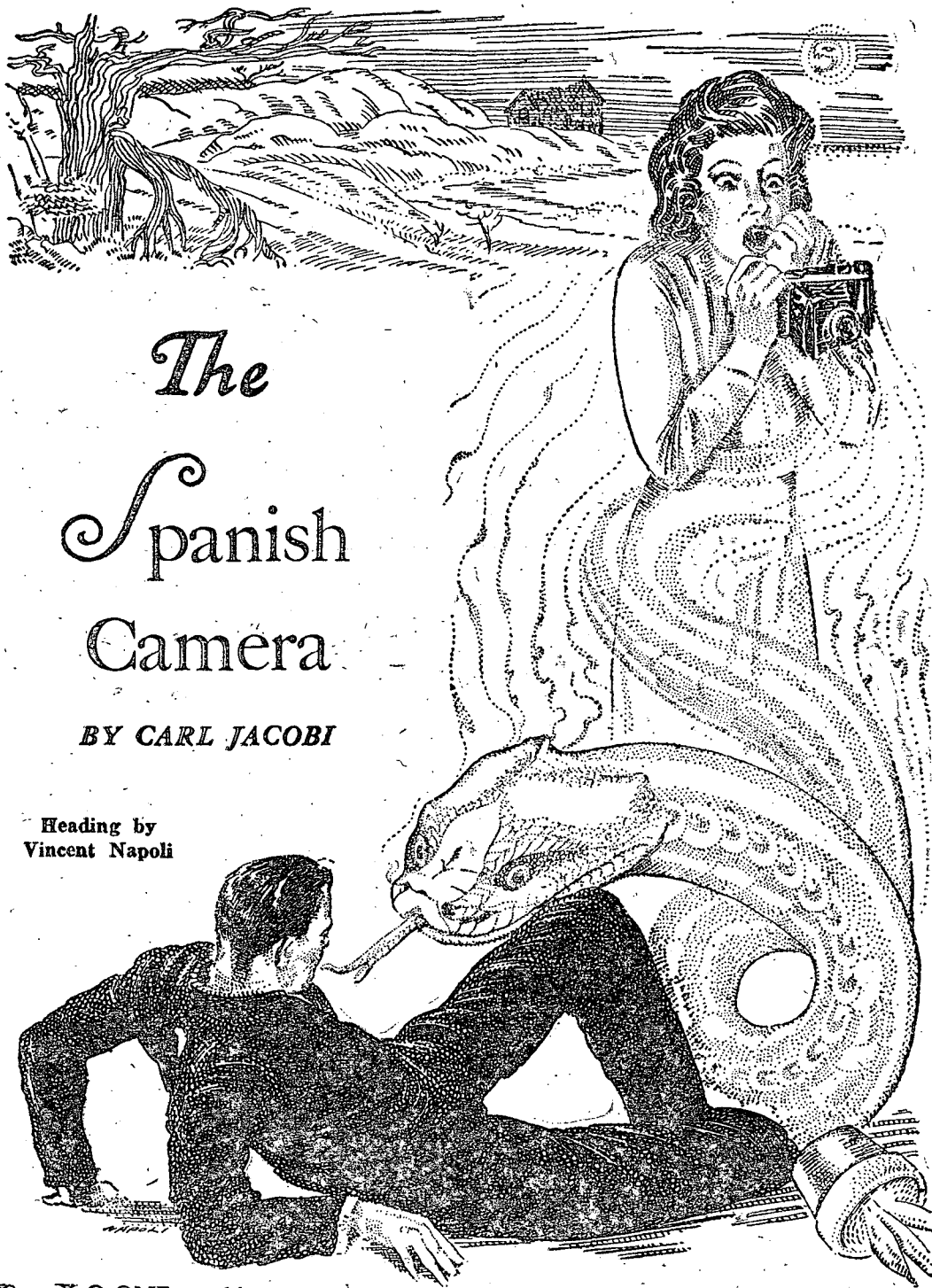


Its lens was sensitive to vague horrors as well as concrete objects.



The Spanish Camera

BY CARL JACOBI

Heading by
Vincent Napoli

NO ONE would suspect Miss Lydia Lancaster of being a dreamer. She was conservative to primness, unemotional, and conventional. Yet for all that, it was a habit of hers to daydream constantly during those off moments when

she was quite sure of being unobserved.

Miss Lydia worked as private secretary in the firm of Childers, Dourley and Ganston, 21 Maiden Lane. Her residence was in Bloomsbury by Russell Square, near the British Museum. And her life, the full thirty-three years of it up to the present, had been quite devoid of interest.

At five o'clock on Tuesday, the 5th of October, a dreary rain-swept day, Miss Lydia put away her typewriter, dusted her desk, as usual, and prepared to leave the office. At that moment a messenger arrived and delivered to her a letter from a well-known solicitor. The letter was brief and to the point:

Dear Madam: I have to inform you that you have been named heir to certain monies and properties as stipulated in the will of the late George Faversham who died suddenly on Thursday last. Will you kindly call at this office at your earliest convenience.

BENJAMIN HOWELL.

Miss Lydia had to read that note twice before it dawned on her who George Faversham was. He was her uncle, but her uncle in name only. That is to say, she had never met or even corresponded with him. The last of her mother's four brothers, he long had been regarded as the black sheep of the family. She knew he had never married and that he had spent the greater part of his life wandering about the back ports of the world. Two years in Nepal, through the Khyber Pass, up the Mahakam River in Dutch Borneo into unexplored Apo Kayan, into the white Indian country of the Upper Orinoco, he had come and gone like a will-o'-the-wisp. But why he should have bequeathed her anything or indeed remember that she even existed was more than she could conjecture.

Early next morning Miss Lydia called at the office of Benjamin Howell in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Howell, a somewhat younger man than she had expected, waited until she had settled herself in the chair opposite his desk. Then he opened a filing folder before him.

"Miss Lancaster," he said, "your uncle left you a small house in East Darwich, and the sum of fifty thousand pounds in cash or negotiable securities."

The significance of those words sank in slowly. Even at the end of five minutes after she had drunk the glass of water the solicitor gave her, she felt slightly dazed.

"Fifty thousand pounds!" she repeated. "Why, it's incredible! I'm—I'm rich!"

Mr. Howell nodded quietly. "The sum should take care of your needs for some time," he said dryly. "Now about the house in East Darwich. I should strongly advise disposing of it."

"Why?" asked Miss Lydia. "Is it run down?"

"Oh, it's in good enough repair. In fact, it's quite attractive. But . . ."

"But what . . .?"

"Well, your uncle was a strange person, Miss Lancaster. He visited some rather off-the-trail places. There may be some things about the house, or rather, in it, that . . ." His voice broke off significantly.

But Miss Lydia was adamant. Inasmuch as George Faversham had been good enough to leave her this money, the least she could do was accept the lesser part of his bequest. Besides, she was independent now, it would no longer be necessary for her to work or live in London, and a country house was the very thing she needed.

"Very well," sighed Mr. Howell, "I've done my part. Here are the keys: the brass one for the front door, the iron one for the back door and two small keys for some chests you'll find in the house. According to the will, my instructions were that these chests were not to be touched or opened by anyone but you."

IT WAS characteristic of Miss Lydia that she completed arrangements for her new life by the following Friday. Saturday she took the train to East Darwich, arriving early in the afternoon. As Mr. Howell had explained, the house was small and furnished in typical bachelor style. It was situated very close to the ocean shore and was quite alone, yet it appeared to be neither damp nor particularly isolated. The

view from the parlor window was breathtaking with the craggy cliffs on one side and the foam-swept beach on the other.

Miss Lydia had all but forgotten the chests mentioned by Mr. Howell until she came upon them in the bedroom. Then curiosity seized her and she hastened to fit the keys into the locks.

The covers thrown back, she stared in disappointment. In Miss Lydia's eyes they contained nothing of interest whatever. Photographic equipment: three cameras of different styles and manufacture, an enlarging device, a developing tank and a quantity of the necessary papers, films and chemicals.

She remembered her mother mentioning that photography had been George Faversham's stock-in-trade. During his earlier years he was employed by a large newspaper service. But more recently he had preferred to free lance, taking and selling pictures of unusual events as he came upon them.

She closed the two chests, pushed them back in a corner and promptly forgot about them. In the days that followed, Miss Lydia attempted to live the life of a gentlewoman of ease. She employed several female servants as well as a gardener and she completely refurbished the house in a manner to her own taste. She called on the vicar. She took long walks through the countryside—but after years of activity and routine this state of affairs soon began to pall on her, and she cast about for some other means of capturing her interest.

It was thus that she thought again of the two chests. Why not photography as a hobby? She had all the materials she needed, and the picturesque shore and the town of East Darwich should offer many opportunities for a camera fan.

From the chests she selected the thirty-five millimeter camera, loaded it with film and strolled out along the beach.

Miss Lydia's ideas about picture taking were decidedly elementary, but she was familiar enough with cameras to know that this one was rather unusual. It was of Spanish manufacture with an F 3.5 Garcia color-corrected lens and a shutter speed up to a thousandth of a second. Just below the lens a small rectangle of silver had been fast-

ened, the center of which was hollow and the outer surface covered and protected by a shield of glass. In this aperture could be seen a tiny black stone roughly carved in the shape of a coiled serpent. In the sunlight this stone glittered from a hundred different facets. The view finder, too, was rather odd. At times when she peered through it, Miss Lydia could see her subject clearly and distinctly. Again, an inner fog seemed to cloud the glass and the scene appeared hazy and indistinct as though viewed through water.

She took eighteen pictures that first day: of the shore, the sea and the streets of East Darwich. Then she set about to do her developing and printing.

SURPRISINGLY enough, all eighteen negatives turned out well. But it was not until she had enlarged and dried her prints and spread them out on a table that she was able to take stock of her day's work. Then she leaned back with a glow of satisfaction.

The Spanish camera was a marvel. Sixteen of the pictures were sharp and clear with no undue highlights or shadows. There was the seashore with its smooth trackless stretch of sand and dashing spray. There was the distant fishing vessel outlined against the driven cloud. And there were the quaint crooked streets of East Darwich snapped in the clean freshness of early morning. She turned to the two remaining pictures and examined them carefully. One was merely fogged from pointing the lens into the sun. But the other—A queer thrill passed through her as she stared down upon it.

It was a sea view, taken from the top of one of the lesser cliffs. Miss Lydia remembered that picture very well, for it had cost her a torn dress climbing up the spume-wet rocks. It should have showed only an empty expanse of Atlantic with several sea gulls perched on a black pinnacle in the foreground. But at that point in the picture where the sky met the water—roughly in a space the size of a postage stamp—there appeared to be the miniature figure of a man—a man sitting in a chair with what

looked to be a painted plate-glass window behind him. The whole thing was small with vague edges, yet the man's features—aquiline nose, bristly mustache, deep inset eyes—were sharp and clear. It gave the impression that one had pointed the lens of the camera through a curtain of gauze and caught a fleeting glimpse of a mirage in the sky.

"Double exposure," said Miss Lydia to herself; but even as the thought came, she realized that couldn't be the answer. For she had taken no inside shots and the surroundings about the man's figure were definitely those of an interior.

She examined the camera again. Next she got out a magnifying glass and studied the plate-glass window background behind the man. Minute printing was discernible across this window and under the glass she slowly made out the words:

CAFE CLENARO

Her excitement mounted. There was no Cafe Clenaro in East Darwich. Of that she was positive. There was, however, a restaurant by that name in Poland Street, Soho, in London.

Miss Lydia went thoughtfully to bed. A hundred questions surged through her mind. Why should a camera which she herself had loaded with fresh film take a double exposure picture of an interior scene in London, hundreds of miles away. There seemed no answer, and she passed into a restless sleep. Toward morning she began to dream—queer fantastic dreams. She saw herself perched on a high tower with an enormous camera strapped about her body, and every time she pressed the shutter release, a huge serpent emerged from the lens chamber to glide about her in an endless circle.

Morning and she woke nervous and exhausted. A single thought was uppermost in her mind. She must go to London, to the Cafe Clenaro. She must wait for the man by the window, take his picture and compare that picture with the one on the table. For in her state of excitement, it somehow never occurred to her that the man might

not come to the cafe or that he might not exist at all.

It was only when she was settled back in her seat on the train with the sunlit woods and fields gliding by that the utter absurdity of her action struck her. At King's Cross she took a cab out Euston, down Tottenham Court Road and along Oxford to Poland Street and the Cafe Clenaro where she chose a table near the window and ordered lunch. Her camera in its case still hung by a strap from her shoulder, and her hands trembled slightly from a nervous expectancy.

Time passed, customers came and went, and Miss Lydia saw no sign of her man of the photograph. At length weariness stole over her; she paid her check and rose. Then suddenly she stiffened.

He was there, sitting in the chair by the window: a large, heavy-set man with a coffee-colored mustache and wearing singularly incongruous pince-nez spectacles. Sunlight streaming in the large window cast him in sharp relief. As in a dream Miss Lydia reached for her camera. She unbuckled the leather flap and raised the view finder to her eye. An instant of focus and she clicked the shutter. And then an astounding thing happened.

The man leaped upward with a hoarse cry and tore at his throat. His eyes bulged, his face purpled, the veins of his neck stood out lividly. A moment later it was all over. While Miss Lydia stood there transfixed, the man slumped to the floor, twitched a few times and lay still.

A crowd gathered like magic, and in the ensuing confusion Miss Lydia sidled quietly to the door and made her escape. Outside, she walked the streets for half an hour before her heart quieted and she regained some of her composure. But even then with the reality of afternoon traffic about her, she felt weak and dazed, like a person who had just been rescued from an onrushing train.

SHE hailed a cab and rode to the offices of Benjamin Howell. The solicitor ushered her into his office with some concern.

"In heaven's name, what's wrong?" he demanded. "You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"I believe I have," sighed Miss Lydia. "At least, I've seen a murder without apparent cause."

"Murder!"

In halting sentences she told him all that had happened. When she had finished Mr. Howell sat there, scowling.

"I think you're seeing too much in coincidence," he said. "A heart attack or a hundred other things might have caused the man's death, if he did die; however, let's take a look at that camera."

HE DID look, long and carefully. Finally he returned it to its case and handed it back.

"Unusual, but I see nothing wrong with it," he said. "I can assure you it's not a weapon of any kind. Now, may I suggest again that you sell or dispose of that house and all that's in it."

"But you said—"

"Miss Lancaster," said Mr. Howell, "you never knew your uncle. I did. Believe me when I say he was an extraordinary man. As you know, he spent the greater part of his life, photographing rare and unusual scenes. He—ah, have you ever heard of the *Trinidad Queen*?"

She shook her head. "I don't believe so."

The solicitor leaned back, closing his eyes.

"The *Trinidad Queen* was a blackbirder, an eighteenth century slave-trade vessel, plying between Africa's west coast and the West Indies. In 1784 she left Martinique, ran into a storm, was blown off her course and foundered near the island of French Key in the Grenadines. Now her approximate position was thought to have been known for a long time and also known was the fact that her strong box contained nearly two hundred thousand gold guineas. There have been innumerable attempts to rescue that gold, but the position was in deep water, exposed to the winds, and all such attempts failed."

Howell paused to tilt back in his chair and make steeples of his hands.

"In his travels, your uncle, George Faversham, came on a map purporting to show that the *Trinidad Queen* had actually gone down some miles to the east off Rojo

Bank and was lodged on a comparatively shallow reef. He organized a party, hired a small motor cruiser and headed for the Grenadines. That was a year ago."

Howell opened the desk humidior and took out a cigar. Halfway to lighting it, he changed his mind and returned it to the box.

"Primarily, of course, your uncle's motive in the whole affair was photography. He saw in the underwater action, the movements of the divers about the old sunken vessel an opportunity to capture on film some dramatic scenes. He took three men with him: Garcia Perena, a Portuguese from Havana, Dane Kellogg, a non-practicing British physician, and Justis Hardesty, a nondescript American whom he found on the San Juan waterfront. It was agreed that your uncle should have all returns on the photography work while the treasure, if any were found, should be divided four ways—"

"But what has all this to do with—?" Miss Lydia interrupted.

"With your camera? It may have nothing to do with it," replied Howell, "and then again it may have everything. First of all, you should know that the *Trinidad Queen* sailed under a stigma that has continued down through these many years. It was said that on the West African coast her skipper went upriver to a native village and took from a crude altar a small particle of what was known as the Damballah serpent stone. All the black evil which surrounded its obeah worship there in the jungle was said to have followed the captain and his ship."

HOWELL uncrossed his legs and shifted in his chair. "That's about all," he said, "except that your uncle eventually realized a part of his fortune from that expedition. He found the *Trinidad Queen* all right and he brought to the surface quite a large quantity of the gold. He also seems to have brought up that much discussed piece of the Damballah stone—that is my guess anyway as nature of that thing under the glass covering on your camera. But something happened on that expedition, something strange that drifted back to civilization only in the form of vague rumors.

It was said your uncle very nearly lost his life on one of the underwater dives."

Miss Lydia failed to see any connection between Mr. Howell's story and the subject in hand, but she was too polite to say so. The solicitor urged her again to dispose of her newly acquired house, and a few minutes later, still nervous and unsatisfied, she took her departure.

Morning found her back in East Darwich, anxiously scanning the morning paper. Any doubt she might have had that the man of the restaurant was not dead was dispelled when she read the following:

DANE KELLOGG DIES UNDER MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES IN SOHO CAFE.

Kellogg! That was the name Mr. Howell had given as one of the three men who had accompanied her uncle on his expedition!

For a week Miss Lydia lived a life of tension and anticipation. The papers continued with a few more desultory accounts of the strange death; then the story died out. More than once during that week she half decided to return to London and tell all she knew to the police. But a moment's consideration changed her mind. After all, she had done nothing that would interest Scotland Yard.

As time passed, however, she found herself thinking less about the man and more about her future work in photography. While in London she had picked up a pamphlet announcing a new prize contest in camera craft, and with typical amateur enthusiasm she cast about for worthy subject material.

Her strange dreams during this period continued; and strangely enough it was one of these dreams that formed into an idea for a picture. She dreamed she was walking along the beach in the moonlight and all about her were middle-aged men pleading with her to take their pictures, but every time she focused her camera and clicked the shutter the surrounding moonlight gave way to blackest night. When the moonlight returned again, the subject was writhing on the ground, desperately fighting a huge serpent.

The more Miss Lydia thought about this

dream, the more it seemed to her that a moonlight shot of the ocean shore might be an ideal entry for the photography contest.

She chose her setting with extreme care. A hundred yards down the shore from her house, half buried in the sand, was the rotting skeleton of an old whale boat. In the background the wall of black cliffs formed a natural archway with the sand piled high in curious shaped dunes about it.

Loading the camera with a high speed film, Miss Lydia took along a collapsible tripod and went out on the shore one night shortly after darkness had set in. The sky, lit by brilliant stars, was shot here and there with flying spindrifts of cloud, but the moon had not yet arisen. Waiting for it, she sat on an outcropping rock and felt a vague uneasiness steal over her. At length the moon peered whitely over the tops of the trees and the rolling surf changed on the instant to silver.

Miss Lydia mounted the Spanish camera firmly on the tripod, focused it so the whale boat would be in upper mid-center of the picture and opened the lens to its full F. 3.5. She clicked open the shutter and waited, watching the minute hand of her wrist watch.

She took several pictures. Back in her house, she set about developing and printing. As she worked, a queer feeling that she was being watched by unseen eyes seized her. Nervously she caught herself looking over her shoulder several times.

Only two of the negatives proved suitable for printing. One of these was fairly successful, but the effect was rather that of a dull daylight shot. It was the second picture which drew her up short.

Double exposure again! The sandy strip of beach was very clear with the mellow moonlight caught perfectly. But the old whale boat was not there! In its place were the head and shoulders of a man—a Latin looking man this time, with dark features and a receding hair line. He was leaning against the front of a building, and Miss Lydia recognized that building as she studied it with her magnifying glass. It was the Drury Lane Theater.

Miss Lydia did not sleep well that night. She awoke at fitful intervals, the last time at three-thirty a.m. by the radium-faced clock on her dresser. The house was quite still, save for the distant swish and boom of the surf. Yet this time she was positive some unusual sound had awakened her. She got up, put on a dressing gown and slippers and made her way to the front door.

The moon had gone down, and the night was steeped in shadows, with only the glow of the stars. But as she stood there, the chill wind clutching at her gown, Miss Lydia suddenly stiffened. Ahead of her one of the shadows had detached itself from the others and was slowly advancing toward her. It was the figure of a man who seemed to glide rather than walk across the lawn. The lower part of his body was wreathed in mist, but to the woman in the doorway it seemed his face was clear and distinct, it was the face of a middle-aged man with mental strength and determination. Under one arm he carried a camera and in the other hand a book.

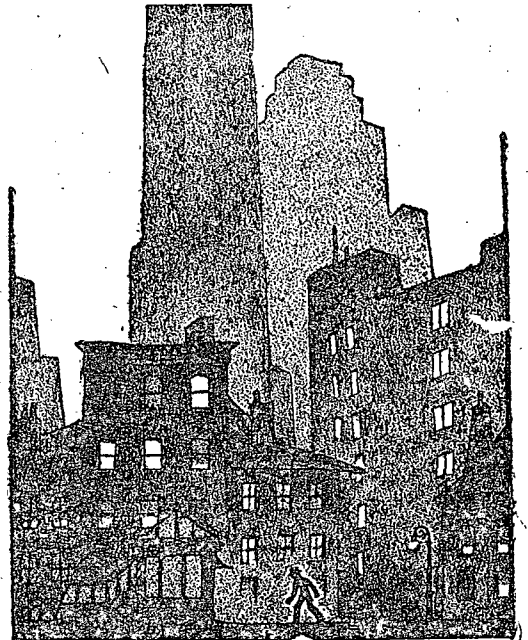
Coming to a halt in the open space before the door of the house, he suddenly poised the camera at some unseen object. Then he passed on to the far end of the veranda, took the book from under his arm and proceeded to wedge it between the ornamental porch rails. After which he turned and glided toward that point where the lawn merged into the sand of the beach. And there the mist seemed to gather about him in loose flowing coils until he had disappeared.

Was she dreaming? Miss Lydia rubbed her eyes and stared before her in sleepy bewilderment. She went back into her bedroom and returned with a powerful flashlight. But although she probed the white beam from the birches on one side to the azaelea bed on the other, she saw nothing.

Morning, and she was half way through her solitary breakfast before she suddenly remembered the book. That at least would prove whether her experience of the night was an actuality. Hurrying out onto the veranda, she stopped stunned. A book was there, still wedged between the porch rails, still damp from morning dew.

Miss Lydia stepped forward, took the book and glanced at its title. It was a well worn copy of *West Indian Journal*, by Panson McBeal, published in London in 1897, and, after a quick glance Miss Lydia thought it queer that anyone would read such a book. It was out of date both in style and subject matter, containing only one yellowed map. But a glance at the map told her that this book was undoubtedly the source of her uncle George Faversham's information as to the actual location of the *Trinidad Queen*. The actual site of the ship on French Key was carefully marked, together with the depth soundings.

One thing about the map puzzled her. On the margin at the bottom, in tiny hurried script was written *twenty-seven*. Why should anyone in the apparent haste that this writer was take the time to write those words instead of the numerals 27? Miss Lydia turned to page 27, but there was nothing unusual about it. Then words spoken by Solicitor Howell came back to her: "Your uncle was a strange man, Miss Lancaster. He did things in unusual ways." Was there a clue to his life, to the mystery of his camera in those two words written at the bottom of the map page?



She began looking on pages that were divisible by 27, without result. Then she looked simply at those pages in which 27 was a component part. She got no place here either.

ABRUPTLY she paused and began to count the letters in those two words. Counting the hyphen, they totaled twelve. She wrote down the numeral, 12, and looked at it abstractedly with the long habit of one who appreciates numbers for what they are. During the summer of '43, Miss Lydia had worked in the cryptograph department of British Intelligence, and now, without thinking, she applied her training here. She added the two digits of 12, making three; she added a 4 for the division of 12 by 3 and then swiftly multiplied the 34 by 12 and to this 108 she subtracted the total of 34 plus 12 or 46, leaving 62. All the while she was quite aware that her actions would seem meaningless to the casual observer.

Turning to the book again, she looked on page 62, sixth line down, second word in. The word she found there—"they"—didn't mean much. But when she had followed it with words in the identical position on every subsequent page with a six or a two in it, she stared astounded at her written result.

As Solicitor Benjamin Howell had told her, three men had accompanied her uncle on his trip to the *Trinidad Queen*, the foundered slave-trade vessel: Dane Kellogg, Justis Hardesty and Garcia Perena. The message which she had extracted from the West Indies travel book was a black condemnation of those three men. Briefly it told of George Faversham's overhearing the three plot to murder him. Murder for his share of the salvaged gold!

Miss Lydia closed the book thoughtfully. Why had George Faversham taken such pains to hide his message in the pages of that book? Simply because he was queer and eccentric? That might be one reason. But undoubtedly it was because at the time of the writing he was afraid one of the three—Hardesty, Kellogg, or Garcia Perena—would discover that he knew the truth. But

if such an attempt against his life were plotted, why had her uncle not made any attempt to prosecute the three after his return to civilization? Howell had told her the answer. The men, fearing retaliation, had disappeared.

For two days Miss Lydia sought to forget these facts and lose herself in the routine duties of her house. The moonlight photograph with its fantastic inset of the man standing before Drury Theater entrance haunted her. On the third day she could stand it no longer. Salving her conscience with a list of things she needed in London, she caught the morning train. She took her camera along.

That night found her stumbling back into her house, dazed and haggard. Her eyes were bloodshot. She went directly to her bedroom and lay down in the darkness while a thousand mad thoughts swirled through her brain.

The camera had repeated itself. In London she had gone directly to Drury Lane Theater at Drury Lane and Catherine Street, and focused her gaze on that section of the theater entrance which had found itself in her photograph. Within half an hour it had happened.

A man with Latin features and impeccably dressed had paused in her ellipse of stage to light a cigarette. An instant Miss Lydia stared at him. Then her arm shot sideward of its own accord, opened the leather case of her camera and jerked the instrument to eye focus. "No!" she told herself. "I must not! I must not!" But a will other than her own ruled her every move. Through the view finder she saw the man standing there. She clicked the shutter.

In her room now, Miss Lydia tried to expel the scene from her thoughts. The man had died there, died horribly, but drawn by the same inner hypnosis she had lingered while the crowd gathered and a phlegmatic bobby made his identification. The man was Garcia Perena, a citizen of Havana!

Out of her confused mind, as she lay there in the darkness, a single thought rose to repeat itself over and over again. The camera with its accursed Damballah stone must

be destroyed, must be sent back to the depths from which it came.

Miss Lydia got out of bed, took up the camera and went out of the house. She went down the gravel path past the bed of azaleas and onto the moonlit beach. The booming surf seemed to resound in tune with her steps and the night wind caught her hair and skirts and whipped them out behind. She was heading for the Needle, a small promontory that stabbed out into deep water. There she could throw her camera away forever without any fear that it would be washed up on the beach.

The moon was brilliant and she seemed able to see for miles in the cold light. Half way to the Needle she suddenly halted. A man was approaching her from far down the beach. As yet he had not seen her, for she was moving in the shadow of the flanking cliff. For some reason stealth appeared to be in his movements; and Miss Lydia darted behind a boulder to let him pass. The man passed her and went on, walking with a slight limp in his right foot. She waited a moment, then began to follow.

He passed through her garden to the rear wall of her house and began to fumble with the fastenings of the window there. The window slid open, and the man gripped the sill preparatory to lifting himself through the opening. And as she stood there watching in the shadows, a feeling of something evil swept over Miss Lydia. Her camera was trembling like a thing alive in its case hanging from her shoulder. Abruptly it seemed to lift of its own accord into her hands. A cry of horror rose to her lips at the realization of what was happening.

With a jerk the man spun around, staring.

And calmly, and matter of factly, moved by another will, Miss Lydia lifted her camera to focus and clicked the shutter. A span of mist appeared to radiate outward from the lens. That mist seemed to open like a white envelope, from the depths of which the coils of a yellow green serpent emerged.

The serpent slid slowly forward, and the man at the window stared in fascinated horror. He threw himself sideways, attempted to leap over a collection of flower pots. He tripped and fell. And while his screams rent the night air, the serpent slid slowly over him and began to gather its coils about his throat.

MR. BENJAMIN HOWELL visited Miss Lydia the day after the inquest. He found his client in surprisingly good spirits, a little nervous from the ordeal of answering police questions but seemingly relieved that the jury had found a verdict of "death at the hands of person or persons unknown."

"But who was he?" Mr. Howell asked. "Your letter said something about a thief trying to break into your—"

"He was just that," replied Miss Lydia calmly. "But in addition his name was Justis Hardesty who you will remember was the third and last of the men who accompanied my uncle on the *Trinidad Queen*."

"But I don't understand," began Mr. Howell.

"The three of them—Hardesty, Kellogg and García Perena—were fiends, cold-blooded fiends," continued Miss Lydia. "They deliberately plotted to murder my uncle, to sever his life-line and air hose while he was under water on the deck of the sunken vessel. Now all three of them are dead, and my uncle can rest in peace."

Howell half smiled. "Oh come, Miss Lancaster, you can't really believe George Faversham had anything to do with the death of those three men. It was pure coincidence that two of them died when they did. As for Hardesty, he simply read in the paper of your inheriting your uncle's fortune and saw in your house a good place to rob. As for that camera—by the way what did you do with the camera, Miss Lancaster?"

"It's gone," she said.

"Gone?"

Miss Lydia nodded cryptically and left the matter at that.