through his mind.

*“The fatal swan dive of the Hunchback Horror!”*

As Quaine staggered into the lab, Lynne whirled and

gave a startled shriek. She found her voice in a moment. "Your clothes . . . your skin . . . you're burned!"

"But happy," grinned the medical scientist. While the girl swiftly began applying salve and bandaging his burns, Quaine recited the whole story of the chase through the passageways and the final fantastic battle at the golden dome.

Quaine finished and stared at her clear eyes. "You don't seem *too* surprised that I returned, alive if not well."

"I wasn't worried," smiled Lynne impishly. "I was sure my man would win out against the Hunchback Horror."

"How sure?" demanded Quaine. "What odds?"

"Oh, about a googol to one. And I mean 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000. . . ."

"Never mind going through the other seventy zeroes," cut in Quaine, eyeing her in mock sternness. "But I see you have very little faith in me. Why didn't you use a bigger number?"

He opened his mouth in a silent laugh. There was no bigger number known in mathematics.

"All right. A googol *squared*, to one," said Lynne haughtily.

Quaine's mouth changed from a laugh to an exclamation—"Ouch! You win, genius."

But Lynne's face had suddenly turned serious, as another lightning flash was vividly framed in the window. She peered out into the rain, and a film of horror slowly faded from her eyes, replaced by a look of infinite irony.

"The real paradox of it all," she murmured, "is that Clinic Center remains as a monument to the Hunchback Horror. Architectural beauty that he first created—then tried to destroy."

"Why don't we try to reverse Mark Antony's famous line?" Quaine said softly. "The evil that men do is interred with their bones, while the good that men do lives after them. . . ."





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