

# The Cheaters

1. JOE HENSHAW

**T**HE way I got those spectacles, I bought a blind lot off the City for twenty bucks.

Maggie hollered fit to raise the dead when I told her.

"What you wanna load up on some more junk for? The store's full of it now. Get yourself a lot of raggedy old clothes and some busted furniture, that's what you'll get. Why, that dump's over two hunnert years old! Ain't nobody been inside it since Prohibition, it's padlocked tight shut. And you have to throw away twenty bucks for whatever you find for salvage."

And on and on, about what a bum I was, and why had she ever married me, and who

wanted to be stuck away for life in the junk and second-hand business. Same old phonograph record she's played for years. Maggie always had a temper.

Well, I just walked out on her and let her



BY ROBERT BLOCH

*Spectacles, you know! Makes you see things better!*



keep right on jawing to Jake. Jake, he's willing to listen to her. He'll sit back of the shop for hours, drinking coffee in the kitchen when he should be working, and let her rave about me.

But I knew what I was doing. Deléhanty at the City Hall gave me the tipoff about this old house and told me to get in my bid, he'd take care of it.

They were pulling down this here old dump near the wharf. Must have been a classy dive once, even though they made a speak out of it back in Prohibition days and

then slapped a padlock on it since. Deléhanty told me that upstairs, where nobody ever went while it was a rummy hangout, there was all kinds of old furniture—a dozen bedrooms full of clothes, everything from way back.

Maybe Maggie was right about it being junk, and then maybe she was wrong. You never can tell. Way I figured, there might be some real antique pieces up there. One good haul and I stood to make two-three hundred iron men selling to a downtown auction house. That's the way to get ahead

Heading by FRED HUMISTON

in this racket. You got to take a chance once in a while.

So anyhow, I slapped my bid in, and nobody bid against me, so I got the lot. City gave me three days to move the stuff out before they started razing. Delehanty slipped me a key.

I walked out on Maggie, climbed in the truck, and went down there. Usual thing, I have Jake drive and help me load, but this time I wanted to case the joint myself. If there really was something valuable in there—well, Jake's my junior partner, sort of—and he'd want a cut. If he saw the stuff. If I saw it first and moved it out, he'd never know. So let him stay back there and listen to Maggie. Maybe I am a dried-up old jerk like she tells it. And maybe I'm a pretty smart guy. Just because Jake likes to dress up Saturdays and go down to the Bright Spot—

Anyway, I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about these spectacles, these here cheaters I found.

Like I say, I drove down to the wharf on Edison and found the dump. It sure was a crummy-looking pile. Easy two hundred years old. Fancy gables, all rotted; no wrecker would get much out of that heap.

**T**HE lousy padlock was so rusty I almost had to jimmy the door, but the key finally worked and I went inside. Dust fit to choke a pig, all over everything. Downstairs was just rubbish and slats. They must have ripped the bar and fixings out when the Feds raided it. I kind of counted on finding bar stools and maybe some metal laying around, but no soap.

So I tried the stairs. Tried is right. They almost rotted right under my feet, going up. Fancy banister, some kind of mahogany—that was in good shape, but no use to me. Even under all the dirt, I could see that this dump had class, oncè. About the time George Washington slept there, maybe.

Upstairs was even worse. Eight big rooms, all dust, and broken sticks of furniture. Busted beds. Canopy beds, mostly. Springs all broken. Bedding, just rags. I poked around but didn't find anything unless you count the crockery under the beds.

There were some chairs with nice wood to them, the frame parts, but springs and

stuffing were absolutely out. Couple tables around, too, but strictly from lumber.

**I** WAS beginning to burn up. I'd figured the least there would be was maybe some pictures on the walls; you know, some classy old masters kind of paintings like Rembrandt and so on. But I got rooked, and now I knew it for a fact.

Closets were full of clothes, though. Lucky I hadn't brought Jake because he'd blab to Maggie and then she'd know for sure she'd been right. The clothes were all rotted and raggedy like she said they would be. And stink!

I poked around and got to wondering. You don't run into old clothes much in a deserted house. Or bedding, either. Why had they took a powder in such a hurry, the people? So long ago, too! Why, them clothes was way before the Civil War, the styles of them. Fancy pants for men. Couple rotted shoes with nothing left but buckles.

I picked some up. That was a break. Silver. Silver buckles. I went around the bedroom closets and got maybe a dozen. That was OK with me. I found a sword, too. Real fancy stuff, in one of those scabbards that was maybe silver, too. I'd find out about that—it sure was a genuine antique piece all right!

Funny about those people having left all this junk. Delehanty tipped me off this was supposed to be a haunted house. Of course in my line that's strictly a gag. I salvaged maybe two hundred haunted houses in my time—every old house is supposed to be haunted. But I never seen a ghost in thirty years, nothing ever alive in those places but maybe some cockroaches.

Then I come to this end room with the big door. All the other bedrooms was open; fact, some of the doors was loose on their hinges. But this door wasn't sprung. It was locked. Locked tight.

I had to use a crowbar from the truck on it. Got kind of excited, because you never can tell what a locked door means. Worked and sweated, and finally got it open.

Dust hit me in the face, and a stink. An awful stink. I was carrying a flashlight, of course; wasn't dark out, but the house was gloomy and there wasn't any lights, it being so old and all.

So I coughed and turned on the light and took a look. It was a big room with mounds of dust all over the floor and under that a big rag that was maybe a carpet once upon a time. There was some oak panels in this room too, and the wreckers could maybe get something for that because it was prime lumber still, even under the dust you can tell when a place is really built.

"But I wasn't interested in dust and rags and panels. I wanted to know why the room was locked. And the flashlight told me. It showed me the walls.

Bookshelves.

From the floor to the ceiling, bookshelves, all around the whole lousy room.

There must of been a thousand books in that room, no kidding, a regular library some guy had up there.

I waded through the dirt and pulled out a couple of the nearest books. The bindings were some kind of leather—that is, they was leather once. Now the things just sort of crumpled in my hands and so did the pages. All yellow and musty, which is why the stink was so bad in here.

I began to swear. I'm no *schmoe*, I know there's dough in old books. But not unless they're in good condition. And this stuff was rotten.

Then I spotted some stuff in iron bindings. That's right, so help me, iron bindings! Big clasps you had to unbuckle before you opened them. I took one down and got it open. It was some kind of foreign stuff, Greek maybe, I don't know. But I recollect the name on the front page—*De Vermis Mysteriis*. Screwy.

Still you never know, and I decided I would haul all the good ones down to the truck and see what Segall would give me for the lot. Maybe there was something valuable here after all.

Then I took another look around the room. No furniture. No tables or chairs in here at all, like in the bedrooms. Except over in the corner—

OVER in the corner was this here table. A sort of a desk-table, for writing, I guess. And right on top of the table, smack in the center, was a skull.

So help me, it was a human skull, all yellow and grinning up at me under the

flashlight beam, and for a minute I almost went for that haunted house stuff.

Then I notice how the top is bored out for one of them old-fashioned goose-quill pens. The guy who collected all these foreigner-type books used the skull for an inkwell. That's a screwball for you, hey?

But the table is what interested me, really interested me, that is. Because it was antique all right. Solid mahogany, and a job of carving—all kinds of fancy scrollwork and little goofy faces carved in the wood.

There was a drawer, too, and it wasn't locked. I got excited, figuring you never can tell what you find in such places—maybe a lot of valuable documents, who knows. So I didn't waste much time pulling the drawer open.

Only it was empty. Nothing in it whatsoever.

I was so mad I let out a couple words and kicked the side of the table.

That's how I found them. The cheaters, that is.

Because I hit one of the little goofy faces and a sort of panel in the side of the table at the left just swung open and there was this drawer.

I reached in and pulled out the spectacles.

Just a pair of glasses, is all, but real funny ones. Little lenses; square shaped, with big heavy ear-pieces—books, I guess is what you call them. And a thick bridge for over the nose; that was silver too.

I didn't get it. Sure, there was silver in the frames, but they couldn't be worth more than a couple bucks. So why hide the cheaters away in a secret drawer?

I held the glasses up and wiped some specks of dust off the lenses, which was yellow glass instead of the regular, clear kind, but not very thick. I noticed little designs in the silver frames, like engraved lines. And right across the bridge for the nose was a word, carved into the silver. I remember that word because I never saw it before.

"*Veritas*" was the word, in funny square letters. Some more Greek, I guess. Maybe the old guy was Greek. The guy who had the locked library and the skull for an inkpot and the glasses in the secret drawer, I mean.

I had to squint some at the lettering in

the gloom there because my eyes weren't too good and—that gave me an idea.

Get to be my age, you get kind of short-sighted, sometimes. I always figured I'd go down to the opt—to the eye doctor—but I never got around to it. But looking at the cheaters I said to myself, why not?

So I put them on.

The bows, or stems, whatever you call them, were pretty short for me. And like I said, the lenses were small. But I didn't feel uncomfortable wearing them. Only my eyes hurt.

My eyes hurt. Not hurt, exactly, but something else like hurting inside of me. Like I was being all pulled and twisted.

Sounds screwy? Well, it felt screwy, too. Because the whole room went far away for a minute and then it came up close, and I blinked fast.

After that it was all right, and I could see pretty good. Everything was sharp and clear.

I left the cheaters on and went downstairs, because it was getting dark and I figured on coming back with Jake tomorrow and loading up the truck. No sense in me doing it all by myself, Jake being so much younger, he could lift the heavy stuff.

So I went home.

I come in the shop and everything was OK and Jake and Maggie were sitting in the back having coffee.

Maggie kind of grinned at me. Then she said:

"How did you make out, Joe, you lousy, old baboon? I'm glad we're going to kill you."

No, she didn't say *all* that.

She just said, "How did you make out, Joe?"

But she was *thinking* the rest.

I *saw* it.

Don't ask me to explain. I *saw* it. Not words, or anything. And I didn't *hear*. I saw. I knew, by looking at her, what she was thinking, and planning. Like what was coming next, almost.

"Find a lot of stuff?" Jake asked, and I *saw*, "I hope you did because it's all mine as soon as we bump you and we're gonna bump you for sure tonight."

"What you look so funny for, Joe, you sick or something?" Maggie said, and she

also said, to herself, "Who cares, he's gonna be a lot sicker soon all right, all right, does he suspect anything, no, of course not, he couldn't, the old goat never got wise to us for a whole year now, just wait until Jake and I own this place together and his insurance too, it's all planned."

"Yeah," I said. "I was lifting stuff over to the house, and I don't feel so hot. Guess I better sit down."

"What you need, you need a little drink to warm you up," Jake said to me, and to himself he was saying, "That's the way, we'll start it like we figured, get him drunk and then when he gets upstairs I'll push him down and if that don't finish him Maggie will with the board, it leaves the same kind of bruise. Everybody knows he drinks, it's just an accident like and I can swear to it."

I made myself smile.

"Where'd you get the cheaters?" Maggie asked, saying, "God, what a homely mug on him, I get sick just looking at that face but it won't be long now."

"Picked them up over at the house," I said.

Jake got out a fifth. He opened it and got some water glasses. "Drink up," he said.

I sat there, trying to figure it out. Why could I read their minds? Why did I know what they were planning? I didn't know. But I could see what they were up to. I could *see* it. Could it be—the cheaters?

Yes, the cheaters. *They* were the cheaters. Carrying on behind my back. Getting ready to finish me off. Tumble down the stairs. Never mind how I knew. I knew, that was the main thing.

I **KNEW** what they were thinking while they sat there drinking with me, laughing with me only really laughing at me and waiting until I got drunk enough so they could kill me. Pretending to drink a lot while they got me loaded, until I made them drink shot for shot with me.

I couldn't get drunk, not as long as I was *seeing* them. The thoughts going through their heads, your blood would run cold and no liquor could make you drunk if you knew such things.

Everything turned to ice. it was all cold.

and I knew just what to do. I made them drink with me and they began to get loud, only the thoughts kept getting worse. I listened to them talk, but all the time I saw their thoughts.

"We'll kill him, just a little while now, why doesn't he pass out, he's drinking like a fish, mustn't take too much, got to keep him from suspecting, God how I hate that ugly puss of his. I want to see it smashed open, wait until he's out of the way and I have Maggie all to myself whenever I want to, he's going to die, I could sing it, he's going to die, die, die—"

Everything turned to ice.

I knew just what to do.

They were laughing and singing and it was way after dark when I went out to the truck to put it into the garage for the night. They stayed behind, thinking about how to do it now, how to keep people from suspecting them.

Me, I didn't worry about that. Suspecting, I mean. I was all set.

I put the truck away and then I came back to the kitchen, carrying the crowbar from the truck that I'd used up at the house.

I came into the kitchen and locked the door. They saw me with the crowbar, standing there.

"Hey, Joe—" said Jake.

"Joe, what's wrong?" said Maggie.

I DIDN'T say a word. There wasn't any time to talk, because I was smashing Jake's face in with the crowbar, smashing his nose and eyes and jaw, and then I was hammering Maggie over the head and it spurted out and up, and the thoughts came out and they weren't words, just screams and then there weren't even any screams left to see.

So I sat down and took off the cheaters to polish them. I was still blowing on them when the squad car came and the cops took me.

They wouldn't let me keep the glasses and I never did see them again. It didn't matter much, anyhow. I might have worn them at the trial, but who cares what they thought of me then? And at the end I would have had to take the cheaters off. I know they would have made me take them off.

When they put the black hood over my head, just before they hung me . . .

## 2. MIRIAM SPENCER OLCOTT

I DISTINCTLY remember it was on Thursday afternoon, because that's when Olive has her bridge club over, and of course she simply *must* have Miss Tooker help with the serving.

Olive is much too diplomatic to lock me in my room, and I always wondered why it was that I seemed to get so sleepy on Thursdays, just when I might have a chance to slip out without anyone noticing. Finally I realized that she was putting something into my luncheon—more of Dr. Cramer's work, no doubt.

Well, I'm not a complete fool by any means, and this Thursday I simply made up my mind. When the tray came up I just nibbled a bit at some toast—that seemed safe—and poured the rest down the you-know-what. So Olive was none the wiser, and when I lay down upon the bed and closed my eyes she felt satisfied.

I must have rested about an hour until I heard the front door open and the voices drifted up the stairwell. Then I knew it was safe for me to get up.

I put on my dress and powdered my nose, and then I took ten dollars out of the pincushion where I keep what's left of the cash. After that there was nothing to do but tiptoe down the stairs very quietly and slip away.

Olive and her friends were in the parlor with the door closed. I had to rest a moment at the foot of the stairs because of my heart, you know, and for an instant I had the most peculiar temptation to open the parlor door and stick my tongue out at her.

But that wouldn't have been very lady-like. After all, Olive and her husband Percy had come to live with me and take care of me when Herbert died, and they got Miss Tooker to help when I had my first heart attack. I mustn't be rude.

Besides, I knew Olive would never permit me to go out alone any more. So it would be wiser if I didn't disturb her now.

I went out very quickly and walked north, away from the parlor windows. I

turned down Edgewood and decided to take a bus at the corner. It cost a dime, but I couldn't be choosy.

There were several people on the bus and they kept staring at me. People seem so rude nowadays; I can't help but notice. When Herbert was alive we had the electric runabout and I never was forced into contact with the masses, but now I'm old and all alone, and there's no one to protect me.

I know my clothing is not in the latest style, but it is fresh and neat and there is no call for rude and vulgar curiosity. I wear highbutton shoes for the support they afford my ankles, and if I chose to be sensible regarding draughts, that is my affair. I mean, about the gray muslin stockings and the scarf. My coat is fur and very expensive; it needs relining and possibly some mending, that is true, but for all strangers know I might be quite impoverished. They need not be so rude. Even my bag comes in for its share of attention on the part of boors. My fine reticule, which Herbert brought back for me from abroad, in '22!

I didn't like the way they stared at my bag. It was almost as if they knew. But how could they know? No one had ever suspected.

I sniffed and sat back. I had to plan, now. I must get off east of the river. Then I could walk either north or south. I wasn't quite sure yet what I planned to do. I had ten dollars, remember.

If I walked north, I needed my bag.

If I walked south, like the last time—

No. I couldn't do that. The last time was frightful. I remember being in that awful place, and the men laughing, and I had been singing, I believe, was still singing when Percy and Olive came for me in the taxicab.

How they found me, I'll never know. Perhaps the tavernkeeper telephoned them. They got me home, and I had one of my attacks and Dr. Cramer told them never to even mention it to me again. So there were no discussions. I hate discussions.

But no. I couldn't walk south again today.

I left the bus east of the river and walked north. I began to get that tingly feeling all over. It frightened me but it felt—nice.

It felt even nicer when I went into War-ram's and began to look at the cameos. The clerk was a man. I told him what I wanted and he went to look for it. He brought back a wide selection and I tried to make up my mind. I told him about my trip to Baden-Baden in '16, and what Herbert and I had seen in the jewelry stores during the war abroad. He was very patient and understanding. I thanked him politely for his trouble and walked out, tingling. There was a brooch, a really lovely thing, in my reticule.

At Slade and Benner's I got a scarf. The girl was an impertinent young snip, and so I felt I really must buy a corsage to distract her attention. They were vulgar things, and cost 39 cents. Not nearly worth it. But the scarf in my bag was of imported silk.

IT WAS very exciting. I walked in and out of the shops, and the bag began to fill. I bought. One must be very discreet, you know. None of my purchases were extravagant, but I managed to spend over four dollars. Still, I had the little figurine, and the locket, and that perfectly enormous jar of shaving cream. That seemed silly, but the opportunity was there, and perhaps Percy might find a use for it.

Then I started going into these second-hand shops and antique stores near the City Hall. One never knows. My reticule was almost full, but I could still make purchases.

I saw a lovely escritoire in the window of a place called Henshaw's. Obviously solid mahogany and beautifully carved. There was a slight chance that it might be available for a trifling sum.

The proprietor was a fat man. I smiled at him.

"I noticed that escritoire in your window, Mr. Henshaw," I began.

He shook his head.

"It's sold, madam. Besides, I'm not Henshaw. He's dead. Didn't you read about the case in the papers? Hanged him."

I held up my hand and sniffed.

"Please," I said. "Spare me."

"My name's Burgin. Bought the place out. We got a lot of nice things here, though, besides that writing table."

"I'll glance around a bit, if I may."

"Sure, madam."

I had seen the table with the ceramics, and now I approached it. But he never let his eyes stray from me. I was tingling and felt nervous. There was one piece I simply adored. I had the bag open and it only needed an instant—

He was right behind me. He had seen my hand move.

"How much is this?" I said, very quickly, picking up an object at random from one of the trays.

"Two bits!" he snapped.

I fumbled in my pocket and gave him a quarter. Then I marched out of the store, very quickly, and slammed the door.

It was only when I reached the street that I stopped and examined the object in my hand.

A pair of spectacles. How in the world had I ever managed to snatch eyeglasses from that tray?

Still, they were rather unusual—quite heavy, and obviously silver.

I held them up to the light and in the sunset I noticed a word etched across the bridge.

"*Veritas.*" Latin. Truth. Strange.

I slipped them into my pocket and walked briskly down the street. I was tired, yes, but I felt the need of leaving this disreputable neighborhood before sunset. Besides, Olive would be bidding goodbye to her guests shortly, and I must return before my absence was discovered.

GLANCING at the City Hall clock I was astounded to find out that it was past five. This would never do. I should be found out, and there might be a distressing scene—

A taxicab ride to the house costs fifty cents. But this was an emergency. I beckoned to a cab-driver and entered his vehicle.

As we drove, I grew more and more apprehensive. Even the thought of my successful expedition, of what I had in my bag, didn't console me.

Suddenly I remembered something else. Olive and Percy were dining out tonight! And Dr. Cramer was to come over and examine me!

Surely they would have ascertained my absence. How *could* I explain it?

I fumbled in my pocket for the fare. My hands encountered a cold object.

The spectacles.

That was the solution. I placed them firmly on the bridge of my nose and adjusted the bows, just as we turned in at the driveway.

When the cab stopped the tingling feeling seemed to rush back, and for a moment I felt that I might have another attack. But I mastered it. Perhaps the glasses were "drawing" on my eyes a bit. In a moment I could see clearly and the tingling drained away.

I paid the driver and walked quickly towards the house, before he had time to comment on the lack of a "tip." Then I took out my key and opened the door.

The glasses seemed to make it easier. Perhaps I really *did* need spectacles. Dr. Cramer had once commented upon the fact that I was slightly astigmatic. At any rate, everything seemed clear, quite clear.

Everything *was* clear.

Let me express myself properly, now, so that you will be sure to understand.

I OPENED the door. Olive and Percy were standing there; Olive so tall and thin and Percy so short and fat. Both of them had pale skins. Like leeches.

Why not? They were leeches. I looked at them, and it seemed to me as though I were meeting them for the first time. They smiled, but they were strangers.

Not *quite* strangers. Because I knew them. I could *see* them. The leeches.

Moving into my house when Herbert died. Using my property. Living on my income. Getting Miss Tooker to come and keep her eye on me. Encouraging Dr. Cramer to make an invalid out of me. Ever since Herbert died. Now they were waiting for *me* to die.

"Here's the old—now."

I won't *repeat* the word.

For a moment I was shocked beyond all belief. To think that mild little Percy would stand there smiling and *say* such a thing to my face!

Then I realized that he wasn't saying it. He was *thinking* it. I was reading his mind.

He said, "Mother, darling, where on

earth did you disappear to? We worried so."

"Yes," said Olive. "We didn't know what to think. Why you might have been run over." Her tone was the familiar one of daughterly affection. And behind it, the thought, "Why wasn't she run over, the old——"

*That word again!*

So that is what she thought of me. That's what they both thought of me!

I began to tremble.

"Sit down, dear. Tell us all about it." Percy, smirking. Puffy-mouthed leech. Sucking my blood.

I summoned all my strength.

"Yes, Mother. Where *were* you?" Olive, smiling. Prim-mouthed leech. Thinking, "Did you go out on another bat, you doddering old fool? Or were you making trouble for us, stealing from the shops again? The times Percy has had to go down and make good on merchandise——"

I caught that thought and blinked behind the spectacles. I hadn't suspected *that*. Did they *know*, in the stores, what I did? And permitted it as long as Percy—?

But then I wasn't profiting at all! They were all against me, I saw it for the first time. Spectacles.

"If you must know," I said, very rapidly, "I went downtown to be fitted for a pair of glasses."

Before they had time to consider that fully, I marched up the stairs, entered my room, and slammed the door. Not angrily, but quite firmly.

I was really quite upset. Not only by their thoughts, but because of the fact that I could read their thoughts. They were waiting for me to die. I knew it—but how?

Perhaps it was all my imagination. Maybe I was really ill. They always said so. Miss Tooker treated me as an invalid. Dr. Cramer came regularly twice a week.

He would be coming tonight. He was very nice. Let him tell me what was wrong.

Because it couldn't be the spectacles. It couldn't be. Such things aren't really possible.

It was only that I was so very tired and so very old——

I took off the glasses and lay down on the bed and suddenly I was crying. I must

have fallen asleep, for when I awoke it was quite dark.

The door had slammed downstairs. Now footsteps ascended the stairs. Miss Tooker.

She opened the door with one hand. She carried a tray. A teapot and some biscuits. Part of Dr. Cramer's diet. He knew how I loved to eat and he wouldn't permit it.

I made a face at Miss Tooker.

"Go away," I said.

She smiled weakly. "Mr. and Mrs. Dean have left for their dinner engagement," she said. "But they thought you might be wanting your supper now."

"Go away," I repeated.

"Are you sure you're feeling quite yourself?" she asked, setting down the tray on the table beside the bed. "Dr. Cramer should be coming soon, and——"

"Send him up and go to bed," I snapped. "But keep out of here."

HER smile faded and she started for the door. For a moment I had the queerest desire to put on the spectacles and look at her through them. But that was all an illusion, wasn't it? I watched her depart, then sat up and reached for my bag.

I began to go through my treasures. It took quite some time. I became so engrossed that I was unaware of Dr. Cramer's arrival.

His knock startled me. I hastily stuffed my collection back into the bag and dropped it at the side of the bed. Then I lay back and called, "Come in."

Dr. Cramer was always the soul of courtesy. He entered quietly, despite his portliness, and sat down in the boudoir chair near my dressing table.

"What's all this I hear about you, young lady?" he chuckled. He always called me "young lady." It was our private joke.

"What do you mean?" I smiled at him pleasantly.

"I hear you took a little trip this afternoon. Mrs. Dean mentioned something about spectacles——"

I shrugged. He leaned closer.

"And you haven't been eating. You were crying."

He sounded so sympathetic. A wonderful personality, Dr. Cramer. One couldn't help but respond.

"I just wasn't hungry. You see, Olive

and Percy just don't understand. I do so enjoy getting out into the air, and I hate to trouble them. I can explain about the glasses."

He smiled, and winked.

"First, some tea."

"I'm afraid you'll find it cooled by now."

"That's easily remedied."

He turned and set the teapot on the little electric hotplate over in the corner. He worked quickly, efficiently, humming under his breath. It was a pleasure to watch him, a pleasure to have him visit. We would sit down now and have a cup of tea together, and I would tell him everything. He knew. He would understand. Everything would be all right.

I sat up. The glasses clicked on the bed beside me. I slipped them on.

Dr. Cramer turned and winked at me.

When he winked I closed my own eyes and felt the glasses pulling on them.

Then I opened my eyes and I knew. I knew that Dr. Cramer was here to kill me.

HE SMILED at me and poured out two cups of tea. He got the second cup from the table where my luncheon tray still rested. I watched him pour. I watched him stoop over the cup to the left and slip the powder into the hot tea.

He brought the tray over to the bed, and I said, "Doctor—a napkin, please." He got the napkin, sat down next to me, and politely lifted his cup as I raised mine.

We drank.

My hand didn't tremble, even though he watched me. I emptied my cup. He emptied his.

He winked again. "Well, young lady—feel better?"

I winked right back at him. "Much better. And you?"

"First rate! Now, we can talk, eh?"

"Yes," I said. "We can talk."

"You were going to tell me something?"

"That's right," I replied. "I was going to tell you something, Dr. Cramer. I was going to tell you that I know all about it."

He blinked again. I kept smiling as I went on.

"Yes. I know just how it is supposed to go. Percy and Olive put you up to it. They will inherit and give you one-third.

The time was indefinite, but when I came home distraught tonight they thought it a good idea if you acted at once. Miss Tooker knew I might have an attack, anyway, and she would act as a witness. Not that a witness would be needed. You would certify as to the cause of death. My heart, you know."

Dr. Cramer was perspiring. The tea had been quite hot. He raised a hand. "Mrs. Olcott—"

"Please do not interrupt. I am not finished. I was telling you about the plan. In half an hour, or less, I will have a seizure. You will go downstairs and tell Miss Tooker to phone the Deans at their dinner party. Then you will return and endeavor to help me. Naturally, it will be too late. By the time my beloved daughter and her husband arrive, I shall be dead. That's the way it is, isn't it?"

"But—"

I stared at him. "You wonder how I know? So do I. I cannot explain the power I have. It is enough that I possess it. I can read your mind."

"Then—"

I inclined my head. "Please do not trouble yourself to speak. Reading your mind, I know what you meant to say next. You wondered why, knowing these things, I permitted you to poison me. You wonder why I would trust you, knowing that you are a treacherous, hypocritical—"

HERE I used the masculine form of the epithet Percy had thought of in connection with me.

His eyes bulged. Apparently he wasn't used to such language. He had turned red as a beet.

"Yes," I whispered. "You wonder why I allowed you to poison me. And the answer is—I didn't."

He tugged at his collar and half-rose from the chair.

"You didn't?"

"No." I smiled sweetly. "When you brought me the napkin, I switched our tea-cups."

I do not know what poison he employed, but it was efficacious.

Of course, his excitement helped speed the process along. He managed to stand

erect, but only for an instant, and then sank back into his chair.

He died there.

I watched him die. For fifteen minutes I observed the process of disintegration. His voice failed almost immediately. His head wobbled. He frothed and retched. His eyes dilated and his face was purple, except around the mouth where he bit his lips.

I WANTED to read his thoughts, but there were no coherent thoughts any more. Only images. Words of prayer and blasphemy commingled, and images of desperation. Vile things. And then the overpowering mastery of pain blotted out everything. It hurt my head to read his mind, so I took off the glasses and just watched.

It made me tingle all over to see him die.

At the end he had convulsions. He tried to claw his own throat out. I stood over him and laughed right down his gaping maw. Not a very ladylike thing to do, I admit, but there was justification. Besides, it made me tingle.

Afterwards I went downstairs. Miss Tooker was sleeping and there was no one to stop me. I deserved a little celebration. I raided the ice-box and took up a tray loaded with turkey and dressing and truffles and kumquats—oh, they feasted well downstairs, my loving daughter and son-in-law!

I brought the brandy decanter, too.

I carried everything into my room. It was enough to make me quite giddy, climbing the stairs with that load, but once the door was closed behind me, I felt better.

I filled my teacup with brandy and toasted the figure sprawled in the chair before me. I mocked him silently as I ate. I inquired politely if he cared for a snack, did he want some brandy, it was delicious, and how was his heart behaving these days?

The brandy was strong. I finished all the food, every last bit of it, and drank again. The tingling was mixed with warmth. I felt like singing, shouting. I did both.

The teacup broke. I drank out of the decanter. No one to see me. I reached out and closed his eyes. Bulging eyes. My own eyes ached. Spectacles. Shouldn't have worn them. But if I hadn't, I'd be

dead. Now he was dead. I was alive. Very much alive. Tingling alive.

More brandy. Heartburn. Too much food. The brandy was burning, too. I lay back on the bed. Everything went around and around. Burning. I could see him sprawled there with his mouth open, laughing at me.

Why did he laugh? He was dead. I was the one who should laugh. He had poison, I had brandy. "Liquor is poison to you, Mrs. Olcott."

Who said that? Dr. Cramer said that, the last time. But he was dead. I wasn't poisoned. So why did it hurt when I tried to laugh?

Why did it hurt my chest so, and why did the room go around and when I tried to sit up and fell face downwards on the floor why did I tear at the rug until my fingers bent backwards and snapped one by one like pretzel sticks, but I couldn't feel them because the agony in my chest was so much stronger, stronger than anything, stronger than life itself . . .

Because it was death.

I died at 10:18 p.m.

### 3. PERCY DEAN

AFTER the whole affair was hushed up, Olive and I went away for a while. We could afford to travel, now, and I made arrangements to have the whole place remodeled while we were gone.

They really did a beautiful job—money was no object. I told him—and the results did us proud. It was about time, too. All those years wasted, sitting around and waiting for the old lady to die; yes, it was about time.

Now Olive and I could really hold our heads up in the community. No more snubs, no more covert insults, no more gossip about, "Mrs. Olcott's son-in-law . . . parvenu . . . not altogether the sort of person who belongs."

I swore to myself that all this would be changed. Olive and I would take our rightful place in society, at last. We had the background, surely, and now there was ample money to move in the best circles, to entertain.

To entertain. That was the first step.

The costume party was really Olive's idea, although I was the one who tied it in with our "house-warming."

"There's a certain atmosphere of gaiety and informality about a costume party," I told her. "It will distract from the awareness of the guests; so many of them know about the—uh—unfortunate occurrence six months ago, and an ordinary dinner party would be strained. But a costume party is just the thing."

"Maybe I could get that little dance troupe to entertain," Olive mused. "The Puerto Ricans, you know. They're all the rage this season. And we could use the garden, too."

IT PLEASED me to see her respond so enthusiastically. We fell to planning, determining whom to invite. Here is where my superior acumen came into play. For years I had been balked, frustrated by my ignominious position as a "hanger-on"; unable to associate on a plane of equality with the business and financial leaders of the community.

I seemed to attend their dinners and parties under sufferance, and was unable to reciprocate with invitations in kind. In consequence I was never able to broach certain ventures I had in mind regarding real estate and bond issues. I knew the key men and my propositions were completely worked out. All I wanted was *entree*. I could make money in this city; quite a bit of money. Now was the time.

"Thorgesesen," I said, checking off the list. "Definitely yes. Harker, if he'll come. And Dr. Cassit. Pfluger. A repulsive person, but I need him. And the Misses Christie. Hattie Rooker. Very good."

"If we have Hattie we must invite Sebastian Grimm," Olive reminded.

"Grimm? Who's he?"

"The novelist. Summering in town here. He's invited everywhere—*everywhere!*"

"As you wish."

We planned it all, sent out our invitations, and had a most gratifying response. The week beforehand was filled with endless details which engaged our time. As a matter of fact, it was the day of the party

before Olive brought up a highly important matter.

"Our costumes, Percy," she said.

"Costumes?"

"This is a costume party, silly! And we've forgotten to select our own." She smiled. "You'd go well as a pirate."

I frowned. I dislike levity. The thought of wearing a costume repelled me.

"But they'll all be in costume," Olive told me. "Even dignified old men like Harker. And Mrs. Loomis has spent weeks, simply weeks, on her Watteau shepherdess. The dressmaker told me."

"What shall you wear?" I asked.

"Something Spanish, with a mantilla. Then I can wear the earrings." She peered at me quizzically. "But you're going to be a problem. Frankly, Percy, you're too tubby for the usual thing. Unless you choose to dress as a clown."

I almost spoke harshly to her. But it was true. I regarded my portliness in the mirror; my receding hairline, my double chin. She peered over my shoulder.

"Just the thing!" she announced. "Percy, I have it! You shall be Benjamin Franklin."

Benjamin Franklin. I had to admit it wasn't a bad idea. After all, Franklin was a symbol of dignity, stability and wisdom—I am inclined to discount those absurd rumors about his mistresses—and that was the note I was seeking. I depended upon this evening to impress the guests. It was a highly important first step.

The upshot of the matter was that I went down to the costumer, told him my needs, and returned that evening with a Colonial costume, including a partial wig.

Olive was ecstatic over the results. I dressed hastily after dinner, for our guests were expected to arrive early, and Olive merely glanced into the master bedroom and inspected me at the last moment.

"Wonderful!" she said. "But didn't Franklin wear spectacles?"

"So he did. Unfortunately, it's too late now to secure a pair. I trust the guests will forgive me this oversight."

The guests did.

I spent a most enjoyable evening. Everyone arrived, the liquor was good and plentiful, the costumes added the proper note of

frivolity, and the entertainment—although vulgar—seemed most well received.

ALTHOUGH a total abstainer myself, I nevertheless saw to it that the proper persons imbibed. Men like Thorgesen of the bank, old man Harker, Dr. Cassit, and Judge Pfluger. I managed to keep them around the punchbowl and their cordiality increased as the evening progressed.

I was particularly interested in getting Thorgesen's friendship. Through him I could gain membership in the Gentry Club, and sooner or later I'd worm my way into Room 1200—the fabulous "poker club" room where the really big "deals" were decided; millions of dollars in contracts casually assigned as the powers-that-be dealt their cards.

Sebastian Grimm put the thought into my head. "Party seems to be going nicely," he drawled. "Almost think it would be safe to leave the ladies to their own devices for an hour or so. You haven't a poker table available, have you, Dean?"

Poker. The very thing. A game in my house. Wouldn't it be natural to suggest another meeting at the conclusion of this game? Perhaps Thorgesen would suggest the Gentry Club next time, and I could remind him that I was not a member. "That's easily remedied," he would boom. "Tell you what you do, Dean—"

Perfect!

"There's a big table upstairs," I ventured. "Away from the crowd and the noise. If you gentlemen are interested—"

They were. We ascended the stairs.

I hate poker. I dislike all games of chance. I do not regard them as immoral, but I instinctively dislike a speculative venture where the element of risk is dependent upon chance.

But this was an exception.

I secured chips and cards. Thorgesen, Dr. Cassit, Judge Pfluger, Harker, Grimm and myself were seated around the table. I would have excluded Grimm if possible—the tall, thin sardonic writer was a disturbing element and his presence was of no value to me. But it had been his suggestion, and I couldn't very well shake him off.

Olive tapped on the door before we started our play.

"So there you are," she said. "I wondered where you'd disappeared to, Percy." She smiled at the group. "I see you're in good company, however. Would anyone care to have a luncheon sent up? We're serving buffet style downstairs in a few moments."

There was an awkward silence. I felt annoyance.

"Very well, then. I shan't disturb you. Oh, Percy—I found something for you. In—in mother's old room." She came up behind me and slipped something over my ears and nose.

"Spectacles," she giggled. "You remember, we couldn't find them for your costume. But mother had a pair in her drawer. Now." She stood back and surveyed me. "That does it. He really looks like Benjamin Franklin, don't you think?"

I didn't want the spectacles. They hurt my eyes. But I was overcome with embarrassment. I forced a smile and waved her from the room. The men were intent upon distribution of chips. Thorgesen was the banker. I pulled out my wallet and placed a hundred dollar bill on the table. I received a stack of twenty white chips.

They played for "blood." Very well. I smiled. "Now for some reds," I said. I placed five more hundred dollar bills on the table and received twenty red chips.

"That's better," I commented. And it was. For I meant to lose. A thousand dollars or so invested properly tonight in a losing game would almost guarantee that my membership be looked upon with favor by the other players. There was a deal of sound psychology behind my reasoning. I meant to lose, and more than that, to lose gracefully. Amiably. Like a gentleman.

But it didn't work.

I HAVE heard of clairvoyance, of telepathy, of sixth sense, of "card sense." These phenomena I have always discounted. Yet *something* was at work this evening.

For as I squinted through my spectacles at the cards, I could read the hands of the other players. Not their hands, but their minds.

"Pair of eights under. Raise. Get another. Two queens. Wonder if he's got a straight? Better stay in. Never make an

inside with those tens showing. Flush. Raise again. Bluff the others out."

It came to me in a steady stream. I knew when to drop, when to stay, when to raise, when to bluff.

Of course I meant to lose. But when a man *knows* what to do, he's a fool to drop the advantage. That's logic, isn't it? Sound business. They respected shrewdness, good judgment. How could I help myself?

I do not wish to dwell upon the actual incidents of the game. Suffice to say that I won almost every hand. That I was able to raise, to bluff, to "sandbag" as I believe they call it, and all with this marvelous flow of intuition, this veritable psychic sense which never deserted me.

I was over nine thousand dollars ahead when Harker cheated.

The strain of concentration was terrific. I paid no heed to time, to any extraneous circumstance or thought or movement. It was only the game—reading their minds—calculating my bets.

And then: "I'll keep the ace until the next hand," Harker thought.

I could *feel* that thought. Feel the strength, the desperate avariciousness behind it. Old man Harker, worth three million, cheating over the poker table.

**F**OR a moment I was dismayed. The next hand was being dealt. I concentrated. Harker had the ace of spades under his left sleeve on the table. He received a seven and an ace down, and an ace up. Three aces, if he could switch the seven.

I had queens, back to back, the down queen paired with a four. The cards were distributed—the fourth, the fifth. The others had nothing; Grimm a possible straight. Harker kept raising. I got another queen on the fifth card. I raised him back. Grimm stayed. Harker re-raised. He was gloating. The conversation grew animated. This was a vital hand; the pot was large. The sixth card brought me another four. Full house, queens up. A sure winner in almost any seven-card stud game. Harker had his aces. My pair of queens on the board bet—the limit. He raised the limit. I re-raised. Grimm dropped out.

They hung upon our last cards as the deal went out. I got a jack. Harker re-

ceived the fourth ace. It almost hurt my head to feel the wave of exultation possessing him. He raised, I raised, he raised, I hesitated—and Harker switched cards. The fourth ace went under. The seven slid beneath his sleeve. That was what I had been waiting for.

I raised.

Harker raised.

"Six thousand dollars in the pot!" somebody murmured.

I raised. Harker raised.

Then, very deliberately, I called. I laid down my hand triumphantly.

"Full house. Queens over fours." I started to rake in the chips.

Harker's old man's monkey-face creased into a grin.

"Not so fast, my friend. I have"—he licked his thin lips eagerly—"four aces."

Everybody gasped.

I coughed. "Sorry, Mr. Harker. But has it come to your attention that you also have—eight cards?"

Silence.

"An oversight, no doubt. But if you will be good enough to raise your left arm from the table—there, underneath your sleeve—"

The silence deepened.

And suddenly it was filled with a clamor. Not a clamor of words. A clamor of *thoughts*.

They weren't thinking about cards any more. But I could still read their minds!

"The cad—the cur—accusing Harker—probably planted the card there himself—cheating—no gentleman—nasty little fat-faced fool—never should have come—barred from decent society—vulgar—moneygrubber—drove her to her grave—"

My head hurt.

I thought if I could talk, the hurting would go away. So I talked and told them what I knew, and what I thought of them, and they only stared. So I thought if I could shout, it might relieve the strain, and I shouted and ordered them out of my house and named them for what they were, but they looked at me as if I were mad. And Harker thought things about me no man could stand. No man could stand such thoughts, even if his head weren't splitting and he didn't know it was all lost, they all

hated him, they were laughing and sneering.

So I knocked over the table and I took him by his wizened throat, and then they were all on me at once, and I wouldn't let go until I had squeezed out the hurting, all of it, and my glasses fell off and everything seemed to go dim. I just looked up in time to see Thorgesen, over my shoulder, aiming the water carafe at my head.

I tried to move to one side, but it was too late. The carafe came down and everything went away.

Forever.

#### 4. SEBASTIAN GRIMM

THIS will be brief. Very brief.

When I picked up those peculiar yellow-lensed spectacles in antique frames from the floor—slipping them into my pocket unobserved in the confusion attendant upon calling the doctor and the police—I was motivated by mere curiosity.

That curiosity grew when I chanced to overhear a remark at the inquest regarding the disappearance of the glasses. The widow, Olive Dean, spoke of her mother, and how she had brought the glasses home with her upon the night of her tragic death.

Certain aspects of that poker game and Dean's behavior had piqued my fancy. The statements at the inquest further intrigued me.

The legend, *Veritas* inscribed upon the bridge of the spectacles, was also interesting.

I shall not bore you with my researches. Amateur detection is a monotonous, albeit sometimes a rewarding procedure. Sufficient for me to say that I undertook a private inquiry which led me to a second-hand store and eventually to a partially-razed house on Edison Street. Research with the local historical society enabled me to ascertain that the spectacles had originally been the property of Dirk Van Prinn, he of unsavory repute. Legends of his interest in sorcery are common property and can be easily corroborated in any volume dealing with the early history of this city. I need not bother to underscore the obvious.

At any rate, my rather careful investigation bore fruit. I was able, taking certain liberties based upon circumstantial evidence,

to "reconstruct" the thoughts and actions of the various persons who had inadvertently worn the spectacles since the time of their discovery in the secret drawer of old Dirk Van Prinn's *escritoire*.

These thoughts and actions have formed the basis of this narrative, in which I took the liberty of assuming the characters of Mr. Joseph Henshaw, Mrs. Miriam Spencer Olcott, and Mr. Percy Dean—all deceased.

Unfortunately, a final chapter remains to be written. I had no idea that it would be necessary at the time I opened my investigation. Had I suspected, I would have desisted immediately. For I knew, as Dirk Von Prinn knew when he shut the spectacles away in that drawer, that they were objects accursed; that his heritage of wisdom from his ancestor, the infamous Ludwig Prinn, was evil wisdom; that the lenses were ground, almost literally, in Hell.

Yes, I knew that the truth is not meant for men to see; that knowledge of the thoughts of others leads only to madness and destruction.

I mused upon the triteness and the obviousness of this moral, and not for anything in the world would I have emulated poor Joe Henshaw, or Mrs. Olcott, or Percy Dean, and put on the spectacles to gaze at other men and other minds.

But pride goeth before a fall. And as I wrote of the tragic fate of these poor fools whose search for wisdom ended in disaster, I could not help but reflect upon the actual purpose for which these singular spectacles had been created.

"*Veritas.*"

The truth.

The truth about others brought evil consequences.

But—the truth about one's self?

"*Know thyself.*"

Could it be that this was the secret purpose of the spectacles? To enable the wearer to look *inward*?

Surely there could be no harm in that. Not in the hands of an intelligent man.

I fancied that I "knew" myself in the ordinary sense of the word; was perhaps more aware, through natural predeliction and introspection, than most men, of my inherent nature.

I fancied. I mused. I believed.

But I had to *know*.

Yes, I had to know.

And that is why I put them on, just now. Put them on and stared at myself in the hall mirror.

I stared at myself. And I saw myself. And I *knew* myself. Completely and utterly.

There are things about subliminal intelligence, about the so-called "subconscious," which psychiatry and psychology long to discover. I know these things now, but I shall never speak. And I know a great deal more.

I know that the actual agony undergone by Henshaw and Mrs. Olcott and Percy Dean in reading the minds of others is as nothing compared to that which is born of reading one's own mind.

I stood before the mirror and *looked into my mind*—seeing there the atavistic mem-

ories, the desires, the fears, the self-deceit, the spawning madness, the lurking filth and cruelty, the slimy crawling secret shapes which dare not rise even in dreams; seeing the unutterable foulness beneath all the veneer of consciousness and intellect which is my true nature. Every man's nature. Perhaps it can be suppressed and controlled. But merely to realize that *it is there* is the supreme horror.

It must not be permitted.

I shall finish this account, presently. Then I shall take the "cheaters," as Joe Henshaw so appropriately called them, and destroy them forever.

The cheaters!

I shall use a revolver for that purpose; aiming it quite steadily and deliberately at those accursed instruments, and shatter them at a single shot.

And I shall be wearing them at the time. . . .

## Atlantis

By STANTON A. COBLENTZ

LEGEND has sunk it where the shoreless foam  
Goes scudding over unplumbed leagues of sea.

But I have seen it glittering, dome on dome,  
Spire on spire, in castled sovereignty;  
And watched ten thousand million men that  
streamed

Across the ages on its squares and docks;  
The huckster bawling, and the seer that  
dreamed,

The captain helmeted for war's iron shocks;  
Poets and lovers, merchants, farmers, priests,  
Beggars and clowns . . . till at one cindery  
blast

They vanished like a drove of slaughtered  
beasts

Into the mist and silence of the past,—  
Less than a fable to one later clan  
That winds the way of Atlantean man.

