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ANGEL OF HELL

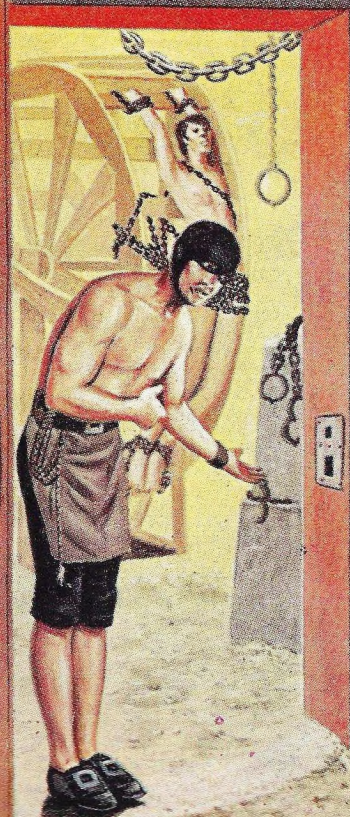
SATAN'S SPAWN

PREY ON ME

REPENT AT LEISURE

COME, KISS THE LASH

MY LOVE, MY PRISONER



THE CURSE OF THE BORGHIAS

WEB

TERROR STORIES

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THE PAIN TREE

by Aurelia Mulhare

“But, Father,” Birgitta exclaimed, “why ban Carnival this year of all years—when I have finally returned home?”

Jens Poulsen, Governor—by the grace of His Majesty King Christiern of Denmark—of the tiny Caribbean sugar island, frowned at his pretty daughter. Perhaps, he was thinking, it had not been such a good idea to bring Birgitta home at this time. Her pink-and-white Nordic beauty—which was heightened by the pale blue morning gown she was wearing—impressed him as being too fragile to withstand the storm which he instinctively felt was gathering on the island. Yet, at the same time, he knew that her doll-

like delicacy concealed a willfulness which manifested itself at present in angry sulks.

“Where is your respect for the dead?” he roared. “Your cousin Inger has only been gone from us for two days and already your mind is on parties and balls!”

Birgitta bit her lip. It was true that she had been very fond of her cousin who had been carried off by brain fever in a matter of hours. Inger had been the only female confidante she had possessed on the island of St. Neba. Still, she thought defiantly, Inger would not begrudge me a good time. Besides, Inger was dead and Birgitta was very much alive!

“I should have stayed with Aunt Pia in Copenhagen,” she

sulked. "Apparently, there is to be no relief at all from the dreary monotony of life in this uncivilized place!"

"I agree with you," her father said solemnly. "You should have stayed in Denmark. I was a fool to bring you back at a time like this. Come over here. I wish to show you something."

He went to his desk. Birgitta followed and stood silent at his side while he reached into his drawer and pulled out a flat shell on which a blackened sketch of a skull had been roughly drawn. It did not seem sufficiently ominous to Birgitta to warrant the dark look which her father fastened on it. She laughed lightly.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed mockingly. "What emblem is that—the Jolly Roger?"

"No," her father said sternly. "There are, fortunately, no longer pirates in these waters. But this symbol—the sign of the skull—represents as real and diabolical a threat to the peace and progress of this island as Blackbeard and his cutthroats ever did!"

"What does it mean?"

"Voodoo!" Governor Poulsen spat out vehemently. "African black magic and superstition which—if given a foothold here—can paralyze our sugar plantations in no time. I have seen it happen in other places—*islands* not far from here. The hougans—voodoo priests—gain sinister power over the fearful imaginations of the cane-cutters. They use terror as a whip until they control virtually everything! It has happened in Hispaniola. It can happen here! But *damn* me if I shall not move heaven and earth to prevent it!"

His powerful fist crashed down on the desk top. Birgitta stared at his face which was flushed ruddy with rage.

"But what has this voodoo to do with Carnival?" she asked stubbornly.

"The hougans use Carnival to mask their mass meetings—at which weird and unholy rites are performed. It is their special time for gathering converts of which, I fear, your friend Pierre du Lac is one!"

"Pierre!" Birgitta breathed incredulously.

There must be some mistake, she thought. Pierre was not the sort to involve himself in mystic mumbo-jumbo. He was a gay, handsome sophisticate whose only thoughts were of dancing and making love. Birgitta had looked forward eagerly to flirting with him at the Carnival balls. Indeed, her dream of Pierre had extended to seeing herself as the mistress of Beau Visage, Pierre's gracious plantation house.

"Of course, I may be wrong about young du Lac," the Governor admitted grudgingly. "But I have always had the feeling that he resented Danish rule on this island most keenly. His ancestors, you know, were the Knights of Malta who originally colonized here. He might very well have visions of forming a revolutionary government and establishing himself as ruler!"

At this last, Birgitta could not resist a derisive peal of merriment.

"Pierre—a ruler? Really, Father," she cried, "the only crown Pierre covets is that of

Rex at the Shrove Tuesday Ball!"

Governor Poulsen glowered at her impudent levity.

"I do not trust him!" he bellowed. "And I do not desire that you should be in his company until I am thoroughly convinced that he has nothing to do with the Sign of the Skull!"

Trembling with indignation, Birgitta opened her mouth to retort. Then, intimidated by the Governor's stern expression, she restrained her hot words. Instead, she clutched at her skirts and, turning, left the room....

The tropical night was sultry and still. It was as if the island held its breath in abeyance—waiting for something to occur. The palms outside Birgitta's louvred windows had ceased their customary rustling. No breeze stirred. A heavy cloying scent of jasmine wafted in to fill her room, arousing in Birgitta a restless craving for some nameless excitement.

Clad only in her silk chemise, she tossed on the bed, her long Scandinavian silver-

blonde hair clinging to her damp shoulders. Suddenly, her flesh prickled warningly. She became aware of eyes watching her.

"Who's there?" she called sharply, sitting bolt upright.

A dark form detached itself from the shadows of the enormous room. In the flickering candlelight, Birgitta saw with relief that it was only Anna, her maid.

"Oh, it's you," she said. Anna did not answer. Birgitta frowned slightly as she studied the girl more closely. Anna, she noticed, was dressed in her finery. Long hoop earrings dangled from her ears.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"Only to wait," the girl said, "until Miss is asleep. Then I go, please."

"Go?" Birgitta echoed. "Go where?"

As if in answer to her question, a low throbbing of drums began somewhere high up in the green mountains. Anna stirred impatiently at the sound, Birgitta's keen eyes did not miss the shimmer of excitement that flashed across

the maid's face.

"What does that drum mean?" she demanded. "Is that where you are going—up into the mountains where the drums are?"

"Please, Miss," Anna said evasively. "I go now?"

"Yes!" Birgitta cried decisively, springing from the bed. "You will go now and you will take me with you."

"No!" the girl objected, shrinking back in reluctance.

"Yes!" Birgitta repeated imperiously. "You will take me. And you will not breathe a word of my going to anyone—because if you do, I will flog you within an inch of your life and have you cast out from this house to starve!"

The girl stared at her, fear in her black eyes.

"Don't just stand there!" Birgitta snapped. "Come. Help me to get dressed!"

Anna hesitated. Then, cowed by the strong-willed determination she saw blazing in Birgitta's dark blue eyes, she moved slowly to do her bidding. . .

The new moon was a crescent of ivory in the south-

ern sky over their heads as Birgitta stumbled in Anna's nimble wake—up the rocky donkey trail which led to the crest of the mountain where the glow of a mammoth blaze was edged against the night.

Birgitta was unused to such arduous hiking. Her dainty silk slippers were already shredded from their unwonted contact with rocks and dirt. They impeded her progress. Acting on a sudden impulse, Birgitta pulled them off and tossed them into the steep ravine which yawned to their immediate right. Almost immediately she regretted having done so. Her tender, pampered feet complained painfully at being stubbed on rocks and bruised on sharp pebbles.

Still, she thought, it was safer to go without shoes as far as mingling unnoticed in the festivities was concerned. Anna had made it very clear that only natives would be welcomed. The presence of a Danish settler—particularly that of the Governor's daughter—would be keenly resented. Anna had even hinted that it might be dangerous for her.

The maid's obvious opposition to the idea had only whetted Birgitta's curiosity. She had wrapped a piece of dark silk around her pale hair and had darkened her face and hands with burnt cork while Anna watched in servile dismay.

Now that they were nearing the mountain top—with the drums growing steadily louder in their ears and the awareness of other silent forms joining them from out of the brush as they climbed—Birgitta felt a strange exhilaration surging through her body. She felt like laughing aloud. For the first time since she had left her hoydenish young companions in the cosmopolitan whirl of Copenhagen, she was having fun!

There was only one element missing from her midnight adventure: the presence of Pierre du Lac. If only, Birgitta thought wistfully, Pierre could have been at her side, holding her hand on the dark road, stirred to romantic badinage by the beauty of the stars overhead—she sighed.

But there was no more time

for wishful thinking. They had reached the summit of the mountain. They looked down over the entire length and breadth of St. Neba and across the silver-black water to where the other islands in the archipelago brooded in the night.

Then Birgitta saw it glowing red against the midnight sky: the Sign of the Skull!

Smoke poured forth from the eyes and the mouth and what had been the nose. It took Birgitta a few minutes to realize that she was seeing the skull at a distance, that it was actually large enough to accommodate some sort of shrine. Inside it, stood an altar bedecked with conch shells, feathers, dried bones and religious ikons. Three men were prostrate before the altar.

Outside the cavity of the mammoth yawning death's head knelt a vast silent mob of natives. There was no sound but the steady throb-throb-throbbing of the enormous drum which stood to the left of the skull.

Intimidated by the ominous silence of the crowd, Birgitta fell back. To her indigna-

tion, Anna shoved her forward.

"You wanted to see!" the girl challenged her, smiling grimly. "Now look!"

The drums suddenly stopped. The stillness was absolute. Birgitta held her breath. There was only the whistling of the trade winds over the crest of the mountain.

Then—out of nowhere, from everywhere—came a blood-curdling shriek which drew prickly gooseflesh on Birgitta's arms!

As one, the crowd sprang up to begin chanting and stamping its feet in place. The chant took on a hypnotic quality, droned over and over. To Birgitta—who had been schooled in French—some of the words of the cabalistic chant seemed familiar but they were linked with other words, not European in origin, which were totally alien to her. Again and again, the same phrases were repeated. They rolled through the mesmerically swaying crowd like a gentle breeze sighing through a grove of pines.

Birgitta peered into Anna's face. To her amazement, she

realized that Anna did not recognize her. The girl's eyes were glazed and fixed on visions beyond Birgitta's understanding. All around them, Birgitta saw the same expression on the gleaming dark faces. One man in front of them gave a frenzied leap. The drum began pounding out an intricate, savage rhythm. Its sombre voice was joined by other drums. Wild, uninhibited dancing broke out throughout the mob. Birgitta soon felt her own body begin to move—as if of its own volition.

Then that hideous, chilling shriek was heard again! It was louder and even more anguished than before. In the midst of its mindless cavortings, the crowd was arrested. Like statues, the people stood poised in various postures—some bending, some about to leap, some with arms upraised.

Birgitta watched with interest as a small procession filed through the motionless crowd. She saw three semi-naked men wearing elaborate animal masks and carrying enormous symbols of a sexual nature.

They were followed in turn by four shapely nude native girls who bore a litter upon which a body lay supine. They carried this litter past the three prostrate priests and into the skull itself where they placed the litter—still containing the body—on the altar amidst the clutter of feathers, bones and shells.

Even from a distance, Birgitta could see that it was the body of a fair-skinned woman. In the firelight, the flesh of the body gleamed white as marble.

The drums resumed and the dancing redoubled its frenzy. Wild cries of sensual rapture were heard throughout the crowd. The masked men held dried poinciana pods which they used alternately to shake in rhythm and to swat the laughing priestesses. The persistent pounding of the primitive drums awakened new fires in Birgitta's depths. She found herself responding, whirling around in a drunken trance, tearing at her clothes in a seizure of excitement. No one noticed her. All were too busy in their own little whirlpools of hypnotic ecstasy, each

worshipper of the skull listening busily in his or her subconscious to the subtle message of the drums.

Pierre! Birgitta thought hungrily. Her nails ripped her own flesh. If only Pierre were there—

Then she was startled out of her temporary insanity by the sight of the three priests—*hougans* her father had called them—who had finally risen from their prostration before the skull and were advancing towards the altar. The chief *hougan* turned to face the people. Birgitta gasped!

The *hougan* was Pierre du Lac!

The Governor had been right. Pierre was out for power. Birgitta could see his motive in the imperious glint in his eyes as he looked out complacently over the writhing bodies of his superstitious subjects. The crowd was all his to command.

Never to Birgitta's dazzled eyes had Pierre looked so handsome. Gone was the simpering, fawning smirk which had masked his true identity.

He was the personification of triumphant masculinity as he surveyed the scene with cold contempt.

Birgitta's knees went liquid with passion. She felt she must run to Pierre and cast herself abjectly at his feet. Her loyalty to her country and to her father melted away in the searing blast of her sudden, compelling need for this man among men.

"Pierre!" she shrieked.

Her voice was lost in the general din. Unaware of her, Pierre turned and went to the altar. He bent over the ghastly pale female body. Little by little, the crowd ceased its gyrating. They became rapt upon the scene being enacted within the skull. Pierre's huge frame blocked the eyes of the mob from seeing what weird and mysterious rites he performed on the immobile body.

Finally, he stepped back a few paces from the altar. He extended his hand in a commanding gesture. A low murmur of awe and astonishment rippled through the crowd as the body on the altar stirred. Then it sat upright.

Birgitta stifled a horrified

scream. With disbelieving eyes, she recognized the female form which walked stiffly towards Pierre's extended hand—jaw slack, eyes agape and staring blindly.

It was her cousin Inger!

Inger is dead, her stunned mind protested. *She died two days ago.* Birgitta herself had folded her cold, rigid hands in her coffin.

Then she recalled bizarre legends related to her by her father of dead bodies restored to a turgid resemblance of life to become slaves to the evil whims of the hougans. Was it true that Pierre was building an army of the undead? There was no doubt in her mind on one point: her cousin had been transformed into a *zombie!*

It mattered not. All that mattered was that she must be with Pierre, to share this magical night. She fought her way through the mob which had gone mad with religious frenzy. Hands tore at her clothing as she pushed and scabbled through the sea of human flesh to gain Pierre's side.

Just as she did, however,

her incredulous eyes saw Pierre's powerful arms wind about Inger's lifeless form in a passionate embrace. The rigidity left Inger's body. She collapsed limply in Pierre's clasp and was carried away into the surrounding darkness, her dead eyes staring whitely into Birgitta's shocked face.

A savage jealous rage shook Birgitta. The hot blood coursed into her cheeks. She shivered with fury.

Pierre had turned from her, rejected her! He preferred Inger's inanimate beauty to her own warm, living charms. She had been spurned! A fierce, insane desire for vengeance obsessed her, giving strength to her legs as she fled from the scene and down the mountainside...

There was a roll of military drums. Birgitta watched as Pierre—dressed in black breeches and a white silk shirt which was opened to reveal his proud and powerful throat—was marched between two soldiers into the courtyard of the Governor's mansion.

For a brief moment her father glared sternly into

Pierre's defiant eyes. Then he barked to the Colonel of the Dragoons: "Proceed as directed!"

"What are they going to do to him?" Birgitta asked, suddenly fearful.

Her anger and jealousy had dissipated in the satisfaction of seeing Pierre a prisoner. Now she was afraid. She did not want him dead. She wanted him alive and hers alone.

"He will not be shot. Not this time," the Governor growled. "But I intend to teach him a lesson he will never forget!"

The Dragoons had executed a snappy turn. Now they marched Pierre out of the courtyard into the thick mahogany forest behind the house.

"Come," her father said. "We will follow. I shall show you how we treat voodoo plotters who would overthrow the government."

Her father's hand firmly grasped her elbow. Birgitta was drawn along a narrow forest trail until they reached a clearing where the soldiers were stripping Pierre's shirt

from him. Pierre's face was ashen with dread, as he saw one Dragoon hacking a deep X in the trunk of a nearby tree.

"I don't understand," Birgitta whispered unhappily. "Why are they cutting into that tree?"

"That is the Machineal," her father explained grimly. "The natives call it the 'Pain Tree'. We do not waste precious bullets on scurvy knaves like du Lac. Nature has provided us with a very suitable punishment for them. See how the would-be ruler trembles like a frightened pup!"

It was true. Pierre's entire body was convulsed with a violent shivering. He gave a cry and tried to bolt. His captors laughed, grasped him tightly and dragged him to the scarred tree to which they lashed him securely.

Pierre shrieked with agony as his naked flesh contacted the open wound in the tree. He writhed helplessly against his bonds, anguished sweat pouring from his face and chest.

The Governor nodded with satisfaction.

"He is learning now the

price of ambition," he said. "The sap of the machineal is eating into his flesh—burning and blistering it with far greater efficiency than any acid or lye. He will bear the cross of his anarchy on his hide as long as he lives!"

A fresh series of screams broke from Pierre's foaming lips. He wriggled impotently against the unyielding leather straps which held him fast against the poisonous flowing belly of the Pain Tree.

A sudden giddy sensation passed over Birgitta. With a fascination which verged on pleasure, she watched Pierre's futile struggles.

Then the sensation passed—to leave her filled with a bitter remorse. I still love him, she thought forlornly, and he will never forgive me for betraying him....

Upon first reading the letter, Birgitta could not believe her eyes. Even when she saw the sprawling signature affixed above the du Lac signet imbedded in purple wax, she thought herself the victim of a cruel joke.

Only two days before,

Pierre had suffered the excruciating torments of the Pain Tree. His broad back was marred for life. Was it, then, likely that he would write the authoress of his suffering words like: "...I have learned a harsh lesson at your esteemed father's hands. But, as I paid for my folly in the stinging caress of Mother Machineal, my eyes saw tears for my suffering in only one face, that of the beautiful Mademoiselle Brigitte. Such compassion, such tenderness as I never hoped to see in any face this side of the angels...!"

Was it possible that Pierre did not know that she had betrayed his secret to her father? Birgitta's heart bounded with new hope. It was! she thought joyously. It was entirely possible! None but Anna knew that she had witnessed the secret rites of the skull. If Anna had remained silent, then there was nothing to worry about!

She had not seen Anna for several days. She had been sentenced to cut cane with the men for a week as punishment for attending the voodoo ceremony. Birgitta had threatened

her direly, but she had not expected her threats to have any effect. Apparently, however, they had! For Pierre, her beloved Pierre, went on to write: "...I must see you. Tonight and every night of this week I shall wait for you in the woods beyond the courtyard of your home. If you do not come, I shall understand perfectly that you do not wish to associate with a man who has covered his name with shame. But I pray all the same that you *will* come to receive the homage and affection of your adoring
Pierre, Count du Lac"

Birgitta's pulses raced wildly. **T**onight—this very night, even now—Pierre was awaiting her in ardent anticipation. She would not disappoint him. She had already caused him enough anguish. Still, the sly voice of reason whispered in her ear, it was his ordeal which turned him to thoughts of you. Yes, she thought hotly, she was *glad* he had suffered! Now he was hers, all hers—

Her heart pounded madly against her tightly-laced stays. She was wearing her most be-

coming gown—a low-cut confection of white lace and silk which bared her rounded bosom in naughty fashion. Yanking the small cap sleeves of the gown down to expose more of her smooth shoulders, she snatched up her fan and hurried from the house.

There was no danger of detection from her father. He had ridden to Fort Christiern for a military dinner. No one stood between Birgitta and her lover's waiting arms!

On blithe feet, she ran out into the moonlit courtyard. Without hesitation, she plunged into the black forest. "Pierre!" she called softly. "Pierre!"

An icy hand touched her naked shoulder. Birgitta gasped.

"Silence!" cautioned a toneless voice in her ear. "Come with me. The Count waits."

Nervously, Birgitta responded to the unpleasant pressure of that cold, bony hand on her flesh. It led her through the woods to a clearing. The very clearing—she realized with a tingle of sudden terror—where Pierre had been stripped and tied to the Machineal.

The moon came out from behind the clouds, illuminating the clearing. It lighted the face of her invisible guide. Birgitta cried out and fell back. It was Inger! Her cousin's dead hands had led her to the clearing!

There were other presences in the clearing. Silent, watch-

ful, vengeful presences surrounded her. Her heart sank as she recognized Anna's smirking face among them. Then joy turned entirely to horror as Pierre emerged from the group to embrace her in the moon-dappled shade of the Pain Tree.

THE END

THE ANGEL OF HELL

by Bursell Bradshaw

Lil Winters was boiling mad. Her rising voice cracked dangerously as she addressed Herb Lewis, who sat behind the City Desk at the Bass Head *Gazette*.

"Why should a bumbling idiot like Pete Starrs get a by-line? It's discrimination—that's what it is! Unfair Labor practice—whatever you want to call it! I can write rings around Pete Starrs and you know it, Herb! But just because he's a man and I'm only a woman, *he* gets a by-line and I don't! Talk about the Middle Ages!"

"Now, Lil," Herb replied mildly. "I don't know what you're complaining about. After all, you got a raise last summer, didn't you?"

Her bright blue eyes seemed suspiciously damp with rage. "You know what they can do with their lousy raise!" she fumed. "I want a by-line. And, by God, I'm going to get

one, or else—"

Herb Lewis studied the tossing blonde head, the obstinate little dimpled jaw, the flashing eyes—and sighed. It was a great pity that Lil wasn't content with merely being beautiful. She could make some guy here in Bass Head mighty happy—if she wanted to. The trouble was that she didn't want to. Getting married was the furthest thing from Miss Winters' made-up mind.

She was a young woman in a great hurry. She wanted to be another Dorothy Kilgallen, but she didn't intend to wait until she had achieved Miss Kilgallen's maturity. She wanted it now—all of it; the by-line, the press passes, the hobnobbing with the rich and the influential, the thousand and one little day-by-day glories that were attached to being an important press figure.

First of all, though, she wanted that by-line.

Herb Lewis sighed. She had about much chance of getting a by-line on the *Gazette* as a snowball had in hell. Colonel Pettersen, the doughty old publisher of the *Gazette*, had some pretty strait-laced Victorian ideas about women in business—particularly the newspaper business.

She had finally lapsed into silence, staring down at the desk. Herb's ears were grateful for the surcease. He never knew just what to do with an excited woman.

“What's this?” Lil asked.

She held up the yellow sheet that Bill, one of the copyboys, had brought up from the teletype room.

“What?” Herb said, looking. “Oh, *that*. That just came in from UP. They sold one of our friend Paul du Frees' paintings for a quarter of a million dollars in Europe.”

“—making him the richest living painter.” Lil read thoughtfully from the sheet. She levelled her eyes at Herb. “Isn't du Frees the one who

rents the old Miller place on the cove?”

“That's the boy,” Herb replied happy to have her interested in another topic besides Pete Starrs' by-line. “He's the last of the old Paris crowd. He must be in his seventies, but he doesn't look it. He seems to have discovered some secret of eternal youth. They say the women still go wild over him in New York. He was going with a real young one a few months back. I don't know whatever became of her—she just dropped out of the picture, I guess.”

“Does he ever bring any women up here?”

“Not that I know of,” Herb said. “Of course, no one would know if he did. Miller's cove is pretty isolated, you know. The only time anyone here in Bass Head sees him is when he comes into town to buy some more paint.”

“Paint?” Lil Winters' clear brow wrinkled in a puzzled frown. “It says here in this release that du Frees hasn't painted anything new in twenty years.”

“Oh, yeah!” Herb laughed. “I almost forgot—the Great

Mystery of the art world. 'What is du Frees Up To?' They had an article on him in the New York *Bulletin* a few weeks ago. And last month there were two fellers from *Now Magazine* nosing around Bass Head. Of course, they couldn't get anything out of du Frees. He's a tough-minded, close-mouthed old bird."

"**B**ut if there *were* a picture—" Lil continued thoughtfully. "With his old paintings going for a quarter of a million bucks, that would put the price-tag on a brand new du Frees—"

"At something like a half-million," Herb finished for her. "But I, personally, don't believe the old boy is painting a damn thing. He just buys the paint and stores it away in Hank Miller's wine cellars."

"Wine-cellars!" Lil echoed, laughing. "In Bass Head?"

"Well," Herb admitted wryly, "that was the polite name Hank gave 'em. During Prohibition, he used them to make the worst moonshine you ever melted your false teeth with—"

Lil giggled. Then her face

sobered. A dreamy, calculating look came into her eyes.

"If there *were* a painting—" she repeated softly. "—and someone up here could find out what it looked like, that would sort of put a spotlight on Bass Head, wouldn't it?"

Herb nodded. "And how!" he said.

"And if the one who found out about the painting was the same person who wrote the story in the Bass Head *Gazette*—" Lil went on excitedly.

"Hold on, now!" Herb said.

But she ignored him.

"Then a story like that should be worth at least a by-line, shouldn't it?" she demanded. "I mean—even the Colonel couldn't refuse a by-line to a story like that. Even if a woman wrote it. *Could* he?"

Her nails were pressing anxiously into Herb Lewis' sleeve. He disengaged himself from her tense grip and smiled.

"No," he said gently. "Not even the Colonel could refuse. The story would be picked up by every paper and magazine in the country. 'Half-Million Dollar Art Mystery Solved'—"

But it isn't going to happen that way."

"Why not?" she scowled.

"Because, my sweet," he told her patiently. "du Frees isn't talking. They've had the best reporters in the business trying to pick his brains for the past twenty years. Don't you think they would have gotten something—if there were something to get?"

"Maybe," Lil smiled. "But did a woman ever try? I mean a young, good-looking woman?"

"I thought you just got through saying that the Colonel was medieval for considering you as a 'lowly woman,'" Herb remarked.

"I did. He is. This is a case of fighting fire with fire. Maybe I can prove to him that it's sometimes very handy to be a woman—"

She picked her gloves and purse from the desk and straightened the bow of her printed blouse. She looked very pretty and very desirable, Herb thought. Suddenly, a cold wave of premonition swept over him.

"Lil—" he said earnestly.

"Hmmm?"

"Forget it," he told her. "I don't like it. There's something about du Frees. His eyes, maybe. I can't explain, but I wish you'd forget this crazy notion and leave him alone—"

"Now, now," she said, patting him mockingly. "Don't make noises like a mother hen. I'm a big girl, remember? I don't think old Grandpa du Frees is likely to give me any trouble—"

With a gripping sensation of helplessness, Herb Lewis watched her strut gaily out of the office door...

Lil Winters wandered through the art supply store in Bass Head, absently examining brushes and paints. She knew a little bit about oils—having studied with Miss Brody back home in Wendleton. In Wendleton, every young lady studied oil-painting. It was part of her cultural training. Lil smiled to herself, thinking that maybe, for the first time, those tedious hours spent with Miss Brody might pay off.

She had spent several after-

noons in this fashion, browsing through the store, all the while keeping a sharp eye out for anyone resembling the description she had received of du Frees. From what she could gather, the great artist was a tall, slender man with an exceptionally straight carriage for a man of his age. His hair was black with a white lightning-streak zigzagging back from his forehead, and he wore a small, black Van Dyke beard. From his description, Lil mused, he should be extremely easy to spot.

However, after four days spent in this fashion, she had seen no sign of anyone answering to du Frees' description. Sighing with frustration, she picked up a thin sable brush and carried it to the counter. "That will be fifty-nine cents," the clerk said, eyeing her with ill-disguised curiosity. Every afternoon, she had purchased one small item—selecting it without really noticing what it was. She suddenly realized that she had bought the very same type of brush just the previous day.

She counted out the coins from her purse, conscious of

the blood rushing to her cheeks.

Then, as he turned to leave, she noticed a man standing near the door of the shop, ostensibly immersed in a book on painting. Something about him rang a bell in her head. He was short, stocky, balding, with large dark sunglasses. He was not du Frees—that much was certain. But he was familiar to Lil for some reason.

Suddenly, it struck her. She had seen the very same man in the shop for two of the past four days—aimlessly wandering through it just as she had done. He was a stranger to Bass Head, that she knew. But who was he?

All at once, she recalled Herb Lewis saying something about two men from *Now* magazine who had tried to get at du Frees, to discover the secret behind the supposed existence of a new du Frees masterpiece. Now that she had the clue, further covert study of the short man convinced her more and more that he was a reporter—out for the very same story as she was, and, apparently, using the same

methods of obtaining it.

Even if du Freses were to walk into the art store, she would not be alone when she questioned him. The New York reporter—who was undoubtedly faster on the draw when it came to questioning a subject for a story—would be there, too. And would probably walk off with the story.

It would not work this way. Lil saw it at once. She also saw that she had attracted the attention of the man in question. Behind the round, dark sunglasses, his sharp eyes were scrutinizing her carefully.

She batted her eyelashes at him flirtatiously before turning back to the clerk and asking: "What have you in the easel-line?"

"Just about anything you can think of," the clerk responded eagerly. "What did you have in mind?"

"Oh," Lil laughed lightly. "I'm no professional. But I just decided that I'd like to get out on the shore and do a little dabbling. With the weather turning so mild, it just seems a shame to be chained indoors."

"You said it," the clerk

said wryly, "but I'm afraid I have no choice in the matter."

"Well," Lil said. "I'll certainly think of you when I'm out by the ocean—cramped up here in this little tiny store—"

She shuddered. The clerk laughed. More important, the man by the door smiled in sympathy. Lil was relieved to see that the suspicious look had vanished from his face.

She ordered a dozen tubes of paint, an easel, some extra brushes, and a palette pad, asking the clerk to send them to her home.

As she left the store, she flashed a dazzling smile at the short man by the door who smiled back. To her immense satisfaction, the smile contained nothing more than a man's admiration for a very pretty girl. . .

The old Miller House stood by itself on a craggy promontory overlooking the sea which churned and foamed wildly among the rocks at the foot of the cliff, as if they were in a fury at being unable to attack the house. It was a forlorn, desolate-looking place. Hardly the type of house, Lil

thought, in which you would expect to find a man who was not only one of the world's greatest artists, but also a reputed millionaire!

She stared at the house now, holding up her brush to reduce it to proportion for her painting. The site of the house, its air of melancholy foreboding, the whitecaps of the waves licking furiously at the exposed stone underneath it—all made for a natural subject for a landscape.

She made a hurried sketch of the scene on her canvas. Then she began to mix her colors. To her surprise, she found herself enjoying it. She became more and more preoccupied with her paintings, eventually losing herself so completely that she was unaware of the man standing behind her until his gaunt shadow fell across the bright canvas.

Startled, Lil exclaimed softly and wheeled. She was looking into the sun against which the man in the big sombrero-type hat was a mere outline with a voice, deep and compelling.

"Forgive me," the voice said. "I didn't mean to frighten you. I was merely enjoying watching you at work. Are you an artist?"

"No," Lil said, still squinting at him—her eyes adjusting rapidly to the sunlight. He was a tall, swarthy man with black eyes. She could not see his hair and the small beard she had been prepared to look for on du Frees was not there.

"It's just a hobby with me," she continued. "I took a few painting lessons once, but I haven't touched a paint brush in years."

"It's a pity," the stranger told her. "I think you show a considerable feeling for it."

"Are you a painter?" Lil asked sharply, alerted by this last statement. There was a slight trace of foreign accent in his voice. Perhaps he had shaved his beard—

"I used to be," he said. "Perhaps you have heard of me. I am Armand du Frees."

Carefully concealing the surge of triumphant exultation which suddenly filled her, Lil shook her head slowly. "I'm sorry," she said. "Ought I to have heard of you?"

Inside, she was crowing. It had been easy contacting him—so very easy. She had done what the big boys from New York had completely failed to do. If she played her cards right, it would mean that her by-line was a sure thing. If she played her cards right— It would not do to let on that she knew him. That might frighten him away...

Du Frees was chuckling softly to himself.

"No," he said, as if the thought amused him. "It's far better that you have not heard of me—that makes it easier—"

"Makes what easier?"

He chuckled again.

"Easier for us to become—friends," he said. "Of course, if you were thirty years older, you might recognize me. I was quite well-known in those days—"

"Before the war?"

"Yes," he said. "Before the war—in another world where art was all that mattered and the artist was not shackled by stupid human morality—"

There was a quotable line, Lil thought, mentally tucking

it away for future reference.

"Is it so important for an artist to be free of—human morality?" she asked.

"It is the most important thing in his life!" du Frees exclaimed.

He had moved around to her side, and she could see him plainly now. He was amazingly young-looking. She was surprised to feel a small response stirring to her in answer to the man's physical appeal. She reminded herself of his advanced age, but her own arguments failed to convince. There he stood—lean and fit, looking for all the world like a man in his late forties or early fifties. She found him quite attractive. Especially now, when he was plunged into his own dark turmoil of thoughts. Deep in his black eyes, two small red fires glowed. Lil peered into them, fascinated in spite of herself.

"Do you feel yourself shackled?" she asked timidly.

"I?" He laughed loudly, his voice ringing with a jubilation that bordered, to Lil's ears, on the edge of hysteria. "I am du Frees. I am above and beyond

everything. Mere morality does not concern me. My business is the creation of immortal art—”

“I thought you said you had given up painting,” Lil challenged.

He looked at her. There was a moment's constrained silence, during which Lil held her breath—afraid she had said too much. Then he smiled.

“So I did,” he admitted. “But shall I tell you something? I was lying!”

He drawled out his last words in such a comical way, his dark eyes dancing mischievously, that Lil was forced to laugh along with him.

He seemed so amiable, so unlike the formidable ogre that she had been led to expect, that Lil decided to take the chance.

“What are you painting?” she asked, praying fervently that her voice held the right note of casualness and that he couldn't sense the pounding of her heart underneath her ruffled shirt.

He shot a calculating look in her direction. Then there

was a long pause. Lil's heart sank. He suspects me, she thought dejectedly.

Then, to her vast disbelief, she heard him say: “Would you like to see?”

Just like that—in that off-hand tone—she was having the scoop of the decade handed to her. She felt like laughing out loud. Instead, she smiled demurely and said: “Do you have it with you?”

“No,” he told her, “but we're just a few feet away from my house. It's in there.”

“Oh,” Lil said, feigning great surprise. “Do you live in there? I'll have to give you my landscape when I'm finished.”

“Yes, yes,” he muttered absently. “Come along.”

He certainly has mercurial changes of mood, Lil thought.

“Shall I pack up my easel?” she asked.

“No!” he barked impatiently. “There is no time. I—that is, you must see my painting while the light is right—”

He took hold of her hand—his grip amazingly powerful for so slender a man—and began to pull her after him in the direction of the house.

After stumbling after du Frees for about fifty yards, Lil was leg-weary and panting for breath. "Hey," she complained, "slow down a little, won't you?"

With obvious reluctance, du Frees slackened his intent pace a little. Lil was able to get her breath. Then, suddenly, a figure appeared in the distance—the short, stocky, figure of a man. He spotted du Frees and Lil hurrying along the shoreline towards the big house. He yelled something to them that was lost in the wind. Then he started to run in their direction.

Lil glanced apprehensively at du Frees. Apparently, the artist had not observed the man approaching them at a dead run. He was utterly bent on getting Lil to the house—and his painting.

Our New York friend knows that, too, Lil thought bitterly. If he caught up with them now, if he talked du Frees into showing him the portrait too, all was lost. Lil would never get her by-line then. And from the determined look on du Frees' face, it seemed highly likely that the artist

was in the mood to show his latest masterpiece to all comers.

He isn't going to see that painting, Lil told herself grimly. She startled du Frees by seizing his arm and running ahead of him. Her ambition lent wings to her feet. Now it was du Frees' turn to pant.

At last, they were at the house. Lil glanced over her shoulder. To their left, the New York reporter was bearing down on them shouting: "Wait—Miss Winters! Stop!" Lil grasped the knob on the front door of the house. To her immense relief, it turned easily. She and du Frees slipped in just as the man in sunglasses reached the gate. Lil smiled and slipped the bolt on the door. She had won the race!

du Frees had stopped short to watch her lock the door. He smiled—a strange, mocking smile which made her somewhat uneasy. Behind them, there was a pounding on the door as the New York man beat his fists on the heavy wood in a frenzy of frustration shouting: "Let me in, you

little fool! I'm trying to help you!"

Oh, yes, Lil thought cynically, you're trying to help me all right—help me lose the biggest human interest story of the year! She was pleased to see that the reporter's hammering did not faze du Frees in the least. He was only interested in her. His compelling black eyes did not leave her face for an instant as she looked around the living room with a critical eye.

Everything in the room—furniture, paintings, piano, chandeliers—was shrouded in white cloths upon which the dust of perhaps five years had collected. For some reason, Lil was unable to repress the shiver that travelled up her spine.

"A cat must have walked over my grave," she commented laughingly in explanation of her sudden shuddering movement.

du Frees smiled his mysterious smile again. Have I said something funny? Lil wondered nervously. She realized that she would be glad to be out of the du Frees house and back in the fresh air again.

The musty, dead air in the place gave her the creeps.

"Perhaps you are cold," du Frees remarked solicitously. "I seldom light a fire in this part of the house. However, my studio in the basement is usually cozy and warm—"

"Is that where you keep your painting?" Lil asked pointblank, anxious to view the painting and escape from the house in a hurry.

"Yes," he said absently, "in the basement."

One of his hands was on her back, nudging her firmly towards a door in the center hallway which, Lil assumed, led to the basement stairs. All at once, she was inexplicably unwilling to pass beyond that door. You're being ridiculous, she told herself sternly. But still the feeling persisted.

Then du Frees had opened the door. He stepped aside to permit Lil to descend the stairs before him. A light had automatically switched on as the door opened. Like a refrigerator, Lil thought. She tentatively made her way down the first six steps before she whirled, her senses alerted

by the sly turning of the key in the lock behind her. du Frees grinned down at her.

"What are you doing?" Lil demanded, furious with herself for having such a quavering voice. "Unlock that door at once!"

"Don't be a fool!" he snapped, so irritably that she was almost reassured. "Do you think I want that creature who was chasing us just now prying into our private business? My creations are not for the eyes of clods like that!"

Reminded of the competition like that, Lil felt better. After all, here she was on the brink of a scoop. Her mind started selecting words to describe her feelings as she gazed about the damp, dim, stone cellar.

"I thought you said your studio was cozy and warm—" she commented wryly to du Frees. He did not bother answering. He had made a bee-line for the easel in the far end of the cellar which was covered with a black gauze veil.

Lil followed him slowly. The weird look in du Frees' eyes as she crossed the room to stand beside him before the

easel had revived her uneasiness. Something is wrong here, a voice inside her counselled warningly. However, having come so far she decided to see the thing through, at least have a look at the mystery painting.

du Frees was practically drooling with anticipation. "Come," he beckoned impatiently, "come closer! I want you to have a good look!"

Lil stood before the veiled canvas. With infinite slowness, du Frees began to roll up the hem of the black gauze covering obscuring it from her vision. His eyes never left her face. Lil avoided his gaze, concentrating instead on those talon-like hands that were slowly, slowly rolling up the gauze. Lil was suddenly reminded of a burlesque queen she had once seen at a sleazy night club. She had used the same deliberate dawdling in removing her clothes, and her eyes had remained fixed on a man at a ringside table—much as du Frees' were fixed now on Lil. Suddenly, the thought occurred: what if the old boy is a sex nut and the painting is

pornographic? Lil almost felt like laughing but the thought of the locked door prevented it. She felt increasingly wary.

The painting was almost revealed. It was apparently a portrait. Amid wildly swirling splashes of vivid red and black, a pair of white hands appeared. They were folded, Lil thought, in the same placid attitude as the Mona Lisa's. Or a corpse's.

"What's the name of the painting?" Lil demanded, not knowing just why it was suddenly so important.

du Frees hesitated. Then a mad, satanic smile spread across his face. His eyes glittered insanely.

"The Angel of Hell!" he shrieked, snatching the cover from the painting in a dramatic flourish. Lil looked in horror and disbelief. Then as the full impact of the hideous thing hit her, she screamed!

A heavy object descended on her skull and she plunged into a black pit of unconsciousness...

As she surfaced again, Lil was almost immediately aware of the tight restraints on

her ankles and wrists. Automatically, she tugged at them. The full gravity of her desperate plight struck her. She suddenly realized that she was totally naked and strapped to some sort of metal operating table by dampened leather thongs which, from the heat of her body, were slowly shrinking and biting into her defenseless wrists and ankles. It was impossible to move. Overhead, a huge lamp like the ones Lil had seen in hospitals and clinics glared down at her. She blinked up at it with dazed eyes, her head throbbing.

"I had that light specially installed," du Frees' voice explained matter-of-factly. "It's the closest possible approximation to daylight that I could establish in this basement. May I hope that it is making you very uncomfortable?"

Lil turned her head to look at him. It was then that she became aware of the wires. They were in her ears, up her nose, in her armpits—every aperture and sensitive area of her nude body had been rigged up with one.

"You're mad!" she told du

Frees, battling to keep the panic she felt out of her voice. "Release me at once. I happen to be a newspaper reporter. If you don't turn me loose at once, I'll tell the whole world how pitifully degraded you really are—"

"Tell the whole world," du Frees muttered, pattering among his paints, readying his brush. "Yes! Tomorrow the whole world will know—that du Frees had completed his greatest masterpiece!"

"Masterpiece!" Lil exclaimed. "That—that horror! It's absolutely foul—it should be destroyed. Release me, damn you!"

She wriggled and writhed on the table—struggling to free her wrists and ankles from their leather bonds. du Frees laughed excitedly. "The others struggled, too," he commented shrilly. "But you—you are going to be different, I can tell. This time, the painting will be finished!"

"Others?" Lil faltered.

"Yes," du Frees nodded, daubing at the canvas. "I used three other models. But they weren't quite right,

somehow. Today, however, I am sure. With you, I cannot fail—"

Lil's heart sank within her. "And these others—where—where are they?"

du Frees paused for a long minute, his brush poised before the canvas. Then his mouth twisted in a sinister smile as his left hand reached for a small mechanical switch box. "Where you are going right now," he answered softly.

The first jolt struck Lil in the nostrils. The pain fingered its way across her face into her brain. She shrieked. Then the wires in her ears exploded in a mushroom of agony. One by one, du Frees touched the switches attached to each wire. Now it was the soles of her feet, now her mouth, now her hips lifted from the table in an arc of pain. Scream after scream poured forth from her lips as the crackling wires attacked her sensitive nerve ends time after time.

du Frees painted energetically in a frenzy of delight. Each fresh wail that was torn

from her increased his pleasure. "That's it!" he cried out encouragingly. "Let me know how much it hurts! Let me see it in your face. Oh, wonderful, wonderful!"

Then, when Lil seemed in danger of becoming immune to the isolated jolts of voltage, he pushed the master switch, held it for a second and then released it. Her shapely young body sprang up into the air, straining the leather straps severely.

"Magnificent!" du Frees shouted, repeating the treatment. "Perfect! At last. I have the expression I need!"

He worked rapidly on the canvas applying the paint in thick, masterly strokes. Once more and he would have it! He seized the master switch, and pulled with a vengeance. This time he did not release it. He maintained his hold on it, transfixed at the unbearable suffering he saw in Lil's distorted face. Her eyes were rolling and glazed, her lips drawn back from her teeth like a wild animal's, her nostrils distended. To du Frees, it was the most ecstatic moment of his life. In a trance of

pleasure, he clung to the switch, unable to relinquish this glorious sensation.

Then, suddenly, rude hands intruded upon his rapture, wrenching *his* hands—his precious hands—roughly from the switch. A fist connected with his jaw and he was sent sprawling. He looked up in confusion. The man who had struck him looked familiar.

"You!" du Frees exclaimed, recognizing the man who had pursued Lil Winters and himself into the house.

The stocky man looked down at him dispassionately before he turned to the officer who was examining Lil Winters. "How is she?" he asked anxiously.

The officer shook his head slowly. "The last jolt was too much for her heart," he said.

A flicker of cold anger appeared in the first man's eyes as he stared down at the cowering du Frees. "Poor kid!" he said sadly. "I tried to warn her. I wonder who the hell she thought I was?"

THE END

MR. BOREALIS

by Clement Duffy

It was early evening. The harbor of the tiny New England seaport was shrouded in thick mist. An invisible fog-horn hooted its mournful warning every two minutes.

It was no day for sailing. Visibility was a scant twenty feet, and the fog bank extended forty miles out to sea. Nevertheless, a small crowd of excited voyagers had gathered at the north pier of the Webster Shipbuilding Corporation. Impatiently, they waited for the gangplank to be lowered from the gleaming white luxury yacht *Lodestar* which was moored at the long pier.

In the wheelhouse, Tony Benedict, President of the Webster Shipbuilding Corporation, sipped at his mug of coffee and squinted out into the fog which swirled thickly around the bridge.

His yacht's captain, Melvin Andersen, stood at his side,

commenting: "Thick as pea soup."

"All the better," Tony replied. "We've kept the *Lodestar* protected by a security screen until now, but there's been considerable speculation in the town about what we're doing here. If we sailed on a clear day, it wouldn't take an especially bright enemy agent to spot something peculiar about her superstructure. No, we deliberately planned on sailing in fog. The Weather Bureau in Washington promised us this mess—and they kept their promise."

"I just hope we have a good pilot to take us out of the harbor."

"Frank Novack is taking us out. But we're not dropping him at Haverson's Light. He's going all the way with us. Another security measure. We want no news leak whatsoever until we enter port at Le Havre. Then, the more pub-

licity, the better."

"What about the crowd on the pier?"

Tony laughed. "They haven't known about the trip long enough to air it around. I called them all late last night and asked: 'How'd you like to cruise to Europe with me tomorrow?' They're all members of a junior league Jet-Set. More money than brains. This sort of hare-brained thing is right up their alley. As I expected, they all accepted immediately. With them on board, no one is going to suspect anything more important is being launched here than a floating twist palace."

The first mate stepped into the wheelhouse.

"I'm a committee of one, cap'n," he said. "The passengers are getting restless. They want to know when you're going to let them board."

"Has Mr. Pelimo signed on yet?" Tony asked.

The mate glanced at his list. "Not yet, sir."

"Well, the instant he does, you can lower the gangplank."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The captain waited until

the mate had left the bridge before asking Tony: "Who's Pelimo?"

"NEC man they're sending up from Washington. He has to check everything out before we sail."

"But this isn't a nuclear vessel!"

"No, technically she's soleclear. But the NEC has broadened its authority to include soleclear devices too. Of course, soleclear doesn't require the same safety precautions. There's no danger of escaping radioactivity. In soleclear devices, the radioactivity already in the air is consumed by the reactor. That's what we're using for fuel, Mel. We're sailing on air."

The captain grinned cynically. "Sort of brings us around full circle, doesn't it? The old clipper ships needed wind, too."

"Yes," Benedict replied. "But there's no danger of our being becalmed. The radioactivity in the atmosphere right now could sail a million *Lode-stars* around the globe for the life span of the ships—without stopping. We're making history, Cap'n. The soleclear

reactor will revolutionize shipping. What a slap in the face it's going to be for our Communist friends when we reach Le Havre and the press plays it up!"

Just then, the door to the bridge opened. A shapely brown-haired beauty in her early twenties entered.

"Behold the bride!" Tony announced. He began to sing: "Here she comes, Mrs. America—"

He pulled her to him. Captain Andersen beamed his approbation.

"Nervous?" Tony asked her playfully.

"Of course, I am," his bride replied. "After all, a girl doesn't get married every day."

"Oh, *that!*" Tony scoffed. "I meant about the cruise."

"Beast!" she cried, playfully slapping at him.

He laughed. "Have you met Eleanor, Mel?"

The captain smiled. "Mrs. Benedict and I met in the galley a little while ago."

"What's the galley?" Eleanor asked blankly.

"The kitchen, Mrs. Bene-

dict," Andersen replied pleasantly. "I can see you're no sailor. Not like—"

He stopped in confusion. A flush of embarrassment deepened the ruddy hue of his weather-beaten complexion. There was an awkward silence.

Eleanor looked quizzically at Tony whose face had suddenly gone sombre.

"Not like whom?" she asked the captain in a puzzled tone.

He looked helplessly at her husband, who had moved toward the door.

"I'm going to see if Pelimo's here yet," he announced tersely. He disappeared through the hatch into the fog.

He made straight for the saloon where the bar steward stood behind the bar polishing glasses.

"Brandy, please," he said. "A big one."

"Yes, sir." The brandy was produced and poured.

Tony carried the brandy to the corner of the saloon and sank into a deep, soft, leather reclining chair. He took a swallow of the liquor and

closed his eyes.

When would he get over it? he wondered unhappily.

When would he be able to bear discussing the tragedy which had occurred in these waters over five years ago? Sarah had been a good sailor. She could handle her little sloop as well as any man. Who could foresee that she would kiss him goodbye, sail out on a mirror-smooth sea with no sign of clouds, and run smack into the worst gale of the season?

Tony still couldn't figure out what had gone wrong. Sarah and the boat were both top-notch in water. It was just one of those inexplicable things. Still, the shock would always be with him. Sarah had been his first love, the bride of his youth. He still couldn't bear to talk about losing her.

Now Eleanor—the captain had said that she was no sailor. He was right, Tony thought grimly. If she had been a sailor, Tony would have fled from her the night they met. He wasn't tempting fate a second time. He couldn't survive another experience like that: the long hours of

anxious waiting, the fading hope, the discovery of the derelict sloop with no sign of Sarah on board her. She had obviously been swept overboard. . . Tony shuddered. He took another swallow of the brandy and felt its consoling warmth glowing in his stomach.

It was a mistake to drink now. He knew that. He was exhausted after the long months of working on the *Lodestar*. The tensions, the setbacks, the endless reversals—all of them crowded him now. The brandy would knock him flat on his face if he wasn't careful. It was his wedding night. Best to take it easy. A drowsy warmth crept over him. If he caught forty winks now, he thought. . .

“Mr. Benedict, sir! Mr. Benedict!”

“Huh? Wha—”

Tony sat up and rubbed his eyes. The first mate stood over him.

“I must have dozed off,” he said. “What time is it?”

“Six-thirty, sir.”

“Six—good lord, I've been asleep for an hour!”

"Yes, sir. Mr. Pelimo's here, sir. We're lowering the gang-plank for him now. I thought you'd like to know."

"Thank you," Tony said, rising and straightening his jacket. He still felt slightly groggy. The stale taste of the brandy in his mouth was foul. He asked the bar steward for a glass of plain soda water and drank it with relish. Revived, he went onto the deck and stood at the head of the gang-plank watching as a small, swarthy, moon-faced man in a double-breasted pin-striped suit came aboard. Tony frowned. Peculiar-looking ducks the NEC was using these days, he thought.

"Mr. Benedict?"

Tony held out his hand. "Glad to see you, sir."

The hand the NEC man proffered was limp and clammy. "My name is Pelimo. Here are my credentials."

Tony examined the papers. They seemed to be in order.

"I'll take you below," he said. "You'll want to see the reactor first, I suppose?"

"Yes," Pelimo said, licking his abnormally red lips. There was a queer glint in his amber

eyes that made Tony slightly uneasy.

"I'll show you around myself," Tony said. "In the meantime, I'll have your luggage brought on board."

He looked down onto the pier which was steeped in twilight. A group of faces looked up anxiously.

"Tony, you fiend!" a woman's voice called shrilly. "When will you deliver us from this Limbo?"

"In a few minutes," he shouted back. "We just have to check a few things out."

"Please, Mr. Benedict?" Pelimo said softly.

Tony looked at him inquiringly.

"I have an assistant," Pelimo said, "that I would like to bring aboard before we go below."

Tony frowned. "Where is he?"

"Not a he," Pelimo replied. "A she. I do hope you won't mind—"

Tony grinned. Pelimo was human, after all. He was beginning to wonder. The man was taking a chance, though. Benedict was certain the NEC

would take a dim view of this combination of pleasure and official business.

"Hell," Tony said heartily, "I'm on my honeymoon, myself—"

Relieved, Mr. Pelimo turned and motioned to a woman who stood apart from the others on the pier. She wore a long sable cloak. Her face was partially obscured by the black silk scarf which she wore over her dark hair.

In obedient response to Pelimo's gesture, the woman moved towards the gangplank. Her carriage was straight and proud, reminding Tony of someone. She walked leisurely up the gangplank to the deck.

"Maia!" Pelimo called softly.

She turned her head. Tony saw her face. His knees went weak under him. He clutched the deck-rail.

The face he looked into was Sarah's!

Behind him, he heard a gasp: "Miss Sarah—" He turned. Captain Andersen stood there with Eleanor at his side. His eyes were popping in disbelief.

Pelimo looked bewilderedly from the captain to Tony.

"I'm afraid there's some mistake," he said. "This is Mrs. Bonnard. Maia, this is Mr. Benedict, our host. This, I take it, is our captain."

Tony still stared at the woman. The resemblance was uncanny. If he didn't know better, he would have sworn it *was* Sarah standing there. Then her eyes met his. They brought Tony back to reality with a jolt. There was no flicker of recognition in them. They were cold, obsidian. Sarah's had been warm and gentle, full of light.

With a start he realized that Pelimo was looking at him expectantly. Eleanor was watching him, too, with worry plain in her face.

"I'm sorry," Tony said shakily. "You must forgive me. It's just that Mrs.—Bonnard—here reminded me of someone—who is no longer living."

"The very image of her!" the captain agreed in awe-stricken tones. "It's like seeing a ghost!"

Tony whirled on him irri-

tably. "Enough spirits for one night, eh, Captain?" he said sharply. "I'm sure you have work to do."

The captain, rebuked, turned without a word and headed back to the bridge.

"Tony!" Eleanor exclaimed reprovingly.

He ignored the chastising note in her voice. "Eleanor," he said briskly, "please find a berth for Mrs. Bonnard. You won't mind sharing a cabin with another lady, will you?"

"No, of course not," the woman replied in a deep, flat monotone which was as unlike Sarah's voice as it could be. Sarah's voice had been one of her chief charms—it had a certain lilt to it which had captivated Tony from the start.

Eleanor flashed him an annoyed glance. Tony was aware that he was being rude, but coming face to face with Sarah's double had shaken him to the core. He would make it up later to Eleanor.

"Now," he said, "if you will follow me, Mr. Pelimo—"

ly been allowed to board. Tony saw them all to their staterooms before he decided to find Eleanor.

He had not seen her since the meeting with Mrs. Bonnard. It had been foolish of him to react like that—simply because the woman bore a superficial resemblance to Sarah. Poor Eleanor! He had been pretty curt with her. A fine way for a bridegroom to act!

It was a simple case of nerves. He had felt the tension building up in him from the day he had started preliminary sketches of the *Lode-star*. This maiden voyage was like an opening night at a Broadway musical, but there was a lot more at stake than mere money.

Benedict thought of Pelimo and scowled. Something in the manner of the man as they examined the soleclear reactor—something vague and evasive—had made Tony uneasy. If he were the best the NEC had, Tony thought, then God help America! There had been moments when he could have sworn that every word he was saying about the reactor was going right over Pelimo's

The tour of inspection was over. The guests had final-

head. But then, scientists were often like that—Einstein was notoriously absent-minded!

To hell with it all, Tony thought tiredly. I'm on my honeymoon. This is supposed to be fun!

He reached the master stateroom and turned the knob. The door was locked. He knocked gently at first and then—when there was no answer—a little louder.

"Go away!" called a muffled voice.

He knocked again. "Eleanor, honey," he said in a wheedling tone, "let me in. It's Tony!"

"Go away," the muffled voice said again. He had a painful vision of a tear-stained face pressed into a pillow. Damn, he thought, she *is* mad!

"Eleanor," he pleaded through the adamant metal, "don't do this!"

He heard a snicker behind him. One of the passengers, Beulah Finstermaker, was watching him from her open cabin door, a cynical smile curling her heavily-rouged lips. "Trouble, darling?" she purred.

Tony glared. He felt his face grow hot with embarrassment. Suddenly, he was furious with Eleanor for humiliating him like that. He would be damned if he would coax her. She could come looking for him when she was ready to behave like an adult!

"The course of true love, darling—" Beulah Finstermaker called gaily after him as he stormed away...

Dinner was served buffet-style in the saloon. Eleanor did not appear for dinner.

Neither did Mrs. Bonnard. Pelimo explained her absence. "I'm afraid she's a poor sailor," he said sadly. "She isn't feeling at all well. She wants to take supper in her room. A little soup and crackers will be ample."

"The steward will bring her whatever she needs," Tony said to Pelimo. He moved away hastily. He wasn't interested in Mrs. Bonnard's seasickness and he wasn't in the mood for any more of Pelimo. All he wanted in life was Eleanor and she had locked him out!

A talented passenger had

unlocked the piano in the saloon. In no time, a party was in progress. The jolly group bawled the lyrics to old-time songs, while the champagne corks popped. Their high spirits depressed Tony. Calling over a steward, he told him he would have dinner on the bridge.

Captain Andersen raised his eyebrows as Tony entered the wheelhouse. He waited for Tony to speak first.

"I acted like a horse's ass down there a while ago, Mel," Tony said immediately. "My apologies."

The corners of the captain's eyes crinkled in friendly fashion.

"Forget it," he said. "I got the shock of my life seeing that woman. I can imagine what it did to you."

Tony nodded. "Well," he sighed, "at least *you're* speaking to me."

"Meaning?"

"My wife's locked me out."

"Maidenly modesty," the captain commented.

"I didn't think she was the type," Tony replied.

"Hell," Andersen scoffed,

"all of 'em are the type—if you rub their fur the wrong way. She'll come around, all right."

"Yeah," Tony said glumly, "but I didn't exactly expect to spend the night holding your hand."

"There's always Mr. Pelimo," Andersen said mischievously. "Go talk to him."

Tony groaned.

"Now that you're up here, though—" Andersen said next in an altered tone which made Tony look at him apprehensively.

"I was wondering if you had that compass checked out before we sailed," he continued.

"Why? What's wrong with it?" Tony demanded.

Andersen frowned. "I can't rightly say. Most of the time she's all right, but every once in a while she goes haywire—"

"She's the best money can buy."

"I know," Andersen said slowly. "The company that made her have been making the best for centuries. But either there's something wrong with the compass or there's some magnetic field around

here that we don't know about."

Tony digested this in silence. Then he said: "Let me know the next time she does it."

The steward brought trays of food for the captain and Tony. Tony merely toyed with his. He wasn't very hungry. Putting his tray aside, he wandered outside the wheelhouse and stood peering into the fog which was gradually thinning out as they got further away from the New England banks. Almost soundlessly, the soleclear-powered vessel cut through the black water. Deep, cold black water, Tony thought, where Sarah's bones rested—on the bottom. For the first time, he felt strong enough to face the idea. The night and the fog were oddly consoling.

Or was it because Sarah was finally fading slightly from his heart—to make room for Eleanor? Eleanor, he thought hungrily. He cursed savagely under his breath.

"Mr. Benedict, sir," the captain's voice called. Tony turned.

Andersen's face was grave. With a prescience of disaster, Tony went to him.

Andersen, conscious of possible eavesdroppers, muttered: "There's something radically wrong. The compass had gone wild. Our radar is blank. And, worst of all, the ship won't answer the helm!"

"We'd better get busy on the radio," Tony said.

"I've tried," the captain said grimly. "I can't get a damn thing!"

"It can't be the power. We're still moving. The turbines must be functioning," Tony said.

"We're moving, all right," Andersen said tensely. "I think we've gained a couple of knots." He hesitated. "It's crazy but—it's almost as if the *Lodestar* were being pulled by some outside force!"

"Can you get us any sort of reading on our position?" Tony asked anxiously.

The captain looked up at the sky which was still partially obscured by fog. "As soon as we're out of this pea soup," he said, "I can get an approximation by the stars."

"Good," Tony said. "In the

meantime, keep somebody busy on the radio."

"How about flares?" the captain asked. "It's an outside chance in this fog, but somebody might spot us."

Tony considered. "Later," he said.

"Later might be too late," Andersen argued. "We're moving away from the coast at a steady rate of knots."

"I know," Tony said. "But I'd rather take the chance than start a panic on board ship. Besides, the trouble—whatever it is—might turn out to be curable. I don't want any bad reports when we get to Le Havre."

"If we get to Le Havre," the captain corrected him solemnly.

"We'll get there!" Tony said firmly. "We've got to."

He found himself thinking of Eleanor. He had already lost one wife to the sea. He did not intend to lose another. Or himself.

"What do you think it is?" he asked the captain, as they stood together at the rail waiting for the fog to clear. Noise reached their ears from

the direction of the saloon where the gay party continued in full force, the singing mob blissfully unaware of their mutual dilemma.

The captain shrugged. "Damned if I know!" he said. "I've been at sea for thirty years, man and boy, and I've never seen anything like it!"

"Do you think we *are* being pulled—by some magnetic field, maybe?"

"We should be able to tell pretty soon," the captain said. "It would take a damned powerful magnet to pull the *Lodestar* off her course but anything's possible!"

"But why would they *bother*?" Tony demanded. "That's what I can't figure. All they needed were the plans. They could have installed an agent at the yard without too much trouble. They've done it before—with tighter security to get through. They could duplicate the *Lodestar* in six months. They wouldn't have to go through all this hocus-pocus! Besides, this isn't a military operation!"

"Maybe they didn't want the propaganda you'd get at Le Havre. 'American ingenu-

ity' and that sort of thing. Or," he added thoughtfully, "maybe 'they' have nothing whatsoever to do with it. It could be a simple matter of a simultaneous breakdown in the compass, the radio and the wheel. That is also possible, you know. And that's what I'm going on until I find out different. . ."

"Do you think that's what it is? A simultaneous breakdown?"

"No," Andersen said honestly.

"Neither do I," Tony agreed with a deep despondency in his voice.

Tony stood on the afterdeck watching the last of a case of flares glow in the sky. There were plenty more if he wanted them, but the sky was lighting up with dawn. The flares would not be as effective in the daylight.

"What are you doing?" asked an oily voice in his ear.

Tony started to find Pelimo at his shoulder.

"I'm shooting off fireworks," Tony replied gaily, unwilling—for same reason—

to let Pelimo in on the unhappy secret.

"Really!" Pelimo smirked. "What's the occasion?"

"I'm celebrating my wedding."

"Your wife is a very beautiful woman," Pelimo purred. "I wonder at your staying away from her all night—"

Tony restrained the impulse to punch him in his leering mouth. Noticing for the first time, that Pelimo was still dressed as he had been the night before, he retorted: "You don't seem to have been to bed, either."

"No," Pelimo said calmly, "I'm celebrating, too."

"Celebrating what?"

"You'll find out," Pelimo said. Still smiling, he walked away.

Now what the hell does he mean by that? Tony wondered. Who is he, anyway? How do I know for sure he's from the NEC? He could be anybody—from anywhere.

While he was pondering over Pelimo, Andersen appeared, looking more glum than before.

"I'm afraid it's going to be fair today," he said.

"Why afraid?"

"The passengers are going to start wondering why we aren't heading into the sun this morning. We've changed course. We're now heading due north."

"Where will that land us?" Tony asked.

"Greenland, eventually. If we don't ram an iceberg before." He sighed and sank into a deck chair. "Might as well relax," he said. "We're apparently just along for the ride. This ship knows where she's going. She doesn't need any help from us—"

Tony settled beside him. Together, they soberly watched the wake of the *Lode-star* as her clean white bow sliced through the swells, pointing inexorably to her mysterious destination...

"Why are we heading north?" Beulah Finstermaker demanded belligerently.

Tony forced a casual smile. "What makes you think we're heading north?"

"Oh, come on, Tony boy!"

she exclaimed. "Everyone on board has crossed the Atlantic at least five times. We knew where the sun is supposed to be. It's not there. It's someplace else, and we want to know why!"

"We've charted a northern course," Tony lied.

Beulah frowned. "Isn't that dangerous? I mean—icebergs and floes and so forth?"

"Not at this time of year," Tony said blithely, hiding his own concern under a sunny smile.

Eleanor had not appeared for breakfast. Mrs. Bonnard had, however, looking so much like Sarah that it was downright eerie—until she smiled or spoke. Then Tony remembered the real Sarah. But Sarah, he reminded himself, was part of the past. The present was what gravely concerned him—the present and the uncertain future and Eleanor's place in both.

She was obviously still sulking. Tony went below and tried the door of the master stateroom. It was still locked. He banged once on the door

and called to her. There was no answer.

"Listen!" he said angrily through the door, "I've got too many problems right now to play games with you. I'll give you twenty minutes to get your little rump on deck or I'm coming right through this goddamn door!"

He stormed back onto the deck, thinking furiously: twenty minutes! Who the hell knew whether they had twenty minutes to waste on a silly female silence-strike. Any time now, a Russian sub or even a trawler might appear. He found the passengers gathered around the bow rail, peering ahead of them and chattering excitedly.

Tony squinted in the direction in which they were pointing. He swore under his breath. Suddenly, Captain Andersen was at his elbow.

"Do you see what I see?" Andersen demanded grimly.

A grey-green mass loomed ominously in the distance.

"Is it an iceberg?" Tony asked fearfully.

Andersen nodded. Then he frowned. "Beats me," he said.

"what the hell it's doing this far south—especially this late in the year!"

Tony wasn't interested in the unseasonable aspect of the iceberg. He wanted to know only one thing. "Think we'll hit her?"

"If we continue on course, we can't miss her," Andersen said calmly.

"What do you suggest?"

Andersen lifted an eyebrow under his cap. "Prayer," he said.

Tony wheeled and raced back to the master state-room. There was no time to waste. Eleanor was coming out if he had to drag her by the hair. Grabbing a heavy fire ax, he battered the lock in the door with a few strokes.

He pushed the door open and stepped inside. Then he exclaimed in horror: "Eleanor!"

She was lying on the floor, clad only in her lace brassiere and panties, trussed up tightly with copper wire which bound her wrists and ankles together behind her waist. A cotton gag was stuffed in her mouth.

Tony pulled out the gag. "Who did this to you?" he demanded.

She worked her mouth, but no sound came. She had had the gag in too long. Her tongue was swollen, her lips were cracked. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Okay, baby," Tony said consolingly as he worked on the wire. "Don't worry. You'll be all right in a jiffy. Let me just—there!"

He held her in his arms. She shivered with fright as he massaged her raw ankles and wrists. He cursed himself savagely for being a blind, obstinate fool. He should have known that Eleanor wasn't the type to go in for petty tricks like locking doors. He would never forgive himself. When he thought that he was on deck all night—nursing his bruised ego—while she was tied up here like that—

"When I get the one who did this I'll kill him!" he growled into Eleanor's fragrant tousled hair.

"What if it's a 'she'?" asked an amused voice from the door.

Pelimo and Mrs. Bonnard stood there, grinning in at them. Eleanor gave a small cry of terror deep in her throat, burrowing frightenedly against Tony. In a sudden flash, he understood!

"You did this, you—" Tony barked, releasing Eleanor and rising menacingly.

A lethal-looking revolver appeared as if by magic in Pelimo's hand.

"A little discretion, please, Mr. Benedict," he said pleasantly, but there was no disguising the threat in his eyes.

"Well," Tony said bitterly, "you're quite a boy, aren't you? I suppose you set this whole thing up for the comrades—"

Pelimo frowned. "The comrades?" he echoed. Then his face cleared and he laughed. "Oh, I see!" he said delightedly. "Of course. You suspect a Communist plot!"

"Naturally," Tony said. "What else?"

Pelimo laughed again. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy."

"Skip the poetry!" Tony snapped. "What are you after?"

"That's not for me to say," Pelimo replied. "You'll have to find that out from Mr. Borealis."

"Mr.—who?"

"Mr. Borealis," Pelimo repeated patiently.

Tony stared at him. The man was stark, staring mad. So was his girl friend, Mrs. Bonnard, who eyed the wounds on Eleanor's wrists and ankles with glittering amusement. But the *Lodestar*—drawn a hundred miles off course—that was reality. So was the iceberg dead ahead of them.

"I'm afraid I'll have to wait to meet this friend of yours," Tony said sarcastically. "I have something rather important to attend to right now. There happens to be an iceberg right off our bow!"

That should shake him, Tony thought. To his amazement, both Pelimo and Mrs. Bonnard laughed pleasantly.

"That's no iceberg!" Pelimo declared. "That's Mr. Borealis come to meet us."

He slipped the gun into its

holster under his double-breasted jacket. Tony made a slight move in his direction, meaning to jump him. Pelimo saw his intent and smiled.

"I wouldn't try any rough stuff if I were you, Mr. Benedict!" he said. "There's really no need. Besides, Mr. Borealis might take it amiss if I were harmed in any way."

To his own surprise, Tony found himself inclined to obey Pelimo. He was even beginning to believe in this Mr. Borealis.

"Get dressed, honey," he said softly to Eleanor. "I'm going above to see what's going on."

"Oh, don't make Mrs. Benedict get dressed!" Pelimo protested. "I'm sure Mr. Borealis would prefer her just as she is!"

He leered suggestively at Eleanor's scantily-clad curves.

Tony saw red. He grabbed Pelimo by the lapels of his pin-striped coat. They struggled together for a few seconds. Then Andersen's voice called down the hatchway: "Tony! For God's sake, get up here!"

Breathing hard, Tony released Pelimo reluctantly. Pelimo straightened his jacket.

"Mr. Borealis will hear of this!" he said shrilly.

Tony pushed Eleanor ahead of him up the gangway. They emerged onto the deck.

The *Lodestar* was astern of the iceberg. Tony noticed that her turbines had stopped. She wasn't moving. But the side of the iceberg was. It was opening slowly to reveal a glimpse of an interior verdant with profuse tropical growth.

A plump little man dressed in a white linen suit and a broad-rimmed cowboy hat emerged through the opening in the iceberg, flanked by two muscle men, with wavy hair and flashing teeth, who were stripped to their abnormally slender waists.

"Am I seeing things?" Andersen muttered over Tony's shoulder.

"Lower your gangplank!" commanded a voice over a loudspeaker.

"Have we any choice?" Andersen asked Tony.

Tony shook his head.

"They're holding all the cards," he said.

Andersen ordered the gangplank lowered. The passengers all gawked as the little man in white strode up it. Tony blinked as he saw the enormous diamond he wore in his buttonhole as a boutonniere.

"Mr. Borealis! Mr. Borealis!"

Pelimo came scurrying onto the deck, followed by Mrs. Bonnard. He pointed a trembling finger at Tony. "That one there!" he cried accusingly. "He tried to throttle me."

"Is this true?" the little man asked.

"I'm afraid so," Tony said tightly.

"Well, sir," Mr. Borealis said. "I'm afraid I shall have to remonstrate with you—over a few cups of champagne. If you and—" his eyes flicked appreciatively over Eleanor—"your charming company will honor us with your presence—"

"I'm afraid I don't know who you are," Tony said.

"Oh, I'm Mr. Borealis," he said. He laughed. "Silly name, isn't it? Of course, it isn't my

real one. But it suits the surroundings."

He waved at the iceberg.

"Shall we go ashore?" he invited politely.

Mr. Borealis, flanked by Pelimo, Mrs. Bonnard, and the two muscle men led the way down the gangplank. Huddled together uncertainly, the passengers and the crew of the *Lodestar* entered the iceberg. No sooner had they set foot in the lushly-foliaged center than there was a slow grinding of machinery and the wall of the iceberg closed behind them.

"Trapped," Andersen muttered into Tony's ear.

Tony nodded grimly.

The others did not seem to notice their dilemma. Or if they had, they remained unmoved. Most of them were exclaiming with delight over the exquisite man-made scene which confronted them.

A dome of glass permitted the bright sunlight into the spacious heart of the iceberg. The temperature was ideally semi-tropical: Palm Beach in April.

Brilliantly-plumaged birds darted among the tall coconut and date palms which rose to meet the transparent dome. Trees—lemon, orange, banana, guava, tamarind, mango, loquat and papaya—offered their succulent fruit to the hand of the casual passerby. In clusters of purple bougainvillea, small Japanese-style houses nestled. Everywhere, orchids, gardenias, alamanda and hibiscus bloomed in a wild riot of color.

From a spout in the side of the iceberg—about fifty feet up—a cataract of water gushed down over moss-covered rocks to splash gaily in a pool about which extraordinarily handsome men and women in brief bathing suits posed like department store mannequins.

"Look!" Eleanor whispered excitedly. "That girl over there—"

Tony looked. The girl in question returned his glance coolly. "A nice bit of work, Tony said approvingly.

"Don't you recognize her? Don't you know who she is?" Eleanor demanded.

Tony shook his head.

"That's Marilyn Winston!"

Behind him, Beulah Finster-maker had also recognized the beautiful blonde. "Marilyn Winston!" she hissed to her nearest neighbor.

"It can't be!" Tony said. "She was killed in a plane crash!"

"That's what the papers said," Eleanor whispered. "But they never recovered the wreckage of the plane or her body. The plane supposedly went down over water."

Over water. An unpleasant chain of thought set off in Tony's brain. Marilyn Winston was lost over water. Sarah was lost in the water. Neither body was ever found...

Mr. Borealis led the group onto the terrace of the largest Japanese-style house where a long table was set with tempting delicacies and great silver ice-buckets containing frosted magnums of Piper Hiedsick.

The passengers exclaimed with joy. "So charming!" Beulah cooed.

It was just as well, Tony thought, that they were enjoying their experience. If they

had objected strongly to being cooped up in the iceberg, there would have been nothing anyone could do for them at present.

"A little champagne, Mr. Benedict?" Mr. Borealis offered.

"No, thanks," Tony said quickly. The thought of drugs had crossed his mind.

Mr. Borealis sensed his thoughts.

"Sooner or later, you have to eat or drink something, Mr. Benedict," he reminded him, with amusement.

"I shall, with pleasure," Tony replied. "as soon as I find out exactly what we should expect around here."

Mr. Borealis spread his hands.

"Comfort and luxury, Mr. Benedict," he said. "I offer you nothing less for the rest of your natural life."

"Meaning that we are stuck here?"

Mr. Borealis looked offended. "Do you find my little retreat so unpleasant?"

"Even the most beautiful prison remains a prison," Tony pointed out.

Mr. Borealis sighed. "Unfortunately, many people I bring here seem to feel that way. 'If I had the wings of an angel, far away would I fly.' That song was before your time, Mr. Benedict, but it just about expresses your sentiments, does it not?"

"Just about," Tony agreed. "How did you come here in the first place?"

"I needed privacy," Mr. Borealis said. "In the jungles of high finance in which I do my hunting, there is always the danger of assassination. Some of my colleagues keep war dogs to protect them. I chose this floating island. I have tried to make it as close to Paradise as possible, but, even so, many of my guests have tried to escape. Man is never content!"

"Did any of them ever succeed?" Tony asked.

"Naturally not," Mr. Borealis replied indignantly. "I could not permit it. They would have revealed by secret hiding place to the outside world."

"So you murdered to protect your privacy?" Tony said disgustedly.

"Mr. Benedict," Mr. Borealis exclaimed in a weary tone, "I do hope you are not going to prove a moralistic bore. I simply cannot tolerate the presence of a bore in my Paradise. It would be a contradiction in terms. Let me explain myself. I am unquestionably the richest individual in the world. I possess more wealth than one-half of the smaller nations of the world.

My only reason for accumulating this vast amount of largesse was to assure myself of the instant gratification of my senses. If I see a Rembrandt which pleases me, I buy it on the spot. On the other hand, if I see a beautiful woman I desire as—for example, Miss Winston over there—I do not waste time and invite possible humiliation by courting her with diamonds and furs. I simply have her brought here. Miss Winston belonged to the world. Now she is exclusively mine. It was the same with the *Lodestar*. I could not simply purchase her outright because of her special importance in the political sphere. Therefore, I had her—and you—brought here.

With a new coat of paint and a new registration, I will be able to cruise all over the world in the only soleclear yacht in existence."

He beamed. "Do have some champagne," he said. "I guarantee you there's nothing foreign in it."

"Really?" Tony drawled. "Have those characters over by the pool been drinking any of it?"

He pointed out the handsome men and women who draped their perfect bodies about the side of the pool, endlessly rearranging their limbs in appealing postures. They were stringless puppets, with empty smiles pasted on their blank faces.

"They're quite happy," Mr. Borealis said coldly.

"That kind of wild happiness I can live without," Tony retorted.

"Take my advice," Mr. Borealis said, "don't try to fight me. You can't possibly win. It's easier if you give in. As I said earlier—sooner or later you have to take food or drink."

Tony glanced about him and the laughing passengers and crew who were enjoying Borealis' hospitality with gusto. To his consternation, he saw Andersen sipping at a glass of the bubbling wine, the beginnings of a fatuous smile playing about his normally stern mouth. The drug had already taken its effect. Tony was alone.

Only he and Eleanor had abstained from the champagne and appetizers. Eleanor stood by herself at the end of the table, surveying her surroundings in a bemused manner.

"I beseech you," Mr. Borealis continued earnestly, "don't oppose me. Others have tried. They were only beating their heads against a stone wall. They died trying to make a dent. Why not make life easy for yourself?"

"Not today," Tony said. "Maybe tomorrow, but not today."

Mr. Borealis shrugged in annoyance. Very well," he said. "But you are facing great unhappiness. I warned you that I will deny myself nothing. I take what I want when I want it—"

"You've got what you want," Tony said. "You've got the *Lodestar*."

"It's a curious thing," Mr. Borealis smiled. "What I've got is never enough for me."

"What else do you want?" Tony asked warily.

"Yonder chestnut-haired maiden," Borealis said primly, almost as if he were embarrassed.

With horror, Tony realized that Borealis was talking about Eleanor!

"That's my wife!" he protested.

"Why are you so determined to raise difficulties?" Mr. Borealis asked plaintively. "The girl is nothing to you. Pelimo and Mrs. Bonnard have assured me that she has been kept safely intact for me."

He feasted his lascivious eyes on Eleanor's near-nude figure. Tony felt anger swell up in him.

"I'll see you dead first!" he snarled. "That girl belongs to me!"

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when he felt his arms seized by the two

burly muscle men who had accompanied Mr. Borealis on board the *Lodestar*.

"Under United States law, Mr. Benedict, a man can have but one wife." Borealis signalled with his left hand. "Here is your lawful wife, Mr. Benedict."

The woman they called Mrs. Bonnard stood before him, gazing at him with her frosty, expressionless eyes.

"I met Sarah Simpson Benedict in the Weston Yacht Club five years ago," Borealis explained. "I was immediately attracted to her and told her so. She repelled my advances, declaring that she was quite content married to you. That left only one thing to do. I had her snatched from her sailboat and brought here. At first, she was very obstinate in her loyalty to you. But the drug eventually brought her under my control. Oddly enough, once she was broken to my will, she became my most efficient agent. There is nothing left in her of the charming girl I met at the Yacht Club. In fact, she has become somewhat of a burden to me. Therefore, I give her back to you in ex-

change for the fair Eleanor.”

The woman moved automatically to Tony's side. She pressed her lithe body seductively against his, her mouth scarcely inches from his own. Tony looked into her blank, cold eyes. With an infinite wrench of sadness, he remembered his warm, rare Sarah. This robot who plied her tawdry sex with the well-oiled efficiency of a machine was the same sweet, soft woman who had loved him with all the fibre of her being, and Borealis had made her into a monster!

A sudden killing rage overpowered Tony, filling him with new strength. In one, swift, unexpected motion he tore himself loose from his two guards and attacked Mr. Borealis—his spirit crowing with delight as his fist connected with Mr. Borealis' smug mouth and he felt teeth yielding behind those smirking lips!

Then, a blinding flash of pain shot through his skull. Tony grunted and pitched forward onto his face!

He came to on the sandy floor of a tiny arena

which was similar to cockpits he had seen in Latin America. A smooth-surfaced wall ten feet high circled the arena. Above it sat the spectators: the passengers and crew of the *Lodestar*. The atmosphere was one of gay festivity. As he looked up, Andersen waved to him jovially.

His head was still woozy from the blow he had received. He could not focus his eyes. His body was slow to react. His legs felt leaden.

From his position, sprawled on his back in the sand, he could see the outlines of two doors set in the arena wall. He tried to move in the direction of the doors, but a wave of nausea swept over him. Closing his eyes, he let the world revolve about him.

Then music came pouring over a loudspeaker—blaring, raucous, circus music. He opened his eyes. A man dressed in a white tuxedo with a white silk top hat bowed to him from the first row of seats. It was Mr. Borealis—enjoying himself immensely as he shared a cone of cotton candy with Beulah Finstermaker.

The entire scene had an unreal, nightmarish quality to it. The most harrowing aspect, to Tony, was the placid, even merry expressions he saw on the faces above him. Whatever Borealis' scheme was in setting Tony in the arena—and he was grimly certain he was not going to enjoy it—the gay, drugged group in the stands would applaud and giggle approvingly. Tony could shriek all he wanted for help. They would nod as if he were serenading them.

The music stopped. Mr. Borealis raised a megaphone to his lips: "And now for the main event of our evening's divertissement. A duel of daring and skill between two charming ladies—Mrs. Sarah Benedict and Mrs. Eleanor Benedict. The winner will enjoy the rewards of her loving husband's arms and will be allowed to share his fate. The loser, of course, will be buried at sea with full honors. Let the gladiatrices enter. And may the best wife win!"

There was an enthusiastic clapping of hands, Tony saw the two doors in the arena slide up. Sarah was the first

to enter. Her dark hair was tucked back tightly under a headband. Her muscular body, naked to the waist, rippled under a fine coat of grease. She looked down disdainfully on Tony—helpless in the sand—and threw back her proud head, her eyes glinting with savage anticipation as they watched avidly for Eleanor's appearance.

An instant later, Eleanor—her hair touseled and snarled, her lace undies torn and dishevelled—staggered into the arena. Her big terrified eyes blinked under the powerful blieg lights. Tony could see bruises on her tender white flesh. When she saw him, she gave a small cry and tried to run to him. Sarah was quick to trip her and send her sprawling. Then Tony saw the short length of fine wire that Sarah held in her hands. Her intent was appallingly clear. She meant to strangle Eleanor!

To Tony's way of thinking, Eleanor didn't stand a chance. She was soft to the core, totally feminine. She had never indulged in athletics. She had gone directly from

playing with dolls to wearing frilly dresses at proms. Her body was aesthetically perfect, but it was not strong.

She did not possess a fraction of Sarah's agile power. Sarah had always prided herself on her excellent reflexes. She had concentrated on keeping her taut, well-developed body in tiptop condition. When she wasn't sailing or swimming or playing tennis, Sarah would devote hours each day to calisthenics. Of course, in those days, Sarah had had the soft warmth of her intensely female personality to temper her athletic leanings. She could be as cuddly as a kitten when the mood called for it. But this Sarah—the Sarah who watched Eleanor flounder awkwardly with such cold contempt for weakness—was someone else entirely. She was all muscle with no heart. She was a perfectly trained machine. This was no cuddly kitten. This was a jungle cat with a killer-instinct and a garroting wire in her strong, beautiful hands.

Eleanor, sensing the danger she was in, scurried away from Sarah on all fours. She

crouched against the wall of the arena, watching in helpless, fascinated terror as Sarah stalked her—taking her time, enjoying the suspense.

"Keep moving!" Tony yelled to Eleanor. She cast him a look of utter despair, but she obeyed. She kept weaving and dodging out of Sarah's reach. But Tony had the depressing feeling that—if Sarah really wanted to—she could corner Eleanor in a matter of seconds. He had seen Eleanor in action on a tennis court. Every movement of that supple naked torso was familiar to him. He knew what she was capable of. She hadn't even begun to use her superior physique.

Over his head, the spectators chattered and laughed softly as if they were enjoying pink tea at a garden party. The degenerate viciousness of the scene completely eluded them—as did the fact that they were witnessing a duel to the death between two young and beautiful women whose charm and female strength were being perverted in this

degrading spectacle by the archfiend Borealis.

Confident of her superiority, Sarah began to play with Eleanor as does a cat with a mouse. She would dart at her, knock her sprawling and then retreat to enjoy Eleanor's fright and confusion as she clambered to her feet.

Tears of fright were streaming down Eleanor's cheeks. Her body trembled visibly. Tony cursed the paralyzing vertigo which rendered him helpless to defend her. Now she was only a few feet from him, cowering against the wall. Her chest heaved as she panted. She was becoming fatigued.

"Sarah!" called Mr. Borealis' voice over the megaphone. "Look at me!"

Obediently, Sarah looked up at him with her glittering, obsidian eyes.

Mr. Borealis made a great show of yawning. "I am getting bored, Sarah," he said in a menacing tone.

The single statement galvanized Sarah into a state of utter savagery. The game was over. She lunged at Eleanor in deadly earnest. Eleanor rolled

away from her. In an instant, Sarah was upon her, pinning her to the ground, her knee digging into Eleanor's chest. Eleanor thrashed futilely under her weight.

Tony saw the wire flash in Sarah's hand. In horror, he saw it stretched taut across Eleanor's creamy, defenseless throat.

Desperation lent strength to Tony's efforts. With a sudden, mighty heave, he drew himself up from the sand and threw his body across the struggling females.

Sarah turned to defend herself. She rolled in the sand with Tony, using her knees and teeth to good effect. Her sharp nails clawed at his face. Valiantly, Tony held on, suffering the blows she rained on him, praying for the strength to outlast her.

Eventually, he felt her tiring beneath the weight of his body. Her thrashing slowed. Her breathing became uneven and slightly wheezy. Little by little, Tony willed his hands to move up her body until they rested at the base of her throat. Realizing his intent,

Sarah redoubled her frantic struggles. But it was too late. Tony's hands had tightened about her neck. He dug his thumbs firmly into her wind-pipe.

Sarah fought him to the bitter end, her cold eyes flashing messages of murderous hatred. It was not Sarah he was killing, but a rabid beast bent on slaughtering the innocent. Doggedly, he tightened his clasp about her throat.

Then—in the instant before the life went out of her wriggling body—a startling change came over her face. For a second, Tony saw the old Sarah—his first and best-beloved—look out of those alien eyes. They warmed and softened. In that final instant before he killed her, Sarah knew and loved him!

Shaken by what he had seen, Tony clung to her limp body until Eleanor placed her soft hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her with eyes full of tears. Then he gently placed Sarah's body on the sand and arose to face Mr. Borealis.

Mr. Borealis was in a state of near-apoplexy. The deadly

game in the pit had taken an unexpected turn. His eyes were bulging dangerously, his face was flushed with wrath.

He glared down at Tony and Eleanor as they stood, defenseless, in the center of the ring. Then, reaching down, he came up with a carbine rifle and aimed it at them.

Tony jumped in front of Eleanor. Even as he did, he knew he was being foolish. He could not protect her any more than he could save himself. The contest was over. Mr. Borealis had won. This was it. Death stared down the barrel of the carbine. A rusty taste of fear was in Tony's mouth.

"Get it over with!" he snarled.

Borealis growled his retort and raised the gun to his shoulder.

"Goodbye, Mr. Benedict," was the last thing Tony heard him say. He closed his eyes.

Then to his amazement, Mr. Borealis repeated himself: "*Mr. Benedict, Mr. Benedict, Mr. Benedict—*"

"**M**r. Benedict, sir. Mr. Benedict!"

"Huh? Wha—"

Tony sat up and rubbed his eyes. The first mate stood over him.

"I must have dozed off," he said. "What time is it?"

"Six-thirty, sir."

"Six—good lord, I've been asleep for an hour!"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Pelimo's here, sir. We're lowering the gang-plank for him now. I thought you'd like to know."

"Thank you," Tony said, rising and straightening his jacket.

He still felt slightly groggy. The stale taste of the brandy in his mouth was foul. He asked the bartender for a glass of plain soda water and drank it with relish. Revived, he went onto the deck and stood watching as a tall, clean-cut collegiate type in a Brooks Brothers grey suit and a conservative striped tie came aboard. Tony smiled. Pelimo was the typical NEC representative.

"Mr. Benedict?"

Tony held out his hand. "Glad to see you."

The hand the NEC man proffered was warm and reassuringly firm. "My name is

Pelimo. Here are my credentials."

Tony examined the papers. They seemed to be in order.

"I'll take you below," he said. "You'll want to see the reactor, I suppose."

"Yes, sir!" Pelimo said, smiling engagingly. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I'll take you myself," Tony said. "In the meantime, I'll have your baggage brought on board."

He looked down onto the pier which was steeped in twilight. A group of faces looked up at him anxiously.

"Tony, you fiend!" a woman's voice called shrilly. "When will you deliver us from this Limbo?"

"In a few minutes," he shouted back. "I just have to check a few things out."

"Uh—Mr. Benedict, sir?" Pelimo said hesitantly.

Tony looked at him.

"I've got a friend I'd like to bring along."

Tony frowned, an eerie, icy sensation gripping his heart.

"Where is she?" he asked.

Pelimo blushed. "How'd you guess it was a girl?"

Tony grinned. He dismissed his premonition as ridiculous. It had only been a bad dream, after all!

"Hell," he said. "I'm on my honeymoon, myself—"

Mr. Pelimo, relieved, whistled to a girl who stood waiting on the pier. She wore a short, flouncy, pink cotton skirt. Her face was partially obscured by the combination of long, fluffy dark bangs, horn-rimmed glasses and a white silk babushka.

In response to Pelimo's whistle, she started up the

gangplank. Her walk was springy and youthful. Tony watched her as she came towards them. At the head of the gangplank, she paused uncertainly.

"It's okay, Mary!" Pelimo called.

She turned her head and saw them. Smiling broadly, she pulled off the studious, horn-rimmed spectacles. Tony stared at her.

The face he looked into was Sarah's!

THE END

FOOTLIGHT VENGEANCE

by Ramon Aguilera

The invitation—delicately engraved on thick creamy paper—read as follows:

YOU ARE CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND A SPECIAL PREVIEW PERFORMANCE OF A NEW EXPERIMENTAL DRAMA, *THE CRITIC*, BY ERNEST HATTERAS, AT THE PANTHEON PLAYHOUSE, 62 GUNTHER STREET. CURTAIN TIME: MIDNIGHT.

A postscript in the lower righthand corner read: "Your colleague, Mr. Peter Emerson of the *Globe*, will be in attendance."

Eric St. Clair tapped the invitation thoughtfully against his chin. A faint smile curled the corners of his stern, thin-lipped mouth. He was intrigued. Hatteras again!

St. Clair recalled with distaste the ugly scene which had ensued two days after he had panned Hatteras' *THE SEA BEYOND* in his drama col-

umn with such acid and expert skill that the play had been forced to close after only three performances.

The circumstances of the incident were uncomfortably clear in his mind even now. St. Clair, who prided himself considerably on his gourmet tastes, was enjoying a delightful *Canard a l'Orange* stuffed with wild rice and accompanied by a perfectly-chilled Moselle wine, when Hatteras—unshaven and bleary-eyed with drink—came lurching towards his table in the rear alcove of Pierrot's Restaurant.

"Ha!" Hatteras exclaimed drunkenly. "I thought I'd find you here—stuffing your fat face while fifteen actors who never did you any harm are facing hunger because of you!"

St. Clair eyed him with disdain. "I beg to differ," he said coldly. "It is not my fault

your cast is out of work. The blame lies with you entirely. If you had given them some decent lines to speak instead of your usual verbose garbage—”

“Don’t give me that!” Hatteras snarled. “I had nothing to do with the way you tore those kids apart. You were making damn well sure that my play would fold, and you didn’t care who got hurt in the process. I know how you feel about me. But why take it out on innocent actors? Those poor kids—they’ll be lucky if they ever act again!”

“Again?” St. Clair drawled the word mockingly. “I wasn’t aware that any of them had ever acted. I’m sure none of them did in my presence the other night. They’re not actors, Hatteras. They’re rank amateurs—like yourself!”

“Well, even if they were amateurs,” Hatteras retorted, “they’d never get the chance to be anything else—not as long as you and Emerson are around to tear them apart every time they get an opportunity to gain a little experience—”

At the mention of Emerson’s name, St. Clair stiffened. Did this hogcaller who had the insufferable gall to call himself a playwright dare to place Eric St. Clair in the same category with a tasteless moron like Peter Emerson? He trembled with rage at the insult.

Waving an angry dismissal at Hatteras, St. Clair returned to his meal. “Go away, hack!” he sneered.

The very next thing he knew, orange sauce was dripping from the end of his pointed nose and his damp lap was festooned with meat, bones, and limp green beans. Walter, the Maitre d’ at Pierrot’s, was shrieking hysterically and two burly cops had seized Hatteras by the arms. As they dragged him off, Hatteras turned his head to deliver a final salute of spittle in St. Clair’s direction.

After such a scene, the man must be raving mad, St. Clair thought, to invite him to review his new play! Perhaps Hatteras thought he could make St. Clair eat his words. The playwright’s unfounded

confidence in his own talent was positively staggering to St. Clair's way of thinking.

The work was entitled *THE CRITIC*. No doubt it was Hatteras' awkward revenge upon St. Clair for exposing him as a no-talent fraud. Hatteras would probably be lurking close by to watch St. Clair's face during the performance. I'm afraid he will be bitterly disappointed, St. Clair thought cynically. Nothing that hack could possibly write would have the power to move me—except possibly in the direction of the nearest exit!

He re-examined the invitation. It struck him as highly curious on second glance. The curtain time was midnight—practically unheard-of for a first performance of the evening. And the theatre was the old *Pantheon*. St. Clair thought it had been demolished in the forties.

Ordinarily, of course, he would have torn up the card and thought no more about it. But it was summer. The openings he was obliged to cover were in abeyance until autumn brought a fresh collection of

hopeful offerings—most of which would never see their third performance if St. Clair had his way. And St. Clair was used to having his way. He ruled the theatre with an iron hand. Of course, he had to concede that there were still a few theatre-goers who read that old fool Emerson and were guided by his tastes which ran largely to sentimental Victorian bric-a-brac like *Smilin' Through*. But Emerson, who was in his late sixties, could not last much longer. He would be retiring soon. Then St. Clair would have full reign over the stage. He alone would say what stayed and what went.

Then, as now, he would insist upon nothing less than absolute perfection. He sneered at those who argued that audiences should be permitted to judge a drama for themselves. What did idiotic audiences know about theatre? Give them a few laughs, show them a few half-naked cows prancing around in a chorus line and they went home happy. A fine spectacle the theatre would be if St. Clair were not alive to protect the theatre-goers from themselves!

The note on the bottom of the invitation said that Emerson was going tonight. Perhaps, St. Clair thought, he should give the old boy a call. It would be a nice touch for the morning tabloids to run a shot of the town's most vitriolic critics, arm in arm, entering a play called *THE CRITIC*.

Emerson was a bore, but at least he would pay half of the cab downtown. Reaching for his phone, St. Clair dialed the *Globe*. He was informed by Emerson's secretary that Emerson was at home. She gave him the number. St. Clair dialed again—to be met with a busy signal. The old windbag probably had some unfortunate victim's ear. Sighing with resignation, he replaced the receiver. On second thought, it would be better if he were to go alone.

Sinking back into his swivel chair, St. Clair planned his evening with his usual passion for detail. First, he would have a leisurely shower followed by a shave. He would wear evening dress. No—a plain black suit would be more appropriate. With a subdued tie. Eve-

ning clothes would only imply that he was treating the diversion as a premiere of importance instead of the labored second-rate trash he fully expected. He would instead dress as for a funeral. After all, that was precisely what the evening would prove to be once he had reviewed the play—the funeral of Ernest Hatteras' last try for glory!

The review tomorrow would be a satirical classic, dripping with poison. "Last night," he would begin, "I witnessed an execution—"

The cab stopped before the Pantheon Playhouse. The street on which the old theatre stood was dark and deserted. St. Clair could vaguely remember when Gunther Street had been a lively thoroughfare, bustling with shop, and small theatres, its sidewalks crowded. With the passing of time, however, the theatres had moved uptown, leaving Gunther Street and the Pantheon Playhouse forlorn and shoddy, grey relics of a brilliant past.

St. Clair frowned as he paid the cab-driver. In the thin light of a solitary streetlamp

he studied his watch. The hands pointed to eleven-fifty. He had deliberately checked it with the large clock at Pierrot's before leaving—in order to avoid being late. St. Clair prided himself on his perfect punctuality at openings. Still, common sense told him that if his timepiece were right, there ought to be a group of theatre goers milling before the theatre. Not a crowd, of course—considering that the playwright was Hatteras—but still a sizeable group ought to be still on the street, and wasn't! For the first time in twenty years, it appeared that St. Clair was late for an opening!

Sighing with annoyance, he hurried into the lobby which was lit by five bare electric bulbs set in the ceiling. The box-office was closed. There was no one to collect his invitation.

He opened the center door and entered the blackened theatre. By the dim light emanating from the stage, he could barely distinguish the figure of the usher who shone a flashlight in his face and said:

"Right this way, Mr. St. Clair." Gratiified at being recognized, St. Clair gladly followed the beam of the tiny flash down the center aisle. "Here, sir," said the usher. "First seat on the aisle."

Noting that the seat next to his was empty, St. Clair settled into his chair. About him, the audience was unusually quiet and well-behaved. No heads turned at his entrance. All eyes were attentively rapt upon the stage, where, apparently, the action was just beginning. St. Clair was relieved. He was late, but the play was even later in getting started. Typical of a Hatteras production, he thought critically..

He focused his full attention upon the stage. The play, which was evidently being done in the allegorical style of a medieval morality play, unfolded behind a scrim—a semi-transparent gauze curtain which muted the colors of the costumes and the features of the actors and lent an ethereal, other-worldly aura to the action.

Some thirty players, dressed in black, and hooded robes

with white pasteboard letters covering their faces, stood on three rows of benches—each succeeding row higher than the last—at the center rear of the stage. Assembled thus, they resembled a human typewriter.

Two other groups of actors and actresses wearing classical comedy and tragedy masks stood to stage right and stage left. In the front, center stage, sat a man with his back to the audience—facing the typewriter.

“I,” said the man in a ringing voice which carried easily through the silent theatre.

The member of the human typewriter who bore the letter I on his face bowed his head.

“I am,” said the man in front. I, A and M all bowed their heads.

St. Clair understood at once that—as the actor spoke his lines, the characters in the typewriter would move as if they were actually working at a real typewriter. Not a bad bit of business, St. Clair admitted grudgingly. Either Hatteras had found inspiration in some new source—drugs, most probably—or he had hired a ghost-writer.

“I am a playwright,” the man on the stage said while the typewriter’s characters moved up and down. “I make ideas move.”

The actors in the Greek masks began to prance across the stage in little intricate dance steps.

“I make them dance,” the playwright continued. “I make them sing. I make words walk up and down across the stage. I breathe life into actors. I enrich the life of the world—”

On and on he went while the masked actors pantomimed his words. St. Clair found it entertaining to watch. But, as usual with a Hatteras play, there was little point to be found in singing the praises of the playwright for so long a time. He fervently hoped that the whole play wasn’t going on like this. If so, he resolved, they would lose him after the first act.

Just as he began to grow restless, the playwright finished. The characters in the typewriter stood stock-still. The masked players returned to their original positions.

The playwright arose from

the stool and turned to face the audience through the gauze scrim. As he did, St. Clair gasped with surprise. It was Hatteras himself who stood there! His thin pinched face looked out at St. Clair over the footlights. But, St. Clair thought bewilderedly, the voice had not been Hatteras'. The next instant, the mystery was cleared up. The actor who played the playwright peeled off a rubber mask, revealing his own face. St. Clair recognized him as Bayard Simms—whose last appearance in a revival of *The Lower Depths* had elicited several of St. Clair's most venomous insults. I thought I had run him out of town, St. Clair thought. Apparently, some actors can survive anything.

Despite Simms' disconcerting appearance, he found the rubber mask clever and diverting. He wholeheartedly joined the applause as the stage went black for a few minutes.

When the lights went up again, there was a new figure on the playwright's stool. Again, his back was to the audience.

"I," quavered the actor's voice. St. Clair gave a little start.

"I am," he continued in the same whining tone. St. Clair grinned his approval. The actor, whoever he was, had captured to perfection the nasal speaking voice of that old fool, Emerson. This is going to be fun, St. Clair thought.

"I am a critic," the actor said. The typewriter moved.

The leader of the masked group stepped forward, pointing at him accusingly.

"You *pretend* to be a critic!" he said sternly. "But you offer annihilation instead of criticism. You stifle the seeds of creation in the playwright's soul. You take the joy from the theatre, the bread from the mouths of the actors. You make them cower with dread at your approach. You make them crawl to curry your favor. If they resist you, you drive them from the theatre. You have no taste or discretion. You are the lowest of the creatures of earth. You deserve to suffer as you have made others suffer—"

Quite right, St. Clair thought. I have suffered

through far too many of his dull reviews myself—

Flectingly, he wondered where Emerson was seated and how he was taking this. Probably the pompous old dunce didn't even realize that it was he, himself who was represented on the stage.

The leader had crossed the stage to where the critic sat.

"Rise!" he commanded. The critic got to his feet. The leader kicked the stool into the wings. "Turn!"

The critic turned so the audience could see his face. St. Clair exclaimed in amazement. The rubber mask of Hatteras had been ingenious, but this one was absolute perfection. One would swear that it was Emerson himself standing there with his shoulders slumped, his eyes furtive and frightened in his jaundiced face, his wrists manacled with steel handcuffs.

The leader led him forward. Then he held out the critic's arms before him. Slowly, from the floor of the stage rose a stake which attained a height of six feet before it stopped. It rose between the critic and

his handcuffed wrists with the result that he was manacled to the stake.

"Wha—what are you going to do?" the critic demanded in a high, terrified voice. St. Clair laughed aloud. The actor playing Emerson was superb. He must have studied Emerson at close range for days to be able to give such an accomplished impersonation.

The atmosphere in the theatre was suddenly crackling with intense excitement as the leader of the chorus produced a birch. Several times, he flicked it teasingly, just missing the critic by inches. Every degree of cringing cowardice was clearly visible in the critic's sweating face. St. Clair decided that it could not be a mask the actor wore, but a skillful make-up job. No mask could be that flexible.

Zzzzit! The crop grazed the critic's back, ripping his jacket. He let out a yowl of fright. A titter of laughter rippled through the rapt audience. St. Clair joined in. He could not help himself. It was good to see that idiotic Emerson being

treated with the contempt he deserved.

Zzzzit! The crop flicked the critic's long nose. It twitched like a scared rabbit's. This time, a roar went up from the audience. The laughter had taken on a new mirthless, breathless sound. St. Clair himself was on the edge of his seat, his eyes glued to the action on-stage.

The leader dropped his birch. The audience moaned its protest. He smiled, signalling to them as if beseeching them to be patient.

Taking a black scarf, he knotted it over the critic's eyes. Then he unlocked the manacles and placed a stout paddle in his hand. He jumped back instantly, barely dodging the blow which the critic immediately aimed at him.

Then the rest of the masked chorus produced paddles. They formed a circle about the critic. They laughed silently as the critic flailed about him blindly. Then one of the chorus tapped him lightly with a paddle. The critic screamed in frustration and fear. Another from the chorus planted a solid thwack on the critic's

backside. The audience howled with glee.

The critic cast about him wildly. For each unaimed swing from him, there was a corresponding blow from his persecutors which made him cry out with pain. Faster and faster the blows came. The circle onstage grew tighter and tighter. The critic's movements grew more and more frantic as blows rained upon him without ceasing.

The tension in the audience was practically physical. You could feel it. It breathed as one person, applauding as the critic screamed and fell to the floor of the stage.

"Get him!" yelled a voice. St. Clair realized that the voice was his. His hands were clasped into fists, his teeth clenched. He longed to be one of those with a paddle in his hand—to get in his licks on that crawling, snivelling, trembling form that crept blindly across the stage on hands and knees, seeking escape.

A low, bestial murmur went up through the theatre. The entire cast suddenly descended in a rush upon the critic—

paddles swinging, nails clawing, feet gouging defenseless flesh. St. Clair cheered.

All at once, the hysteria receded—leaving a mangled, lifeless body on the stage.

Sanity returned to St. Clair in a frightening flood. That was no play, he thought. It was real blood which was smeared across the faces of the murderous players. The stage was slippery with it. Furthermore, the actor had been no actor, but Emerson himself! And now the maddened slayers were seeking new victims to their blood-lust. Their eyes searched the audience and found—him!

A panic seized him. Quickly, St. Clair got to his feet and started up the aisle.

The houselights went on. To St. Clair's dismay, he saw an evil-eyed group led by Hatteras coming down the aisle, blocking his escape. He tried another route. That, too, was blocked—by none other than Steven Brewster whose most recent *Hamlet* St. Clair had laughed to scorn. He spun desperately. Anthony Crowley was

closing in from behind him—another enemy. Everywhere he looked there were faces out of his past. Famous faces, obscure faces—all those whose moment in the sun St. Clair had obliterated with his deadly pen. In every face, he saw one ambition: his own doom!

He dropped to his knees and clasped his hands. "Please!" he squealed, his lips quivering in a paroxysm of fright. "Please don't hurt me. I can help you—all of you. I'll put you right up on top if you'll just let me go. I swear to it. Or if you want—I'll retire. I'll never write another notice—but please, please don't—"

His eyes fled imploringly from one implacable face to the next. His arms stretched out to them for mercy. He saw the hard laughter etched in their cruel, relentless eyes. He heard the cruel jibes and mocking jeers. . .

Then he screamed as the first blow caught him in the ribs, and kept on screaming until, over his tortured eyes, the final curtain fell.

THE END

PREY ON ME

by Henry Cranford

It had been only six months since I last saw Carling, but I was shocked at the change in him.

I had cabled him from London three days before, telling him that I would take the steamer from Penzance to St. Mary's and then proceed by local boat to St. Brynn—the wild and remote island in the Scilly group where Carling had finally decided to settle after twenty years of highly-publicized adventuring.

I was a little surprised when no one met me at the landing, but I hardly expected the greeting I received from him when I was finally ushered into his presence in his book-lined library.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded, scowling ferociously.

His rudeness left me speechless for an instant. I recovered sufficiently to respond: "You invited me."

A genuine bafflement clouded his high brow for a moment as he struggled to remember. "I did? When?"

My long journey had fatigued me to the point of exhaustion. I suppose I sounded considerably piqued as I replied: "Six months ago—at the Correspondent's Club on Fleet Street. You asked me to come out here for my holiday. However, if it's inconvenient I can return to St. Mary's on the morning launch—"

Obviously the tone of injury which I took no pains to conceal made an impression. His next statement was delivered in a gentler tone—albeit a bit strained.

"Nonsense, my dear fellow," he said. "I'm delighted to have you. Delighted. You must forgive me. I had quite forgotten."

"Have you been ill?" I asked then.

"Why do you ask?" he

countered sharply.

"No particular reason," I said. "You look a bit pale."

I was understating the case. The change in Carling's appearance was appalling. He had aged ten years since our last encounter in London. His normally ruddy face was haggard and tinged with an unhealthy pallor.

"I've never felt better!" he retorted.

It was embarrassing to watch him exerting himself to appear hospitable. "Well," he continued with false heartiness, "now that you're here, we must see about making you comfortable. Zuca?"

"Yes," a voice behind me answered. I jumped. I had supposed we were alone. I turned to see a squat, sallow-faced man with rather long black hair, dressed in a white shirt and black trousers, standing just inside the door. His hooded eyes were fixed on Carling's face. I might as well have been invisible for all the notice he gave me.

"Mr. Cripps will be with us for—how long will you be here, Cripps?"

"A fortnight," I supplied.

He nodded. "A fortnight. Where shall we put him?"

Something like a smile tightened the corners of the servant's inscrutable eyes which, I noted, had a faint trace of a Mongolian fold across the lids. "There is the master bedroom," Zuca said.

Carling stared at him. I had the distinct impression that something passed in the air between them—some mystery.

"I wouldn't dream of taking your room—" I protested.

"My room?" Carling asked vaguely. "Oh, I don't sleep in the master bedroom. It will be quite all right—if Zuca says so."

"I will take your valise upstairs," Zuca announced in excellent English, edged with the slight hint of a foreign accent which I could not pinpoint.

"Oh, would you, Zuca?" Carling asked eagerly. "That's very good of you. In the meantime, I shall fix Mr. Cripps a whiskey-soda. I expect you could use it after your long trip, eh, Cripps?"

I assented gladly, pleased to see that Carling's earlier coolness was being rapidly re-

placed by the easy, voluble manner I always associated with him in the past.

He fixed us both tall glasses of whiskey and fizz-water and led me out onto a stone terrace overlooking the sea, around which semi-tropical growths bloomed in lush profusion.

"Lovely spot," I commented.

He grunted.

"So you've finally settled down," I went on. "No more mountain-climbing, no more poling up jungle rivers, no wars. Do you miss it—the excitement?"

He looked down into his glass before answering. "I shall never leave this place," he said.

I could not argue the point with him. The island—seen from the promontory upon which Carling's house sat—seemed drawn from an ancient idyll, far from the clamor of the modern world with its clashing ideologies and monster bombs, its super-highways and jangling telephones—

"By the by," I asked. "Did you receive my wireless?"

"No," Carling said.

"That's odd," I said. "I sent it three days ago."

"We have very poor communication with the mainland," he said.

"Oh, well," I said, "that's no hardship for you, is it? I mean, not after all those years spent in one remote spot or another. Which reminds me—your man Zuca, is he an Oriental or half-caste or what?"

Carling stirred uneasily. "I found him in Bechuanaland. He and Mara as well."

"Mara?" I echoed. Then I remembered the tiny gingerbread woman who had answered the door when I arrived. "Oh, yes. But surely—they aren't African?"

"I don't know what the hell they are," Carling replied irritably.

I could sense his earlier gloom returning and warded it off by promptly launching into a recital of the latest Fleet Street gossip which had him laughing in short order. By the time we had finished our second whiskey, he was much more the Carling I re-

called from earlier days—witty and relaxed.

Suddenly, Zuca appeared beside us, without my being aware of his approach. The man moved like a cat on those short squat legs of his.

He announced that the master bedroom was ready if I cared to refresh myself before dinner. Carling got to his feet. It seemed to me that both master and servant were eager to have me go upstairs. I finished off the remains of my drink and arose.

"We dine early," Carling informed me. "You mustn't expect any of the frills of civilization around here."

"My express purpose in coming here—besides to see you again—was to escape civilization," I assured him.

He showed me to the staircase and I mounted it, leaving the two of them alone.

The master bedroom was an unexpectedly frivolous, luxurious chamber—very much out of keeping with the stoic Victorian decor of the rest of the house. It had French doors which led onto a

small balcony overlooking the white-capped sea and the sheer cliff upon which the house stood.

After my eyes had had their fill of the spectacular view, I returned inside to survey the room more carefully. The bed was an elaborate, canopied affair, built in the shape of a boat. Cleopatra's barge, I thought. The coverlet on the bed was satin, richly embroidered in huge multi-colored silk flowers. On either side of the bed was a fur rug—one leopard, one zebra—into which the sleeper's feet could sink upon disembarking from the boat-bed.

Zuca had thoughtfully unpacked my valise. My shaving equipment was in the bathroom, my two suits and tweed hunting jacket were hanging in the wardrobe and my linen was neatly arranged in the top drawer of the rosewood chiffonier.

The chiffonier itself aroused my curiosity. I wondered in which corner of the world Carling had found it. Idly, I began opening the narrow drawers, finding a surprise in the bottom one. I drew forth my

find and examined it carefully.

It was a comb—of the type used for adornment rather than for untangling snarls. I pictured it atop a great mass of piled and shining female hair. It was quite large, beautifully made of tortoise-shell, inlaid with what appeared to be pure gold.

I grinned to myself, recalling Carling's discomfiture upon my arrival. The truth was quite clear. The gay dog had some woman tucked away somewhere on this island. This did not strike me as unusual. Carling had had beautiful females of every size and color at his beck and call for the past twenty years. Half the women I knew in London were wistfully in love with him. Still, this was the first time he had ever taken pains to conceal a liaison. She must be a real looker, I thought enviously.

Now the room with its gorgeous bed made sense to me. I couldn't picture Carling's burly, massive frame bumbling about that exquisite room alone. No, there was definitely

a woman. But where?

Aside from the fishing shacks at the landing, I had received the strong impression that Carling's was the only house on the island. The woman, whoever she was, must be hidden in this house. Suddenly, I recalled again the tiny, silent, dun-colored servant who had opened the door to me. Mara, Carling said her name was. She was the only female I had seen on the premises. And I couldn't very well imagine a mousey little drab like that sporting an expensive comb atop her head.

I resolved to keep a sharp eye out. Meanwhile, it would do no good to let Carling know that I had stumbled onto his romantic little secret.

I tucked the comb away and began dressing for dinner, humming to myself...

The long dinner table was illuminated by two hurricane lamps.

"No electricity in these parts, I take it?" I said to Carling as Zuca silently placed a bowl of steaming broth before me.

Carling had not bothered

to dress for dinner. He still wore the short-sleeved white shirt and walking shorts I had seen him in that afternoon. Apparently, he had meant what he said about the absence of frills.

"No," he said, the gloom back with him. I restrained a smile with difficulty. He was, I thought, probably annoyed at having to look down the table at me instead of his long-haired and lovely mistress.

"Well," I went on, "fortunately, we'll have a bright night tonight. Moon's almost full, isn't it?"

"Yes," Carling said, the light returning to his sullen eyes.

For some reason, he looked up at Zuca who had moved beside him, bearing Carling's portion of soup. It was a long look, lasting several seconds. Then, Zuca—with a movement almost deliberate to me—overturned the bowl so that the scalding liquid ran over Carling's bare arm and thighs.

Carling emitted a shrill, almost womanish, squeal of anguish. Leaping up, I ran to him—to blot the soup with my napkin. A small piece of epi-

dermis peeled away from his arm onto the napkin as I dabbed. My stomach heaved squeamishly.

"That's a nasty burn," I said. "Do you have any ointment in the house?"

Carling didn't answer. Both he and Zuca seemed to be transfixed. I turned to the servant and snapped: "Don't just stand there, man. Find something to put on these burns. Step lively now!"

Zuca was galvanized into mobility by my commanding tone. His dull black eyes sparked resentfully at me, but he, nevertheless, moved from the room in the direction of the pantry.

"Clumsy fellow!" I commented to Carling. "If I were you, I'd give him what-for. It almost looked as if he did that on purpose."

"Go away!" Carling shouted suddenly, startling me. "Stop fussing at me. It's nothing at all."

He waved off Zuca who had reappeared with a jar of salve. I fell back, protesting: "Those burns have to be treated!"

"Nonsense!" he snorted. "I've had worse than that happen to me. I don't even feel it. Let's get our meal finished!"

We did so, in short order. Then I—who had expected brandy and cigars and a quiet game of chess before the fire in the library—was disappointed when Carling said: "Well, it's time for bed. We don't stay up late around here, you know. You may sit up all night if you wish. I've a lively collection of books—perhaps you might want to take one upstairs with you."

Put that way, there wasn't much argument I could offer. I accepted the "lively" book he recommended and carried it up to the master bedroom where I found the bed turned back for me and a lamp glowing on the table next to it.

I undressed and crawled between the sandalwood-scented sheets. I opened Carling's book which quickly proved to be as "lively" as weak tea. In a matter of minutes, my eyes were heavy. I extinguished the lamp and lay back on my pillow watching the white moonlight pour in through the glass

of the closed French doors.

Suddenly, the desire to hear the sea seized me. After all, I reminded myself, it was my holiday. I deserved to have this one small gratification. Rising, I walked in my bare feet across the floor to the French doors. Opening them, I stepped out onto the balcony. The moon dancing like diamonds on the breast of the black sea was dazzling to behold. I drank my fill of the night's magic. Then I turned to go back inside.

Something—it couldn't have been a sound—arrested me just inside the threshold. Looking down, I saw Carling—resplendent in full evening dress—cross the lawn above the cliff. He stopped and glanced up at the balcony. I shrank back into the shadow of the door. Then, as he moved on, I thrust my head out to watch him disappear around the far corner of the house into a small thicket of trees.

I returned to the boat-bed, shaking my head in bewilderment. Where on earth was Carling planning on taking his

lady-love on a desolate island like that, dressed as he was in full evening regalia? It was certainly peculiar. but then, Carling—soldier-of-fortune, explorer, adventurer and celebrated author of *Congo Green* and *Kayak up the Orinoco*, was not an ordinary man, by any means.

The solution to this pleasant little mystery would, I thought, keep me nicely occupied for the remainder of my stay. Having so decided, I immediately fell asleep.

At first, I thought my dreams—restless, involved, troubled dreams—had awakened me. Then, as I stared into the dark room with the pre-dawn breeze from the ocean tangy and fresh in my nostrils, I suddenly realized that I had been awakened by a sound—a scream, in fact. Where had it come from? I wondered.

The house was steeped in silence. The oblivious sea pounded relentlessly against the cliff. Rolling over, I tried to resume my sleep. I had almost succeeded when—there it was again! The thin edge of a high-pitched wail which

floated vaguely above the crashing of the waves. It was not, I decided, in the house, but someplace outside.

It was not repeated. After smoking a pipe in the doorway of the balcony, I was ready to try for some more sleep. I would, I resolved, ask Carling about it in the morning. Then I realized that he might not have heard the scream at all—if he were preoccupied, lolling pleasantly in his lady's arms.

When I went downstairs the next morning there was no one around. My breakfast was kept warm for me on the buffet in the dining-room. Hot water for tea bubbled gently over a canned gas light. I prepared my plate of eggs, sausage and kippers—all done to perfection—and drank three cups of Darjeeling tea before sauntering out of the house and down to the fishing village near the wharf, where I wasted no time in gaining the acquaintance of the dour, taciturn fishermen who were drying their nets in the morning sun.

"And where is the lady's

house?" I slyly asked the most amiable of them.

His leathered brow crinkled in puzzlement. "Lady?" he echoed. "There be no lady on St. Brynn's. Be no female 'tall save heathen 'un up ter Lord Carling's."

Then Mara *was* the only woman on the island! Had Carling sunk so low as to bury his lust, in an ignorant, insignificant little servant-woman? Try as I might, I could not for the life of me even recall her face.

The fisherman must be mistaken. There must be a woman on the island even the fisherfolk were not aware of. After all, if Mara were the object of Carling's desire, it was only a matter of a few steps to the servant's quarters. There was no need for him to be abroad in the dead of night in full evening dress.

My idle curiosity took on a new intensity when I saw Carling at luncheon. If he had been haggard the night before, he was absolutely ghastly that day. His night's carousal had not lent any light to his eyes which were hollow and lack-

lustre, nor color to his cheeks which were ashen.

I began to be concerned about this *affaire d'amour*. After all, many a strong, virile man had been enticed to an early death by an insatiable female. However, I concealed my anxiety and made small talk as if I noticed nothing strange whatsoever in his appearance.

I ate my lunch with an appetite which had been piqued by the tangy salt air and my long stroll into the village. Carling, I noticed, barely toyed with his food.

"Sleep well?" I asked him.

He shot me a suspicious look.

"Like a babe," he retorted. "And you?"

"Never better," I said innocently. "That's a proper bed you have up there."

"Made specially for me in North Africa," he said.

North Africa. I had not been far removed in my theory of Cleopatra's barge, after all.

"This boiled fish is delicious," I remarked. "That African woman of yours is quite a cook. Have you had her long?"

"Six months," Carling replied reluctantly.

"But I saw you six months ago, and you didn't have her then," I reminded him.

"No," he said. "I went back to Africa for a brief visit, to pick up something. I brought Mara and Zuca here with me."

"They aren't very dark—for Africans," I observed.

"There are many races in Africa," Carling said slowly and distinctly, "and many things which are beyond the ken of most men—"

I waited for him to elucidate. He stopped speaking. We finished our meal in silence. Immediately after dinner, Carling excused himself, saying he had work to do. I suspected he planned on catching up on a little additional sleep. His night's debauchery had left him totally drained of energy.

I left the house. This time, I turned from the village road, and followed instead, the path which I had seen Carling take the night before.

I reached the edge of the thicket in a matter of minutes and entered it. I had not gone

more than a hundred feet into it when I saw, glimmering in a sunlit opening in the very heart of the thicket, a small white marble building unlike any I could recall having seen. The building had no windows. Only a small bronze door admitted egress to the interior. Driven by curiosity I hurried to test the metal handle on the door. It was locked.

I was still standing there, with my hand resting on the handle, when I heard a sound of rustling leaves behind me. I whirled. Carling and Zuca stood behind me, watching me with cold, wary eyes.

"Hello!" I said to cover the odd uneasiness which surged through me. "I thought you were working."

"Zuca said he saw a prowler on the grounds," Carling replied.

"I'm his prowler," I said brightly. "I've been admiring this exquisite little building. What's inside, by the by?"

"Nothing," Carling said sharply, "It was emptied before it left Africa."

"What was it originally?"

Carling hesitated for the merest fraction of a second.

"A tomb," he said.

"Really?" I said. "It doesn't give that impression at all. I should have taken it for some sort of temple."

"Well, you would have been wrong!" Carling snapped. But the tell-tale flicker in Zuca's eyes told me I had guessed right.

"Let's go back to the house," Carling said abruptly, turning away.

"I'll walk with you as far as the cove," I said. "I think I'll stretch out on the sand and get a bit of sun."

Carling nodded curtly.

I left them at the edge of the thicket, acutely aware of their eyes on my back as it disappeared down the shallow side of the cliff.

The sun was losing its strength as I left the cove. My skin was tight with sunburn, but the hours spent lazing on the sand had emptied all the tensions which had been building up in me. For the first time in months, I felt completely relaxed. I was even glad that I had come to St. Brynn. My worries about Carling seemed suddenly fan-

tastic and without foundation. After all, why should I concoct an imaginative melodrama about the absence of color in a man's cheeks and a lack of spontaneity in his conversation. Carling was probably a bit off his feet from a touch of liver which one visit from a doctor would cure. As for my unenthusiastic welcome—I certainly had nothing to complain of as far as accommodations and meals were concerned. I chided myself severely for expecting perfection in a primitive spot like St. Brynn.

My spirits were quite buoyant as I crossed the lawn. Spotting a yellowish wad of crumpled paper on the grass, I kicked at it, feeling frisky. Something compelled me to pick up the piece of paper and smooth it out.

In an instant, all my suspicions were back with me—darker than before. The paper I held in my hand was the cablegram which Carling had denied receiving!

Then, as I drew nigh to the house, I chanced to glance in the library casement, which

was open. What I saw convinced me that something was desperately wrong in that house.

Zuca sat in Carling's accustomed chair, smoking a black Havana and reading an edition of the London *Times*. Before him, on his knees, was Carling himself. He was polishing Zuca's shoes industriously with a chamois! Neither of them noticed me peering in at them—so used were they, I suppose, to utter privacy on that lonely promontory. Zuca looked over his newspaper at the shoe that Carling was buffing. I saw him frown. Then the toe of the shoe caught Carling in the nose, sending him sprawling.

I was too amazed to intervene. The sight of Carling, the dare-devil adventurer, crawling obsequiously—blood streaming unstaunched from his wounded member—back to his humble task, seemed totally unreal to me. I felt as if I were supervising a nightmare.

I controlled myself from rushing into the room and driving my fist into Zuca's mask-like face. His evil leer of satisfaction was infuriating.

However, I was convinced that the scene I was witnessing was merely an outward manifestation of the real disorder in the house—and in Carling himself. I would refrain from taking action until I was face-to-face with the crux of the trouble.

All during tea—for which we substituted whiskey—and later, during dinner, I concealed my real emotions. I prattled on brightly about meeting the fishermen, my sunburn, Mara's excellent meal, Zuca's excellent service—anything which a man delighted with the way his holiday was progressing would extoll. I was the picture of complacent ignorance. My performance was a great success. I could feel the wariness which had reached its height in both Carling and Zuca melting away before my moronic bliss. At one point, they openly exchanged a glance of contemptuous amusement which plainly indicated to me that they felt their secret, whatever it was, to be safe from my unobservant eye.

However, deep inside, I was more than ever deter-

mined to deliver Carling from whatever evil held him in its thrall. Therefore, that night, when Carling's elegantly-attired form passed over the moon-drenched lawn in the direction of the thicket, I was his silent shadow.

Through the thicket I could see a light flickering. I was certain that it came from the tiny marble temple. When Carling disappeared into the dark woods, I waited for a few moments on the grass before plunging in after him. Trailing him on the turf was one thing. Crunching over dry twigs on the floor of a forest was another. Two footsteps and Carling would be alerted to my presence.

A shadow passed over the flickering light. No doubt it was Carling's heavy-set body obscuring the glow as he entered the temple. Feeling it safe to follow, I entered the thicket without hesitation.

I proceeded as soundlessly as possible until I stood about thirty feet from the door of the temple—which was ajar.

Getting down on all fours, I crawled around the trunks of the trees which edged the

clearing until I was a scant fifteen feet from the temple. From my position I could see and hear perfectly all that went on inside the temple—which was lighted not only by a flaming torch, but by the moon itself pouring in through a hole in the roof to illuminate a graven image which stood in its heart.

It was obviously some sort of idol—with a look of primitive antiquity about which harkened back to primordial days before the birth of civilization. The rock of which it was formed was unlike any other mineral I had seen. In the moonlight it glowed with an eerie translucent redness. The grisly face and multiple twining arms resembled certain representations of the Hindu goddess Kali. Mother of Death and Destruction, patroness of the deadly Thugi cult.

The statue itself stood only two feet over its pedestal but it exuded a vast potent aura of demonic fascination. Even at a distance, I could feel its glowing red eyes burning into mine, defying them to turn away even for an instant.

In a knot of suspense I waited. For what I did not know. My impatient vigil was quickly rewarded by the appearance of Zuca and Carling. Carling was clad only in a white loincloth while Zuca, to my astonishment, wore the elegant evening suit in which I had seen Carling dressed only minutes before.

The coat and trousers of the formal suit were far too large for Zuca. I might have been tempted to laugh at the comical figure he cut were I not deeply impressed by the whole scene as symbolic of a complete, deranged abasement on Carling's part.

In ever-increasing amazement, I watched as Carling stretched his big body out in the aisle of the temple—his head facing me. He then extended his wrists and ankles to be manacled by rusty chains, the fixtures of which were out of my sight. Apparently, these chains were attached to pulleys which Zuca cranked, one at a time, until Carling's entire body was slowly and painfully elevated above the ground by his four members, his head falling back

to face me with pain-blinded eyes which saw nothing.

When he was thus securely spread-eagled above the floor of the temple, a soft cymbal sounded once. A woman appeared before the altar. I gasped with admiration as she stood there with arms upraised in worship to the grotesque idol. Her taut and perfect body was gilded from head to toe. Only her gleaming veil of jet-black hair was free from gilt. I noticed that she wore, atop her ebony locks, the very comb which I had found in the chiffonier of the master bedroom the day before!

In the moonlight, her rippling flesh gleamed as she swayed enticingly before the shrine. My throat constricted with excitement as I watched her.

“**O**h, Muli,” she chanted in a bell-like, sing-song voice, “the full moon shines once more upon thy eager slave, Lord Carling. Once more he offers you his journey through pain and fear, hoping that you will grant him the ecstasy which is yours alone.

Open to him the gates of the Forbidden Garden. Let him savor its Secret Fruits. Hear me, o Muli—”

Her chanting suddenly switched to a language unfamiliar to my ears. But I was not as much concerned with what she was saying as I was with what she was doing. Her small, lush body had quickened the pulsating tempo of the silent dance. Every muscle under her golden flesh was alive and moving in a savage rhythm. My breath was ragged in my own ears as I feasted my eyes on her lithe seductive loveliness which flaunted itself so licentiously—

Then a cascade of spine-tingling laughter bubbled up from her long, smooth throat. Snatching up a golden wand from the foot of the altar, she ran at Carling's suspended form, her eyes rolling in her gold, mask-like face. Carling's features contorted in agony as she whacked his nether regions at random, again and again. While she was thus occupied in applying the wand, Zuca appeared, bearing white-hot coals in a shuttle. His broken teeth were revealed in a wolfish leer

as he deposited the coals with a pair of pincers—one at a time—on Carling's naked belly.

As the white-hot coals seared his tender flesh, Carling shrieked and sobbed, tugging frenziedly at the manacles which bound him until his wrists were rubbed raw. Now I knew the source of the scream which had awakened me!

What I did not recognize was the force which held me idle while my old friend suffered such excruciating exacerbations at the hands of Muli's sadistic devotees. I was possessed with a wild excitement, but I seemed somehow incapable of interfering, of staying those brutal hands which wielded whip and coals with such inhuman pleasure.

Exhausted and panting, the two demons in human guise fell back momentarily, leaving Carling moaning gratefully for the respite. But it was short-lived. Within minutes, Zuca was approaching his victim with a large silver bowl and a gleaming knife. As the sight of the blade, I was at last gal-

vanized into a semblance of action. I got to my feet, ready to charge the instant Zuca raised his knife. He did not. Bending, he set the large silver bowl on the floor of the temple, just underneath Carling's hips. Then, before I realized what he was up to, he had nicked open an artery in Carling's thigh. Carling whimpered once. Then a look of unearthly delight passed over his face. His eyes closed.

The blood dripped steadily into the large silver bowl. The gilded priestess smiled greedily as she watched the bowl filling. Then she climbed up onto the altar and was prone at the foot of the graven Muli. She lay there, twitching and chanting in her weird hymns, while Zuca collected the silver bowl and carried it to the altar.

He extended the bowl in offering to the image—which now glowed red as its warm contents—before emptying it over the golden body stretched out before him. She groaned as the sticky, glistening fluid trickled over her gilded flesh, crimson on gold. Then her arms seized Zuca's arms. She

pulled him to her. Together, they wallowed in the congealing ooze.

Now, I thought, was my chance to strike a blow for Carling's freedom! That damnable pagan statue was the cause of his torment. Once the image of Muli was gone, the two savages would lose their lethal hold on Carling's imagination. One thing was certain: he could not survive many more blood-lettings like that.

On silent feet, I crossed the moonlit clearing. I crept into the temple—past Carling's rapt, unseeing face. I crawled along the stone walls of the shrine, which were richly worked with scenes of horrifying atrocities. Past the preoccupied couple I went, tiptoeing to the back of the altar.

Once there, I reached up and grabbed the idol. It was unexpectedly light. The stone, instead of being cold, was warm as flesh to the touch.

I began to run with my burden and was out of the temple, heading into the thicket when a piercing screech of outrage informed me that my act of vandalism had been de-

tected. I increased my speed, aware that Zuca was after me, moving with a cat's grace and speed on those stunted legs. My heart pounded against my ribcase. My legs strained to go faster. The cliff seemed an eternity away—

Eventually, however, I reached it. Turning at the edge, I looked back. Zuca and the girl—whom I had recognized as the self-effacing Mara—were only yards behind me. They screamed in unison as I raised the idol high above my head. I looked down on the rocks below with full intent of hurling the image down upon them, smashing it to bits on their jagged points. But some mysterious force intervened! I could not bring myself to release the statue!

In a cold sweat of terror, I looked helplessly at Zuca who had recognized my difficulty and was now coming at me slowly—a smug, triumphant leer on his ugly face.

Even now, I'm willing to swear that it was his smile that did it. At the sight of the superior smirk, a fury seized me. It surged through me—

adding new strength to my arms as, with a loud, vengeful cry, I dashed the glowering red image down onto the waiting crags.

A wail of despair went up from the two devotees of Muli. Zuca wasn't smiling anymore. He was running, with Mara close behind him. They reached the edge of the cliff. To my horror, they did not pause.

I saw them plunge over the stone face of the precipice, hurling themselves down onto the rocks where their broken, lifeless bodies sprawled like emptied beanbags.

Badly shaken, I staggered back to the temple to release Carling from his fetters.

As I unlocked the chains, I was pleased to see his eyes open. The evil spirit had been exorcised. The trance had fled from him. He gazed at me with clear eyes in which I was happy to see the light of reason fully restored.

"What has happened?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"It's all right, old fellow," I assured him. "You're not to think back on it at all—except as a bad dream."

He stared at me. Then his eyes turned to the bereft altar. They popped in astonishment.

"What have you done?" he demanded.

"Nothing," I replied modestly, "that any other man who values your well-being would not have done."

"Where is it?" he asked. I knew he meant the idol. I pointed in the direction of the cliff.

The next thing I knew he was racing towards the cliff with me in close pursuit, pleading with him to stop. I feared that this sudden exertion following the blood-letting might prove fatal.

He stopped at the edge of the cliff and stood there,

looking down at the grisly sight below. I came up quietly from behind.

"I told you it was over," I said. "You're quite safe now, old man!"

He turned his eyes on me. It was like gazing into a thousand-watt electric light bulb. His eyes were bright with tears which flowed, unchecked, over his haggard cheeks. They glared at me with a shocking hatred.

"You fool!" he sobbed. "You bloody fool—you've ruined it all!"

And before I could stop him, he had disappeared over the crest of the cliff to join his tormentors on the teeth of the inscrutable sea...

THE END

MY LOVE, MY PRISONER

by Charles Patterson

The Piedmont farmhouse to which Antonio Vitagliano brought his sixteen-year-old bride had been standing for over two centuries. It had been built to last—with stone walls inside and out which were eight inches thick.

The gossiping wives of the village high in the southern slopes of the great Alps wondered at the new wife's placid acceptance of the squalid, run-down condition into which the house had been permitted to decline by the miserly Antonio. After all, there was no reason for such neglect. Papa Vitagliano was a rich man—the richest man in the village with no daughters to supply dowries for and no sons either. His young bride would have been well within her rights to demand a complete refurbishing of the old place.

"But then," the wives of the village shrugged, "she is too young to notice such things.

And besides, she is a Sicilian!"

Among the fair-haired Italian of that town, the dark Sicilian was held in contempt. Sicilians, they claimed, were a slovenly, sinister lot—given to sharp practice and the Black Hand. "Papa Vitagliano had better watch his step!" they added slyly.

However, as time passed, even the most critical of her neighbors could find no fault with Stella. She was beautiful without being vain. She used no cosmetics on her tawny skin and eschewed the latest fashions. The coarse frocks she had brought with her from Sicily were sufficient to keep her content. Furthermore, she spent all of her waking hours keeping the farmhouse immaculately clean and doting on old Antonio, who kept pinching himself to be perfectly certain he was still alive and not in heaven.

And as for her cooking!

"Benissimo!" Antonio would shout, kissing his fingers with tears of delight in his eyes. Every dish which came forth from Stella's hands was an epicurean treat. Antonio was particularly fond of the Sicilian *cuscussu* which she prepared for him every other night, and her *bagna cauda* was exquisite.

Gradually, the pointed distrust of the local ladies was lulled to sleep by Stella's consistently winning ways and her willingness to help all in distress—as long as money was not involved.

"Antonio," she explained candidly to Signora Pollio, "gives me very little money and all of it is intended for the groceries."

Signora Pollio—a strong-minded feminist who ruled her small husband with a stern hand—was shocked. "You have no money for yourself?" she demanded in a horrified voice. "I consider such behavior on your husband's part aboriginal. You must *insist* that he give you some!"

"Ah, signora!" Stella sighed. "I am only a weak woman. How is it possible for me to

influence a determined man like my Antonio?"

"There are ways," Signora Pollio said firmly. She proceeded to describe them.

Stella's small brown hands flew to her flaming cheeks, her liquid eyes wide with agitation at Signora Pollio's well-meant suggestions.

"Ah, no!" she protested indignantly. "That would not be proper. I cannot deny my husband his sacred rights!"

At this, Signora Pollio threw up her hands in despair. Stella was either an idiot or a saint. Considering the fact that she had to perform miracles with the pittance Antonio gave her, the latter was most probable.

It is difficult to analyze just how much Stella did manage to keep old Antonio's insatiable appetite for food satisfied. But she did. Three times daily, he gorged himself, and was always amazed when she produced yet another tasty repast for his enjoyment each night before retiring.

The trouble was that Antonio could not resist any of Stella's dishes, so delectable were they, most of them swim-

ming in butter or olive oil and melted cheese. The pasta, which she rolled fresh every morning and served to Antonio smothered in a rich sauce both at noon and at night, was superior to any the old man had ever tasted. Certainly, his first wife had never produced anything like it.

Naturally, with all this eating going on, it was inevitable that Antonio should gain weight. The pounds fastened onto his big powerful frame at an alarming rate. On his yearly tour through the village, Doctor Frascietta cautioned him about over-eating.

Antonio promised to cut down, but the wily doctor did not believe him. He therefore went to Stella with his advice. Her response to him was as it had been to Signora Pollio: "How is it possible for me to influence a determined man like my Antonio?"

"If he does not stop this insane consumption of food," the doctor said severely, "he will kill himself. He is no longer young. His heart cannot long support the excess weight. He is digging his grave with his teeth."

At this, Stella burst into tears, protesting that she was helpless in the face of Antonio's iron will. The doctor consoled her, all the while marveling that—in these modern times—there could still exist a woman to whom her husband's word was absolute law.

"Delicious woman," was the doctor's diagnosis at the local cafe. "Too bad that fool Antonio doesn't realize what he will be losing when he succeeds in eating himself to death!"

Surprisingly enough, however, Antonio meant to keep his promise to the doctor. He was uncomfortably aware of his expanding girth, and, once or twice, he had had frightening twinges inside his rib-cage. He fully intended to curtail his prodigious eating and said as much to Stella.

"Yes, Antonio," Stella said approvingly.

Then she went into the kitchen to prepare a thick, hearty minestra, which was followed by stuffed canelloni, a tender roasted abbacchio with asparagus and baby peas, a bowl of dandelion greens with oil and vinegar, a slice of

goat's milk cheese and a casata of thick whipped cream and preserved cherries.

Antonio hesitated briefly before devouring the entire array.

Two months later, Antonio was taken ill.

"Small wonder!" the townspeople sniffed. Doctor Frassetta was sent for.

The Doctor, who resented the long trip over the mountains which the visit entailed—particularly in view of the fact that his advice on his last trip had been blatantly disregarded—did not even trouble to examine Antonio.

"Too much food!" he said angrily. "I can only give you something which will temporarily ease your discomfort. You yourself must provide the cure by not eating so much!"

Antonio promised faithfully to adhere to his new diet. None of Stella's most elaborate efforts could tempt him to abandon his resolution. Stella wept, protesting that he found fault with her cooking. Antonio was hard put to make her understand that the fault was

not with her food but with his gluttony.

As the doctor had advised, he remained in bed for a few weeks while the weight fell from the bones. Marcello, a handsome young man from the village, was hired to oversee Antonio's farms and collect the rents. For this Antonio paid him very little. But Marcello did not mind.

"I would," he said earnestly, "be happy to do it for nothing."

Antonio noticed that Marcello glanced at Stella's lush and silent figure as he spoke. It was during this time that Stella began to use lipstick. To the surprise of everyone, Antonio approved the use of the cosmetic. "It makes you even more beautiful!" he applauded. Stella blushed.

It was certainly true that Stella's looks altered subtly as the weeks of Antonio's convalescence stretched out. There was a new translucency about her complexion that was most becoming.

"Is it possible," Signora Pollio wondered aloud, "that that old ram Vitagliano has sired himself an heir at this late date?"

She watched Stella's waist-line with interest. To her keen disappointment, the weeks fled with nothing developing except an unforeseen decline in Antonio's general health.

"He stopped eating too late!" the gossips decreed grimly. "He has destroyed himself with his gluttony."

Antonio grew thinner and weaker with each passing week. Then Marcello came to town with the exciting news that he had been fired. "The old miser accused me of being interested in his wife!" he laughed. "Naturally, I am interested in his wife. She is an angel from heaven, and I am only a man, after all—"

After Marcello's discharge, Antonio's illness progressed even more rapidly. He himself could see the appalling change in his face from day to day. It frightened him. His skin was yellow and dry. He was afflicted with a constant vertigo which made it most difficult for him to stand.

His only consolation was the silent, servile presence of his darling Stella in whose tense,

beautiful face he could see his own sickness reflected. She tried to tempt him to eat, out-doing herself in preparing endless procession of light, succulent dishes for him to sample listlessly and then wave away, weak with nausea. Thin soup became his main sustenance. Every few hours, Stella brought it piping hot to him, carrying an extra bowl for herself to be eaten in his presence.

"I shall eat what you eat," she declared soulfully. "I shall not be separated from you for the time it takes to consume a meal."

Tears sprang into Antonio's eyes at this protestation of devotion. Was ever a man so lucky? He thanked his saints for having directed him to Sicily on that journey three years before. Stella was a jewel of jewels. What had he done to deserve such a wonder?

He rejoiced in his fortune, his spirits taking an upward swing for the first time in weeks. He watched as Stella set two bowls of soup on the small table near his bed. One bowl was blue, the other yellow—as always, carefully se-

lected, he thought, to brighten his sick room.

"Do you know, cara," he said cheerily, "I believe I could take a little bread with my soup."

She stared at him incredulously. Then she smiled. "How wonderful," she said. "Your strength must be coming back. A return of appetite is always a good sign."

She left the room. Antonio waited, growing vexed as the steam ceased to rise from the soup. Still he waited. Stella did not return. The soup is growing cold, he thought irritably. Mustering up his flagging strength, he reached over to lift the blue bowl from the table.

He was enjoying the soup when Stella re-entered.

"What detained you?" he demanded.

Her eyes, veiled with tantalizingly long, silky lashes, eluded his alert gaze. "It was only Marcello. He was returning the hat you loaned him last week."

"I hope you gave the young rascal a piece of your mind!" Antonio shouted angrily.

"Don't worry," Stella said shortly. "You will never see him around this house again."

Antonio dipped into his soup, mollified.

"*What are you doing?*" Stella demanded suddenly, in a voice so loud that Antonio gave a little jump, spilling some of the soup.

He looked at her inquiringly.

"That's *my* soup!" she said excitedly. "Yours is in the yellow bowl."

"Does it make any difference?" he asked.

"Yes," she said in the same loud voice. "I put less salt in mine."

Antonio shrugged and handed the bowl over to her. In silence, he accepted the yellow one from her hands and tasted it.

It was difficult to repress the exclamation which came to his lips at tasting his soup. There was a distinct difference in flavor between the two bowls of soup. Nor was the difference in the salting, he decided.

Antonio was aware that he was a miser and a glutton. However, he was certain that he was no fool. "This soup is delicious!" he exclaimed heartily. Inwardly, he was assailed by a thousand hateful doubts.

For the first time, Antonio entertained the suspicion that his treasure, his gem, his Sicilian jewel was trying to poison him!

He told himself that he was an old man and quite ready to die. But his gorge rose at the notion of Stella's sharing the rewards of his death with that adulterous young popinjay, Marcello!

The next day he sent Stella down to the pantry for the salt as soon as she had placed the two bowls of fragrant soup in his room. In her absence, he sampled both bowls: her blue one and his yellow one. The day after, it was pepper he wanted. Again, as soon as she was gone, he tested. There was no doubt left in his mind. His bowl invariably tasted different than the blue one.

Meanwhile, he could feel the strength ebbing out of him. Soon, he thought furiously, Marcello would share this very bed with his dark angel. The ghost of anger revived him enough to strengthen his determination that Marcello and Stella should never, never find happiness at his expense!

It was noon. Stella appeared in the doorway bearing her tray with the two steaming bowls. Under her intent gaze, he spooned a little soup into his mouth.

Then he said pleasantly: "I wonder if I might have a little cheese to munch with my soup?"

For the first time, she balked. "*Must* you have it?" she asked sharply.

"Yes," he said firmly. "I must."

Sighing with annoyance, Stella rose to her feet. She went out into the hall. In a flash, old Antonio was out of bed. Pausing only to seize the short cat o' nine tails which he had formerly used to train recalcitrant watchdogs, he followed her down the stone steps, through the kitchen, to the door of the pantry. There he stood, looking in at her as she plunged a sharp knife into the quivering soft white cheese, burying it to the hilt.

That's me, Antonio thought in a sudden flash of intuition. She would like to stab me as she does the cheese. How hungry she must be for the ras-

cally Marcello's ardent young mouth!

The thought maddened him, filling him with a new strength born of wrath which consumed as it strengthened. He gave a wild roar. Stella turned with a soft cry, her eyes widening in terror as she saw his ghastly face, and then, the instrument of punishment which he held clenched in his hand.

Even in his insane rage, Antonio felt the power of her beauty. Those languid eyes, those pouting red lips, that supple rounded body with its goading talent for whetting fresh appetites the instant the old ones were fulfilled—Marcello would never enjoy them! Antonio would make sure of that!

Panting like a wild beast, Antonio fell upon the cowering Stella, his muscular right arm rising and falling steadily in a machine-like motion as he methodically destroyed the things that made Stella beautiful: her smooth tawny skin, her swelling bosom, her billowing hips. He lashed, he kicked, he tore at her body until the floor was slippery with her

blood, laughing when she screamed in fear and agony.

Finally, she fell to the floor and was still. Antonio lurched to the door of the pantry. With a final effort of his falling body, he leaned against the heavy door, pushing it shut and locking it.

Then he gave a last satisfied chuckle which turned to a death-rattle in his throat as he pitched over onto his face and moved no more....

It was Marcello who found the bodies. He had returned—driven by his irritated conscience—to beg the Signora Stella's pardon for his improper advances. When no one answered the door, he investigated.

Ten minutes later, he ran, retching, from the house. He fetched Doctor Frascetta who was, by chance, in the village that day. There was an inquest. Autopsies were performed. The contents of the two bowls of soup were analyzed.

Doctor Frascetta reviewed the case over a glass of wine to the steady obligatto of Marcello's nervous sobbing: "He

was a fool, old Antonio. Stella was an angel."

"But we heard there was poison in his bowl," a villager declared.

"There was poison in both bowls!" the doctor proclaimed. "Stella was weary of suffering—both his and hers. She had been dosing herself steadily for weeks, hoping to weaken gradually and die with him. Unfor-

tunately, her dosage was too weak and Antonio was too strong to oblige her. She could wait no longer. Determined to die with him, she put a lethal dose into both the yellow and the blue bowls. She did not realize that Antonio had already been poisoned by the subtlest poison of all: his own imagination!"

THE END

THE CURSE OF THE BORGHIAS

by Christine Crewell

“Jane? Darling, it’s me—
Dina!”

“Dina! When did you get
back?”

“Five minutes ago. It’s glo-
rious to be home again. Of
course, Venice was divine, but
it’s lovely to have one’s own
little things about one!”

One’s own little things, Jane
Darwin thought with wry
amusement, included a da
Vinci sketch, a third century
gold chalice, two BOLLINIS, and
countless pieces of Renais-
sance furniture.

“When am I going to see
you?” she asked.

“First thing tomorrow,”
Dina replied promptly. “I’m
all tied up today. I have to
unpack and there’s a crate I
brought up in the taxi with me
from the boat.”

“Oh, Dina!” Jane exclaimed
reprovingly, her heart sinking

at the mention of the crate.
Dina was at it again. Another
impossibly expensive purchase
to drain their joint account
which was already drastically
depleted by Dina’s extrava-
gant passion for art-collecting.

“Now don’t scold me,
darling,” Dina pleaded. “You’ll
love it when you see it. You’ll
agree it was worth every pen-
ny—”

“How much?”

“Only 2 million lire,” Dina
said brightly.

“American money, please.”

“Thirty-two hundred dol-
lars,” Dina translated re-
luctantly.

“Thirty-two hun— Dina,
you’re insane!”

“It was an absolute steal,
darling. Believe me. It came
right out of a Renaissance
ducal palace. It’s even got a
curse on it. And it will look

positively smashing in Mother's old sewing-room!"

"What is it?"

"Two wall panels done by Santangelo in the thirteenth century. They say he was commissioned by one of the Borgias. Isn't it too thrilling?"

"Devastating," Jane remarked dryly. "But you *promised*, Dina! You swore you were finished with these fantastic purchases. We aren't that rich, darling. The way you're going through the money, it won't last five years."

"I knew you would scold me," Dina said glumly and Jane could see her as clearly as if she stood next to her. Her full lower lip sulked, her big blue eyes shimmering with self-pity.

Jane sighed. Dina was a child—a beautiful, spoiled child. And she, the plain sister—the one with the "good head on her shoulders" as their mother used to say consolingly—was unable to do anything but go right on spoiling her. Dina was so bright, so pretty that Jane didn't have the heart to disappoint her.

"I'm not scolding you," Jane

told her gently. "I'm just trying to talk a little common sense into that silly head of yours. What time tomorrow?"

"Make it early. Ten-ish," Dina said happily, sensing that she had won again. "I can't wait till you see my treasure!"

The phone clicked. Jane stared at it blankly. Thirty-two hundred dollars, she thought. She shuddered.

At the time of their mother's death, the sisters had decided between them that Dina should have the family brownstone which stood on a fashionable street in New York's East Side. Dina did considerable lavish entertaining and she needed large quarters in which to display her objets d'art which would look ridiculous in Jane's tiny two-room garden apartment.

Since then, however, Jane had had cause to regret having handed the house over to Dina. If Dina had had to be content with a few small rooms, she would have conquered her addiction to expensive antiques and Renaissance art which had already consumed over half of the sizable legacy left them both by their mother. Dina had

spent her share of the inheritance and was now making inroads on Jane's.

And, fool that I am, Jane thought unhappily as she rang Dina's doorbell, I'll let her get away with it until we're both forced to look for jobs. The thought of working didn't alarm Jane, but she knew it would practically kill Dina.

The door flew open. A wild-eyed Dina yanked her over the threshold.

"What on earth—!" Jane spluttered.

"It's Potsy!" Dina declared abruptly. "She's gone completely crackers! She's threatening to leave me!"

"Potsy — leave?" Jane couldn't believe her ears. The venerable Mrs. Potts had kept the old brownstone clean for so many years that she couldn't imagine the house without Potsy.

"What did you do to her?" she demanded of Dina.

"Oh, sure," Dina said sharply. "That's right. Blame everything on me."

"What did you do?" Jane repeated.

"I asked her to clean Moth-

er's sewing-room." Dina replied sarcastically. "Wasn't that dreadful of me?"

"It's not the room, Miss Jane," said an indignant voice from behind Dina. "It's that filthy thing she's got in it!"

"Filthy thing!" Dina exploded. "That filthy thing came out of a Venetian's duke palace for your information. And it cost three thousand dollars!"

Three thousand two hundred, Jane corrected mentally. "What is it that you object to, Potsy?" she asked calmly.

"I can't rightly say," Potsy said earnestly. "I just don't like the looks of it. Nor the feel of it. And what's more—" she hesitated "—when I turned away from it, I could swear it *moved*!"

"You see?" Dina threw up her hands in exasperation. "I told you—completely crackers."

"It's not me that's crazy," Potsy retorted. "It's you. If I were you, I'd throw it out with the trash."

"I'd die first," Dina said grimly.

"Well, don't expect me to clean that room as long as that thing is in there, because I won't. And that's final!"

Head held high, Potsy stomped off. Jane smiled.

"I hope you realize that she means it," Jane said. "I'm afraid you're going to have to learn how to handle a dust-cloth if you want the sewing room cleaned from now on—"

"I can't!" Dina wailed. "You know I'm allergic to dust."

"Not dust," Jane amended, grinning. "Work!"

Dina shrugged as she always did when an unpleasant subject was mentioned. "I could kill Potsy!" she grumbled. "She's ruined my whole day. And she's probably prejudiced you against my lovely panels!"

Jane laughed, hugging Dina's shoulders. "I don't take Potsy's superstitions all that seriously," she said. "Come on, show me the bone of contention."

Their mother had chosen the rear second-floor room as her sewing-room because it was, undeniably, the most pleasant room in the house. It

caught most of the light during the day and looked over a tidy garden which, in summer, was green and fresh.

For the first time, Jane experienced a sharp chill as she walked into the room. There was a bouquet of cut flowers arranged in a tall crystal vase on a small Louis Quinze table. Jane frowned as she looked at them.

"Are those the flowers I sent you last night?"

"Yes," Dina said absently. "I meant to thank you for them but Potsy has me so perturbed that I don't know what I'm doing."

Jane was annoyed—not at Dina's lapse of manners so much as at the florist's indifference. The flowers, which should have been fresh, were wilted and brown-edged.

"I told that florist to make certain the flowers were fresh," she said irritably.

"Never mind them," Dina said impatiently. "Come over here."

The Venetian panels were placed against the wall prior to being permanently in-

stalled. At first glance, Jane assumed the design on them to be a nature pattern—of brightly colored leaves climbing a curved trellis. As she drew closer and examined them, however, she saw that the involved and intricate curlicues which she had taken for tendrils and branches were in reality entwined and ensnarled human limbs. And what had originally impressed her as blossoms on the snaking vine were—

“Why, they’re faces!” Jane exclaimed.

Dina nodded in satisfaction. “The dealer identified several of them for me. This one here, for example—is supposed to be a self-portrait of the artist. The legend goes that he committed suicide after completing the painting by leaping out of his window straight into the Grand Canal. They never found his body—”

Peering closer, Jane scrutinized the tiny round pink face which Dina’s finger indicated. It was a blind, bloated, dead face.

“Did they all jump into the canal?” she asked.

Dina shrugged. “How should I know? Why do you ask?”

“They all have that drowned look.”

It was true. Every one of the tiny pink faces had the same swollen, dreaming expression on their flat, blank surfaces. They looked drowned all right, Jane thought suddenly, but not in water. They were drowned in dreams of sensuality, bloated with gallons of wine and tons of opiates, their voracious appetites gorged in soft moving mountains of heaving flesh. As she stared, the convoluted patterns of the design took on new, obscene meaning for her which went beyond anything she had ever glimpsed in degenerate art, beyond pornography to something so abominable she could not find a name for it. Her eyes widened in horror. The illusion grew upon her that the human vine of limbs and drowned heads were actually undulating in a slow, writhing, hideous, orgiastic movement. A cold hand closed about her heart. Involuntarily, she cried out and covered her eyes.

"What on earth—?" Dina asked.

"It moved!" Jane wailed. "Didn't you see it? It moved!"

"Oh, come on now!" Dina said angrily. "Don't tell me you've gone balmy on me, too. This is ridiculous. Look at it."

Her hands pulled Jane's away from her eyes.

"Look at it!" Dina insisted.

Reluctantly, Jane ventured a peek. To her amazement, the surface of the panels was still, its flamboyant colors blandly innocent of any hint of motion.

"Talk about the power of suggestion!" Dina was exclaiming. "I've never seen the like!"

"It's all right now," Jane said stubbornly, "but it moved before. I saw it!"

"You saw nothing!" Dina said coldly. "You're just saying it to make me regret buying it. You want me to feel guilty about spending your money!"

"I don't care about the money," Jane said urgently. "But you've got to get rid of this

thing. I can't explain it. I just know that it's evil—"

"I'm sick of being treated like a child!" Dina went on, ignoring her, warming to her subject, "I can't buy a thing without worrying what you'll have to say. You don't want me to have any fun out of life. You want me to hole myself up with you and a bunch of dull blank books until I'm old and tacky and dreary like you. Well, I won't do it! I like beautiful things around me, and I mean to have them—"

"But this isn't beautiful!" Jane argued. "It's hideous. I can't allow you to keep it!"

Dina's lovely eyes popped dangerously. "Allow me!" she cried. "What are you—my keeper? I'll tell you something: if a psychiatrist saw the way you're carrying on over a simple piece of painted wood panelling, you'd be in a strait jacket and I'd have complete control of the money! Telling me that thing moved!"

"It did move!" Jane cried. "It did. It did!"

Dina stamped her foot in a childish tantrum of rage, the blood rushing into her cheeks.

"Awwrrbh—" she growled. Jane watched helplessly as she stormed from the room.

Then, in the next instant, a paralyzing terror seized her as the door slammed behind Dina, shutting her in with the Venetian panels.

"Dina!" she shrieked, rushing at the door. It was locked. Frantically, she hammered at the heavy wood. "Let me out. My God, Dina!"

Dina's voice—cold and impervious came to her. "You're going to stay in there until you stop this nonsense and admit how selfish you're being."

"Dina," Jane pleaded. "This isn't a game. Let me out—please! You can do anything you want—"

A tinkle of triumphant laughter drifted through the door. But the door remained locked. Jane heard Dina's footsteps move away—down the hall. Jane rattled the door-knob in a desperate frenzy of fear. "DINA!"

Then there was a rustling behind her. She whirled. Her eyes gaped at the painted vine which had stirred into life

again and was moving, feeling its way hungrily down from the panels across the carpeted floor, pulsating like timid blood veins, groping, reaching out ravenously—for her. In helpless fascination, struck dumb with fright, she saw that the blind, drowned eyes of the pink blossom faces were open now and staring at her, the mouths beneath them yawning and sucking gluttonously. They travelled along the coiling, snaking vines that were now only inches from her feet, coming closer. One exploring tendril touched the toe of Jane's shoe and fastened on it. She whimpered and shrank against the locked door. Then as the crawling, oozing horror slithered on to her flesh, she finally found her voice in a single shrill scream of terror....

Dina heard the scream. She paused in the hall and waited with her head cocked. The pounding on the door, the rattling of the knob had ceased. A smug, satisfied smile spread her petulant mouth. Her blue eyes gleamed with victory. Turning, she returned to the door and listened.

All was silent.

Apparently, Jane had realized that her silly tantrums wouldn't move Dina this time.

"Is the hysterical tyrant gone?" she called playfully through the door. "Is my sweet and sensible Jane back again?"

There was no answer. Dina scowled.

"Jane?" she said tentatively.

Again no answer. An uneasy feeling stirred within Dina. She turned the key in the lock and opened the door.

A strong, sweet, rank, unidentifiable odor struck her nostrils with the force of a blow, making her stomach turn. The reek dissipated quickly. She stepped into the room, her body suddenly tense with anticipation.

To her amazement, the room was empty. No Jane.

"I know you're hiding,"

Dina said, her voice sounding curiously loud in her own ears. "Come on out!"

She looked under her mother's desk and behind the wing-backed chair. There was no place else Jane could conceal herself.

There was no sign of disturbance. Everything was exactly as it had been.

No—she thought then as her eye fell on the panels. Not everything. Something had changed in the design on one panel. She stepped closer to study the design more carefully, squinting.

Then she fell back, gasping in horror.

There was a new blossom on the gnarled tangle of vine. A new, tiny, blind, bloated, drowned face bloomed in that jungle of corrupted flesh.

It was Jane.

THE END

REPENT AT LEISURE

by Rip Kelly

The Reception Room of the Fairmont Country Club was packed with a lively, chattering crowd. At his station behind the service bar, Harry Burgess mixed a half-gallon shaker of dry martinis and deftly poured it out into cocktail glasses. George Parker, one of the waiters hired—like Harry—for occasion, waited to dispense the martinis into the thirsty gathering.

"Hurry it up, will you, Harry?" George said impatiently.

"I've only got two hands," Harry retorted.

"Some mob, huh?"

"More like a National Convention than a wedding."

"Yeah," George said drily, "they all came to kiss the bride. Brrr—" He shuddered. "Now wouldn't you think that a guy with Parkinson's dough could find himself a better-looking chick?"

"Are you kidding?" Harry

replied. "She's got twice as much as he has."

George shrugged. "They don't believe in spreading the wealth around, do they? They that has, gets—"

He snatched up the tray Harry had loaded with Martinis and disappeared into the crowd.

Harry whipped out a second tray and began setting up more glasses on it. His mind was on what George had just said. It was true. He had seen it happen over and over. The rich married the rich. Only occasionally did the rich marry out of their class. When they did, it made the headlines.

Suddenly, he became aware of some sort of commotion near the door. There was a cranning of neck's accompanied by an excited whispering. Looking up, he tried to see what was going on. The crowd was too thick.

George returned with the empty tray.

"Hey, Harry!" he hissed. "You know who just came in?"

"Who?"

"Baby Dickerson."

"Who's that?"

"Where the hell you been, man? You don't know Baby Dickerson, the Million-Dollar Baby? She's the richest chick in these parts. And a real kook to boot. Wait'll you see what she's wearing!"

Just then, the crowd parted sufficiently to allow Harry a brief glimpse of the new arrival. What he saw was enough to arouse his interest. Baby Dickerson was a tall, beautiful woman with burnished bronze hair and milk-white skin, the fulsome curves of which were scantily hidden by the two strips of black silk she wore in appropriate places. Her eyes were long, almond-shaped, green and speculative above her wide, white smile. They briefly encountered Harry Burgess' across the packed room. The impact of that single glance was enough to make his senses reel. The mere sight of a woman had never affected him that strongly be-

fore. I've been a bachelor too long, Harry thought.

Further scrutiny revealed that Baby Dickerson's shapely legs were covered to the knees by dull black rubber boots. In her hands, she carried a Winchester rifle.

"Just get a load of her, would ya?" George gloated in his ear. "All that and millions besides..."

"What's the idea of the rifle?" Harry asked.

George shook his head. "Who knows? I told you she was a kook. Maybe she's been out hunting for another husband."

"She married?"

"Are you kidding? Where do you come from anyway—Mars? Anybody who can read knows that Baby Dickerson's been married five—or is it six?—times. I've lost count. But I remember the first two: an Italian count and a South American diplomat. Then there was the singer from L.A. He did all right for himself. Baby settled a cool million on him. He invested it all in real estate—ran it up to ten million before he was done. Hell! Any guy who does a year's turn with

that chick is set for life. I don't know what the last two got. I don't remember reading about them. She probably dumped them quietly in Mexico. The last one was an English house-painter. The one before him was a milkman, I think. She's been going for the common man lately."

"That's not bad duty," Harry commented thoughtfully. "A million bucks for a year with a doll like that!"

He could not seem to tear his eyes from her alabaster, supple body with its two intriguing tight slashes of black silk. Once again, her green eyes met his across the room. They read the blatant desire which he could not keep from his eyes and narrowed with amusement. Harry felt himself growing red under her intense scrutiny. Then, to his alarm, he saw her heading towards the bar.

God almighty! he thought in a panic. Now I've done it. I'll probably lose my job for flirting with the customers. The thought of being out of work again rattled him. It was the first job he'd had since the

Detroit factory he'd worked in had closed.

He bent over the sink and began washing glasses furiously. He was aware of her presence on the other side of the bar for several minutes before he could bring himself to straighten casually, look into her smiling face and ask: "Can I get you something?"

Her challenging eyes stripped his pretense of nonchalance from him. A pulse began to pound in his temple. He could smell the musky fragrance in her red-gold hair.

"Yes," she said slowly. "A Marguerita."

With fumbling fingers, Harry poured tequila over ice, wishing fervently that Baby Dickerson wouldn't stare at him so intently. She was making him very nervous.

Straining the drink into a glass, he set it on a paper napkin before her.

As he did, her long, tapered fingers closed over his around the bowl of the glass. She leaned over the bar. Her face was temptingly close to Harry's.

"You're cute," she murmured...

The Rolls-Royce limousine purred along the narrow desert road. Harry Burgess looked out of the window at the vast endless wasteland and frowned.

"When are we going to get there?" he asked his wife.

"See that rock?"

She pointed to a stone barrier about half a mile in front of them. Harry nodded. "That's it," she said.

Harry was puzzled, but he did not question Baby further. He did not dare. She had been in an exceedingly peevish mood for the past few days. It had started in Jamaica where they had flown for their honeymoon after a whirlwind courtship and wedding.

Three weeks of Jamaica's unbroken tranquillity had had an adverse effect on Baby's disposition. Not at first, however. At first, she had been gay and playful, passionately inventive. Recalling their first two weeks together, Harry felt a surge of yearning pass through his frame.

It would be that way again, he thought optimistically. Baby was restless and nervous for some obscure reason, but

once they were settled down together in the remote isolation of her desert hideaway, all her former, ardent desire for him would return. Until then, he had no intention of upsetting her any more than she already was. He was crazy about her. Her lure for him included far more than money. She had an almost eerie knowledge of the art of inducing pleasure. When she was in his arms, he completely forgot her long list of marital ventures. In those delicious moments, it was as if he were the first man and she the first woman. Adam and Eve, Harry thought. And up ahead of them was their Garden of Eden—an oasis of love in the barren desert.

Now that they were closer to the giant rock barrier Baby had indicated, Harry could see that the road turned in behind it. The Rolls followed the road which narrowed as it approached a slender pass between two enormous boulders. To Harry's amazement, a uniformed guard toting a machine gun stepped menacingly before the car, signalling it to halt.

"It's all right, Harris!" Baby sang out.

The guard smiled. "Oh, it's you! Welcome back, Miss Dickerson!"

"It's Mrs. Burgess now," Baby informed him, grinning.

To Harry's intense annoyance, the guard laughed as if she had just told him an irresistibly funny joke. "You don't say!" he commented.

Then, turning, he called up to another guard—invisible until now—who stood atop the boulder to the right. The second guard also carried a gun. Harry's Garden of Eden was beginning to resemble an armed camp.

The inspection completed, the Rolls moved slowly through the pass.

"Why all the security precautions away out here?" Harry asked Baby.

"I don't like intruders!" she snapped.

He lapsed back into his careful silence. In Jamaica, her house had been open day and night to anyone and everyone—despite the fabulous collection of gold and silver objects that bestowed the place.

Baby had not been worried about intruders there.

Rock walls formed an impasse around a flat green floor of grass in the center of which an incongruous mineral spring bubbled up. The house itself sat behind the spring, surrounded by giant cacti and small square-shaped buildings.

"What are those buildings?" Harry inquired.

"You'll find out!" she said shortly, without bothering to elucidate.

Two Indian girls came rushing out to greet them the instant the car stopped before the curving stairs to the magnificent house which was built in the grandiose style of the Spanish Conquistadors. They neither smiled nor spoke, but set immediately about struggling with the luggage. Harry moved to assist them, but he was stayed by an imperious look from Baby and the words: "Let them do it. That's what they're here for."

She led the way upstairs and threw open a door leading into a room which faced the sheer stone wall behind the house.

"This will be your room," she announced abruptly—as

she might to an unwelcome guest in the house.

Before he could argue with *her*, she turned and vanished into a room directly opposite his, across the hall. The subservient Indian girls followed her.

Well, Harry thought ruefully, scanning the austere room with its narrow single bed and its claustrophobic view, I guess the honeymoon is over....

He remembered thinking it later that night when Baby's flaming hair was silky against his bare shoulder. He grinned sheepishly into the darkness. Then he realized that Baby was sound asleep and hastened to join her....

It was the cold that awakened him, the biting, bone-chilling cold of the desert night. In his sleep, he sought Baby's warmth. Not finding her, he awakened to discover that she was gone. Rising, he crossed the hall to her room. He opened the door. The bed in her room had not been slept in. He stood by it for a few

minutes, scratching his head in bewilderment.

A crackling sound from outside the house reached his ears. He went to the window of Baby's room and looked out.

A floodlight shone down from the roof of the house to illuminate the appalling scene below. One of the Indian girls were suspended by her wrists from a rope tied over the lowest branch of a thick tree so that her feet were dangling only a few inches above the ground. Her simple, handloomed shift had been ripped away so that the dark honey of her flesh was exposed to the whims of the man holding an ugly plaited bullwhip which teased at the slender helpless form without actually striking it.

Harry recognized the girl's tormentor. It was none other than Harris, the guard who had stopped them that afternoon. He was just about to yell down angrily at him when, suddenly, from out of the shadows, another whip came whistling. It curled about Harris' wrist, causing him to curse furiously!

Then Harry gasped as Baby

stepped into the light, dressed in the same garb she had been wearing when he first saw her—the brief black bikini, the rubber boots and black hair ribbon. She grinned gleefully at Harris' distress. Harry waited to hear her speak, to hear her send the guard packing.

To his amazement, she merely kept grinning at Harris until he stopped grumbling and returned her smile. Harris bent and recovered his whip. Quick as a flash, he lashed out at Baby who jumped out of the way, laughing scornfully. She retaliated, catching Harris on the side of the head. His ear began to bleed copiously. Harris, in turn, drew blood from one of Baby's slender ankles. On and on they went—dueling with their whips and chortling merrily each time the tip of the plaited leather connected with susceptible flesh. Harry, meanwhile looked on in horror, too stunned to move.

Finally, Baby, moving with a partner's grace, jerked the handle of Harris' whip from his hand. He smiled at her expectantly, his even teeth a white slash in his sun-cured face.

Baby began laughing wildly, her head thrown back, her fiery hair dancing on her snow-white shoulders. Still laughing, she ran past Harris and began lashing the helpless Indian girl in a cruel frenzy, circling her body again and again until the white shift was a blood-soaked mass of shreds. The girl's body which had leaped spasmodically at each stripe, was finally still. Harry realized that she had lost consciousness.

Apparently, the realization had struck Baby, too. She stopped moving and stood, panting and exhausted, the whip coiled in her hand. Her body glistened with perspiration. Her eyes glittered madly.

Harris stalked over to her and grabbed her roughly. Burgess, in dismay, saw her go limp in his arms. Harris carried her off into the shadows.

At first, a jealous rage filled Harry. That was his wife—behaving like a wanton with the hired hand! Then reason took hold of him and began whispering to him. He dismissed his impulse to interrupt the two of them and punch Harris in the nose. This was

undoubtedly no new game with Baby. He would not demean himself by making a scene. He had an idea that all six of his predecessors had probably done just that.

No, he would teach her to play with Harry Burgess. When she came looking for him, he'd be gone! By morning, he should be on the main road. He would hitch-hike to the nearest town and make his way to the Coast from there.

There would be a divorce, of course, and—his depression suddenly turned to glee—one of those big settlements George Parker had mentioned, to keep his mouth shut about her promiscuity. Failing that, he might be able to sell her secret life to a scandal sheet for a few thousand.

His husbandly wrath dissolved in the exciting prospect of a cash killing, Harry left the room. He hurried through the house to the front door. The floodlight was still burning. He did not want to be seen. He crept in the shadows beyond the circle of light—along the canyon walls, in the direction of the narrow opening between the two rock barriers.

Harris would not be standing watch. He was occupied elsewhere—

Moving quickly and silently, he continued until he was within mere feet of the opening. Then he stopped dead. Ahead of him in the desert night was the tiny pinpoint glow of a cigarette.

Harry cursed his own stupidity. He had forgotten the other guard—the one to whom Harris had signalled. Frustrated, he decided to turn back. Escaping from Baby's stronghold would not be as easy as he had thought. It would require planning.

There was no hurry, however. He would stick around and enjoy the luxury of his surroundings. He would take full advantages of the pleasures with which his unsuspecting bride would lavish him and then, when the chance arrived, he would make his getaway—

He quickly retraced his steps. He must get back to the house before Baby returned from her tryst with Harris. She must not detect anything strange in his behaviour.

Not an instant too soon, he

slid between the sheets of his bed. Only seconds later, he heard the click of the latch as Baby peered in at him. Apparently satisfied that he was asleep, she closed the door gently, her heels swishing softly as she crossed the hall to her own room—

Harry was awakened in the morning by the same Indian maid he had seen tortured in the courtyard the night before. Without uttering a word, she deposited the breakfast tray on the table next to his bed and departed. Harry watched her go, conscious of her stiff carriage. Poor kid! he thought sympathetically, she must be suffering from the welts left by Baby's enthusiasm.

Baby herself appeared as he was finishing his coffee. She was radiant in a white jersey dress against which her glorious hair was a living flame.

"Good morning, darling!" she said, bending to kiss him.

With a major effort of his will, Harry concealed the revulsion which the touch of her lips created in him. He forced

himself to respond warmly, caressing her.

"Hurry up and get dressed!" Baby ordered, taking the coffee cup from his hands. "I want to show you something."

Under her observant gaze, Harry dressed quickly, chatting casually about any topic which came into his mind. Except, of course, the one which was uppermost: *escape!*

When he was ready, she took his hand and led him out of the house in the direction of the tiny square out-buildings about which he had questioned her the day before.

"Why, they're cages!" he exclaimed in surprise.

He saw that the buildings—brick on three sides and barred on the fourth—were set along a narrow walk at the end of which a lush garden bloomed behind an iron gate.

"I keep my collection here," Baby said proudly. "It's the finest private zoo in the country."

A yellowed-eyed Bengal tiger glared at Harry, licking his chops.

"Are they hungry?" Harry asked. Baby asked ecstatically.

"They're always a little bit hungry," Baby said. "I purposely keep them that way. Otherwise, they get fat and lazy. They're no fun unless they're slightly angry—"

Picking up a bamboo pole, she jabbed the tiger with it. The beast snarled and sprang at the bars, shaking the whole cage with his frustrated fury. Baby laughed.

"Isn't he grand?" she whispered.

Harry saw the cruel light in her green eyes. His skin prickled. He felt suddenly cold all over despite the hot desert sun blazing down on him. She's mad, he thought, totally mad!

"**A**nd these are my new darlings!" she announced gaily, pulling him along the walk. "They arrived while we were in Jamaica."

Harry glanced into the cage and recoiled instinctively. Baby watched him keenly, enjoying his horrified reaction. Inside the cage, three King Cobras fanned their hoods, spitting and baring their evil slimy fangs.

"Aren't they marvelous?"

"I hate snakes," Harry said shortly, shuddering involuntarily.

"You do?" Baby said absently.

They walked on, peering in at a fantastic assortment of apes, vultures and pacing jaguars. All the animals appeared to be in a foul mood. They eyed Harry and Baby with greedy eyes.

"What do you think?" Baby asked, smiling.

To avoid giving his true opinion, he hedged. "What's in there?" he asked, indicating the iron gate behind which nothing but thick foliage was visible.

A veil of secrecy dropped over her eyes.

"Never mind," she snapped. "That wouldn't interest you!"

They returned to the house. Harry spent the rest of the day thumbing through old magazines while Baby was pedicured by the second Indian maid.

That night, Harry feigned a headache.

"I think I'll turn in," he announced at half-past eight.

To his relief, Baby did not protest.

"Probably a touch of sunstroke," was her diagnosis.

For what seemed like hours, Harry stared into the darkness of his room, wide awake and waiting. At long last, he heard the door of the bedroom being stealthily opened. He closed his eyes, concentrating on keeping his breathing regular. Baby crept silently across the floor to hover over his bed, listening. Harry hoped fervently that she could not hear the nervous pounding of his heart which sounded uncommonly loud in his own ears.

After what seemed an eternity, Baby—satisfied that he was asleep—left the room. He heard her rubber boots padding down the hall. Then all was silent.

Harry arose and crossed the hall to her room. From the window, he watched Baby emerge into the circle of light where Harris awaited her with the long-suffering Indian girl whose torso was wrapped in adhesive bandages. Without hesitating, Baby grabbed a corner of the wide bandage

and ripped it from her skin, opening the fresh welts and cuts which the savage beating of the previous night had left. Harry winced. He saw the Indian girl open her mouth in a grimace of agony, but no sound came forth. Then the truth hit him: the girl was dumb! She could not even enjoy the luxury of a scream. Her anguish remained bottled up inside her.

Harris and Baby laughed together at the pitiful expression on her face. Sickened, Harry turned from the window. They were, he knew, only beginning their disgusting ritual of sadism. He pitied the Indian girl. At the same time, he was glad that they would be preoccupied for the next hour or so. It left him free to explore the mystery which lurked behind the iron gate.

He made his way carefully to the zoo. As he walked down the alley between the cages, he was conscious of the watchful eyes of the perennially-hungry beasts upon him. Luckily they made no sound to warn Baby of his presence there.

Now the latch of the iron cage was in his hand. To his dismay, he realized that there

was a padlock on it. Turning the tiny flashlight which he carried to the ground, he searched the area. He was delighted—after a brief search—to discover a long iron key suspend from a hock on the side of the nearest cage. He tried the key in the padlock. It turned. Slowly, he pulled the gate open, cursing under his breath when it creaked.

Then he stepped warily into the cage.

A scream caught in his throat as strong claws gripped him. There was a great furry head against his. Pointed teeth sought his jugular vein. Harry fell to the ground.

An instant later, he was blinking up into the blinding glare of his own flashlight.

"Dear me!" said a British voice in the darkness behind the light. "Who on earth are you?"

"Harry—Harry Burgess."

"Oh," the voice exclaimed, "you must be a new husband!"

Harry nodded, speechless.

"Dreadfully sorry to have fallen on you like that, old boy," the voice went on apologetically. "I didn't realize at

first that you were human. I'm expected, you see, to attack any living thing that comes through the gate. That's part of my training."

"Training?" Harry echoed.

The invisible man chuckled. To Harry's alert ears, there were overt ones of lunacy in his over-ripe laughter.

"Yes," he giggled. "Baby plans to pit me against one of her pets outside. She does it with all of her husbands. Poor Farrington was tossed with a Highland Gorilla. It was a bad show. I think she has me pegged for one of the Jaguars. At least, I'm counting on it. See—I've sharpened my teeth with an abrasive rock and my nails are quite lethal—"

He held up the light to his mouth. Through the thick fringe of crisp dark hair which practically covered the man's face, Harry could see his teeth—white, strong teeth which had been sharpened to barracuda points.

"What do you mean—'she does it with all her husbands'?" Harry demanded, a clammy horror gripping his entrails.

"Oh, I exaggerated, of course," the Englishman said. "I don't really mean *all!* The first four had money settled on them, as you no doubt know. In fact, that's probably why you're here. I know *I* fully expected to be retired with a cool million after a year's term of matrimony. But Baby fooled me—just as she fooled two of my predecessors. She was bored with handing out millions. She decided to get some sport from her husbands before disposing of them. If I can win my test of strength against the Jaguar, she promised me five million!"

"Do you actually think you stand a chance?" Harry asked incredulously, remembering the muscular, powerful bodies of the furious and famished Jaguars who stalked ceaselessly along the bars of their cages.

"As a matter of fact, I do—yes!" the Englishman said. "As I say, I've been in training. There's been some rather large game thrown in here. I've managed to kill anything they've handed me so far. Have to, of course. Only food I get."

"Ever had any snakes to fight?" Harry asked, thinking

of the King Cobras Baby had just imported.

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Harry said. It would do no good to mention the snakes. The Englishman had enough problems as it was.

And he wasn't the only one. The way things were looking, Harry was the next candidate for the cage behind the iron gate.

"How long were you married before she put you in here?" he asked, wondering just how long he had left.

"Let's see now—" The Englishman calculated. "About six months. Baby makes a lovely bride but a perfectly dreadful wife. Our honeymoon lasted five months. Then we came here. One night, I caught her with Harris the guard. The next day I found myself in this cage!"

Five months! Harry's male ego felt crushed. Here he was, after only a few weeks, already discarded for Harris. Then second thoughts bothered him even more. Evidently he was closer than he had assumed to the cage.

"I'm getting out of here!" he muttered fearfully. "How about you? Together we could overpower the guard and be miles from here before Baby knew we were gone."

"Oh, goodness gracious, no!" the Englishman cried in consternation. "I can't leave now—not before I make my big killing!"

"Suit yourself," Harry shrugged. He wouldn't waste precious time trying to convince the crazy Englishman of his folly. Every minute counted now. He felt it in his bones. It was tonight or never.

"Good luck," he murmured. He walked out through the iron gate. He did not bother to lock it after him.

Then he headed directly for the bottleneck leading out of the stone impasse. If the guard stopped him, Harry would fight. He would rather go down with a bullet in him than cut down Baby's zoo-feeding bills.

He arrived at the opening to find no guard there. He approached cautiously. He could be mistaken in the dark. Closer and closer he crept, his heart surging optimistically. At last, he felt the paved road beneath

his feet. He had made it! He was free!

Just then, something hard crashed down on his skull. His knees buckled and he plunged headlong into the black void....

He came to as Harris was locking the iron cage behind him. In a freezy of despair, Harry clambered to his feet and threw himself against the cold, rigid metal bars of his cage.

He heard Baby's insane laugh. Then he saw her, leaning against Harris, grinning at him.

"Be careful, Harry darling," she crooned mockingly. "You're liable to hurt yourself."

Suddenly, Harry realized that he was alone in the cage. The Englishman was gone.

"Where is he?" he demanded.

"Who?" Baby asked. "Oh—you mean Trevor?"

Harry nodded.

Baby giggled. Harris followed suit.

"Poor, darling Trevor!" Baby sighed. "He went berserk. When you thoughtfully opened the gate for him, he made a beeline for the Jaguars.

Climbed right into the cage with them. It was really very silly of him!"

A shudder of horror thrilled through Harry's body. He repressed it with difficulty. Above all, he must not let her see that he was afraid—

"Well," he sneered in an attempt at bravado, "that must have been a disappointment for you. After all, you had different plans for him, didn't

you?"

Baby frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"The snakes," he said. "You were saving him for the snakes."

She found that very funny. She laughed and laughed until all the laughter was out of her. Then, still smiling, she said gaily: "Why, no, darling. You're mistaken. The snakes are all for you!"

THE END

COME KISS THE LASH

by Justin Lamont

The perpetual night of the Arctic winter shrouded the tiny village in murky darkness. However, Feydor Feydorovitch Zwerin knew that it was no later than three o'clock in the afternoon. He was just returning from Count Rasbuddin's estate where it was his unpainful duty to instruct the young Countess Irena in the arts of literature, music and French.

It was very pleasant work, soothing to Feydor Feydorovitch's aesthetic soul and reasonably agreeable to his money-purse. The Count's sprawling manor house with its scores of serfs was the only reflection in that area of the glorious life led by the nobility in St. Petersburg. Feydor Feydorovitch knew much about St. Petersburg. His mother, who had left a life of plenty behind her when she eloped with the peasant groom from her father's estate, had told

him over and over again of the wonders of that magical city.

Feydor never tired of listening to her tales. Moscow was the head of Russia, but St. Petersburg was her heart with its glittering streets, its dazzling balls, its brilliant society. So often had his mother described the place to Feydor Feydorovitch that he felt he could trace a map of St. Petersburg with his eyes shut.

One day soon, he promised himself, he would go there and make his mark in life. He would be received in the finest salons and would mingle freely with the wealthy intellectuals who would be sufficiently moved by the apt, lyric tenderness of his verses to encourage his poetic career with liberal gifts of gold rupees.

His feet crunched noisily along the snow-packed road leading into the heart of the shabby village. No light glimmered through the chinks of

the tiny hovels which lined the road to guide his footsteps. The poor peasants were obliged to hoard their oil in order to light their lamps later, when the gloom would deepen to such a degree that all vision would be obscured.

Feydor Feydorovitch hunched against the biting wind and doggedly trudged onwards in the direction of the primitive inn where he rented a small cramped room under the eaves. There was one major advantage to living at the inn. There was always a small lamp burning downstairs by whose feebly flickering wick Feydor could pursue his studies. It was the lack of light which he found most offensive about winter in those parts. Feydor longed for the summer when the reverse would be the case—when he could read at midnight in the long shadowy twilight.

Absorbed in his own thoughts, he gave a small cry of surprise as he collided in the darkness with another body. Peering through the gloom he discovered his companion was none other than

Alexei Mikailovitch Shulkin, the town blacksmith. Shulkin was a radical who was constantly spewing forth diatribes against the government. Feydor was always a little uncomfortable in his presence, but he took great pains to conceal this.

"Ho, Alexei Mikhailovitch!" he hailed him cheerily. "Where are you going in such a rush that you trample your fellow townsmen under foot?"

"Eh?" Shulkin replied, squinting. Feydor knew that his eyesight was failing badly. "Who is that? Who is there?"

"It is I—Zerwin!"

"Oh, upon my soul—Feydor Feydorovitch! How are you, my dear fellow? And where have you come from?"

"From Count Rasbudin's," Feydor told him unwillingly. "Where I am tutoring his daughter."

At his words, Shulkin started violently. He spat contemptuously on the ground.

"*That* for Rasbudin!" he snarled. "We will be very lucky, my young friend, if—in a fortnight—we are not all grovelling under his whip!"

Feydor frowned in bewilder-

ment. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Shulkin, "that the Czarina comes today to visit Rasbudin. In the past year, she has visited several of her favorite toadies the length and breadth of Mother Russia. The upshot of each visit was that she delivered to her fawning host the surrounding lands formerly held by free peasants, thus converting those unhappy peasants into serfs. Eh! I like not the looks of things, my child!"

Shulkin shook his head dolefully. Feydor, on the other hand, experienced a fierce exaltation which was quickly followed by a keen regret. The Czarina coming to their humble village! If only he had not left Rasbudin's! He could easily have remained there on some pretext. The young Countess was always glad of his company. Perhaps, if he had, the Czarina's eye would have fallen on his gleaming black curls.

She might have asked: "And what do you do, my son?" And Feydor would reply: "I am a poet, your Imperial Majesty." She would command

him to recite and Feydor, rising superbly to the occasion, would create a glowing impromptu paean of praise to the Empress' wisdom and beauty which would bring tears into her eyes. Perhaps she would make him Poet Laureate on the spot. Or, even, his pulses quickened—take him for her lover. She had been known to do such things since the death of her husband. Lover to an Empress! Feydor Feydorovitch dwelled lingeringly on the prospect. That would be a fate worth striving for—indeed, worth dying for!

His delicious reverie was interrupted by the nearby sound of hammering. Shulkin's claw-like hand fastened on the sleeve of Zwerin's greatcoat. "Hark!" he said. "Do you hear that?"

"Yes," Feydor Feydorovitch replied, puzzled. "What is it?"

"Unhappy Russia hears that sound wherever the Czarina goes," Alexei Mikhailovitch said heavily. "Count Rasbudin, like his fellow nobles before him, has ordered that a facade be erected to cover the face of the village—in order

that the Czarina, as she passes, may not be offended by the poverty and squalor of her suffering subjects!"

He paused to spit again. The spittle crackled on the icy crust of the snow. "Russia groans!" he intoned dramatically.

Feydor detached himself from Shulkin's determined grip. "I must go now, Alexei Mikhailovitch," he explained earnestly. "My work awaits me."

"Yes," Shulkin agreed eagerly, to Feydor's immense relief. "That's right, my child. Go. Study. Russia needs children of wisdom to help her in her dark hour of enslavement, God help her. Oh, my country, my country—"

There was more moaning in the same vein from Shulkin, but Feydor did not wait to hear it. He knew Alexei Mikhailovitch was just warming up to his topic. And he had things to do. He must change his clothes and be wearing his finest linen—albeit a bit frayed at the cuffs—when the Imperial Troika passed. Perhaps a miracle

would occur. Perhaps the Empress would see him and be immediately impressed by his uncommon beauty. Feydor Feydorovitch did not believe in preserving any false modesty concerning the singular symmetry of his features, or the purity of his pale brow, or the lustre of his dark ringlets. If only the Empress would cast one lucky glance at him, he thought, his good looks could plead his case for him. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps...

He hurried into the inn where he was greeted with warm enthusiasm by the innkeeper, Vladimir, who was exceedingly proud of his star boarder who was not only an intellectual but who also enjoyed free egress to the noble house of Rasbudin.

"Have you heard the news?" he shouted as Feydor entered. "The Czarina is coming! I have swept the inn from top to bottom in case her Imperial Worship decides to stop here!"

Feydor thought it highly unlikely that the Empress would take it into her head to halt at the ramshackle inn, but he wisely remained silent.

"I am going to change my clothes," he said then, heading for the rickety staircase.

"Quite right, too," Vladimir called after him. "My little Natasha has anticipated you on that score. She has laid out your best shirt for you, the little darling. She is an angel, so thoughtful. There is no doubt but that she will make some man a fine wife someday—"

Feydor ignored the innkeeper's blatant hint. It was true that his daughter Natasha was an appealing armful with her plump bosom and languishing dark eyes, but Feydor was not planning on settling down in that remote village with a mere peasant girl. No, he was his mother's son. St. Petersburg was his ancestral home, to which he must eventually return. He had promised his mother on her deathbed that he would never cease striving to rise above his circumstances.

Upon entering the tiny room high under the roof of the inn, he discovered that Natasha had not only set out his best linen on the patched coverlet of his bed, but had also left a washbowl of snow to

melt upon his shaving stand. She had more than once heard Feydor Feydorovitch's comments on the beneficial results to the complexion of snow-bathing, a theory he had gleaned at his mother's knee.

Stripping down, he sloshed the icy water over his naked torso and his face—his teeth chattering with the cold. He dried himself hurriedly and slipped on his clean shirt and his best frockcoat which was five years old and rather too tight across the shoulders. He reminded himself to stand erect. If he relaxed for an instant, the worn material might be rent with disastrous effect.

He hastened downstairs again and stood before the inn which had been transformed beyond recognition by a false front of thin boards with windows freshly painted on them. In the dark—travelling at the customary speed—the Empress might easily mistake the artificial facade for the real village which lurked behind it—a quagmire of oppression and penury.

Too late, he discovered Alexei Mikhailovitch standing next to him. "Is that you,

Feydor Feydorovitch?"

Reluctantly, he admitted his presence.

"So you have been drawn from your ivory tower to observe the tyrant at first hand, eh?" the old pest inquired loudly.

Zwerin glanced nervously about him to see if Shulkin's treasonous remark had been overheard. To his relief, he noticed that the villagers were too busy hammering the final nails in the mock village to pay any attention to Shulkin. Feydor—to be on the safe side—moved a few paces away from Shulkin. It only made matters worse. Alexei Mikhailovitch's next comment was delivered in an even louder tone: "So much the better. Let us see our oppressor face to face. Enslaver of the poor! Debaucher of the soil! Adulteress! Murderess!"

At this last, Feydor Feydorovitch broke into a cold sweat. It had been for some years whispered about that the Czarina had engineered the assassination of the late Emperor, but only a madman like Shulkin would have the temer-

ity to air such an idea aloud.

"Excuse me, Alexei," Feydor called nervously. "I have an errand to perform."

"Of course, my dear chap. Go about your business. Don't disturb your routine for the Imperial Harlot. Don't be like those spineless lackeys who will put on their finest and bow and scrape as she passes—"

Feydor was conscious of a keen relief that Alexei Mikhailovitch's poor eyesight had prevented his noticing Zwerin's best linen and Sunday frockcoat. If he had, Feydor Feydorovitch thought, I should be in for a pretty lecture, indeed!

He crossed to the other side of the road, hoping that the increased distance would put him out of Shulkin's range of vision. There he prepared to watch for the coming of the Czarina, pounding his feet and thrashing his arms to keep his circulation flowing in the bitter cold.

His vigil was not long. In the dark distance, he heard a roar of greeting go up—as if from many throats. Then a

flicker of light appeared down the road. The people of the village spilled out excitedly into the road. The distant shouting grew louder and was joined by the sound of pounding hoofbeats and jingling troika bells. Then the flickering light spread and multiplied, becoming not one but many torches held aloft by a troop of resplendent Cossacks. Their torches illuminated the dreary gloom, casting a yellow glow across the glittering snow drifts. They turned the Arctic night into day, winter into summer.

Closer they drew. The Cossack colonel who rode in front carried above his head a banned edge in gold fringe. No, Feydor told himself with excitement, it was more than a banner. It was the portrait of a woman. More than a woman, he corrected, a goddess! Her creamy skin and nude shoulders, her blazing blue eyes, her thick, flowing golden curls, her raspberry lips, her proud aquiline nose— Was this Catherine? Feydor wondered ecstatically. Here was beauty to satisfy the loftiest

artistic ideals, the most ardent longings of the soul! With a doration, Feydor gazed hungrily upon the portrait as it passed. Then, with throbbing senses, he awaited the Royal Troika which contained the living counterpart of that glorious image.

Just then, there was a noisy commotion in the road. Alexei Mikhailovitch leaped out to wrest the pole upon which the portrait swung from the Cossack colonel's unwary grasp. Casting the magnificent banner to the ground, he stomped upon it in a fury, shouting: "Into the mud where you belong, oh tyrannous strumpet!"

The procession halted in confusion, the colonel's horse dancing and rearing skittishly. There was a deathly silence. Then, all at once, the colonel recovered from his amazement. His face went purple with rage. Drawing his heavy sword from its scabbard, he plunged the tip into Shulkin's breast. Shulkin tried to scream, but only a great red gush of blood issued forth from his open mouth. In a horrified hush, the watching villagers saw him wriggle helplessly, spitted on

the colonel's sword. Then the colonel withdrew the blade, simultaneously kicking Shulkin in the face. He fell backwards into the snow, twitched once and was forever still.

The awed silence was then broken by a high, shrill trill of laughter. At the sound the colonel turned his head, his white teeth flashing in an echoing smile. There was no doubt that the laughter pealed forth from the Royal Troika. The Czarina deigned to be amused!

With a clamor of clanging swords and silver bridle-chains the procession jolted forward into motion once more, moving faster than before, the colonel apparently afraid of other, more dangerous, demonstrations. Now the Royal Troika with its trio of spirited black Arabian steeds, its silver bells singing, was directly in front of Feydor. He craned his neck desperately for one glimpse into the dim depths. His only reward was the sight of a mass of sable furs from which emerged a hand, tapered exquisitely and white as fresh snow, wearing three rings. The

jewels—as large as the buttons on Feydor's greatcoat—flashed red, green and translucent in the torchlight.

At the sight of that hand, Feydor Feydorovitch's knees went weak beneath him. That tiny hand was the symbol of all the beauty, power, and wealth in the world. To kiss that hand, to gaze upon that face in the flesh—therein were embodied all of Zwerin's earthly ambitions.

Then she was gone and the light with her. She was the sun and the moon, the yearning of his soul. Shivering in the sudden darkness, Feydor Feydorovitch vowed that he would never cease until he stood before her and those sapphire eyes burned into his.

In a daze, he walked across the road to the inn, ignoring the crowd that had gathered about Shulkin's fallen form. "Did you see that, Feydor Feydorovitch?" a soft woman's voice whispered in his ear. "Poor Alexei Mikhailovitch—he didn't have a chance to defend himself. Of course, he should not have said those dreadful things about the

Czarina, but still—to be cut down like a cur—”

He stared at her without seeing her. He saw instead the conspiratorial glint in the laughing colonel's eyes as they glanced into the murky depths of the Royal Troika. It was, Feydor realized suddenly with a violent twinge of jealousy, the look of a lover bridling before his mistress. If the Cossack could be the Empress' lover, then he would be, too!

To Natasha's surprise, he laughed. Her look of shock changed rapidly to a pleased coquetry as she protested: "Feydor Feydorovitch—you forget yourself!"

He laughed again, excited by the day's portentous events, and kissed her in the deepening darkness, the cold night forgotten in the heat of Natasha's willing mouth...

Upon arriving at the estate of Count Sergi Rasbudin the following morning, Feydor Feydorovitch's wild hopes were immediately dashed to the ground by one of the Count's many serfs who informed him that the Czarina had left early that morning to

return to St. Petersburg. The day which he had greeted with such enthusiasm now stretched before him like all the other dull days he had spent with his pupil. He cursed the darkness which made him stumble over the rocks which lined the carriage drive leading to the main house.

He was admitted by the Count's venerable footman and went directly to the schoolroom on the second-floor, observing as he went that there were more candles than usual burning in the house and a singular amount of activity going on among the maids. Was it possible, he mused with a sudden return of optimism, that the serf had been mistaken, that the Empress would be back that night? If so, Zwerin was determined not to leave the grounds until he had encountered his beloved sovereign face to face.

The young Countess Irena who was sixteen, painfully thin and bore an unfortunate resemblance to her noble father ran to take Feydor's hand as he entered the schoolroom.

Her pale, delicate face was alight with excitement.

"Feydor Feydorovitch!" she exclaimed. "Great news—the Czarina has been here—" she shuddered. "A horrible woman—she terrified me—"

"I know," Feydor said, interrupting her. "Tell me—will she return?"

"Here? Why—no," she said hesitantly, startled at the burning intensity of his question. Her round hazel eyes with their pale lashes rested with concern on his crestfallen face. "But you must not be so sad, Feydor Feydorovitch," she insisted. "I have great news!"

He was too depressed to feign any but the most trivial interest. "News—what news?"

"Papa has given orders. We are to leave for St. Petersburg the day after tomorrow."

Zwerin could not repress an anguished groan. A passionate jealousy gnawed at his innards. "The day after tomorrow?" he echoed.

The Countess Irena watched his face with hungry eyes. Mistaking the misery she read in it, as evidence of a flattering

bereavement, she blushed and fluttered her eyelids. "Dear Feydor Feydorovitch—" she murmured affectionately—her hands tightening their hold on his. "Surely you do not think that Irena would abandon her dear teacher in so summary a manner?"

"Wha—?" he asked blankly.

"Don't you understand? You are coming with us!"

"I!"

Irena prattled on happily. "I said to Papa, 'I shall not allow you to deliver me into the hands of some frightening St. Petersburg martinet who will make fun of my poor country ways. If I cannot have my dear Feydor Feydorovitch I shall grow up ignorant and disgrace you!'"

There was more, but Zwerin did not hear it. He was in a deep rapture induced by this abrupt, unexpected windfall. St. Petersburg at last! The dream of his life come true! One dream, at least, he reminded himself. But that one having been accomplished, the second one would follow. For, Feydor Feydorovitch thought ecstatically, to the south of St.

Petersburg lay Tsarskot Selo and the marvelous palace of the Czarina!

The Great Throne Room at Tsarskoe Selo was ablaze with light which reflected in the countless prisms of the massive crystal chandeliers. The polished mirrors and the diamond tiaras which were liberally sprinkled like snow-clusters on the curled and powdered wigs of the elegantly-gowned women who circulated daintily on the glossy floor in the latest Parisian dance steps.

Tsarkoe Selo was reputed to be an inferior cousin to the magnificent palace of Louis XIV at Versailles. Feydor Feydorovitch found this hard to believe. He could not envision anything more luxurious, more elegant than Catherine's Tsarskoe Selo.

He abstained from dancing—afrail of cutting a foolish figure. He contented himself with watching the Countess Irena whose fond eyes constantly returned to his as she minced through the gavottes and minutes. It had been due to the Countess' unflagging in-

tervention on his behalf that he was included in the Empress' invitation to the Court and that he was decently clad in a new frockcoat and frilly linen. She had even bought the shining silver buckles on his boots out of her personal allowance. However, to Feydor's way of thinking, all of her kindnesses had been in vain since she had overlooked the most important item of all: a wig. He alone was not wearing a wig at the ball. His black curls had been oiled and combed, but their very exposure proclaimed distinctly that he was an outsider, that he did not truly belong to this regal gathering!

From time to time, the eyes of passing ladies lingered on his gleaming ringlets. This caused him severe embarrassment. He felt certain that all his neighbors were whispering about him, making fun of his lack of chic. His discomfort reached its acme when a portly French gentleman dressed in grey brocaded satin approached him to ask curiously: "Are you an American?" Zwerin did not know what an American was, but, under the

circumstances, he was sure the allusion was derogatory.

Suddenly, the Imperial March was struck up with a thrilling roll of drums. All dancing ceased, the dancers scurrying to the sidelines to form a living corridor down which the Royal Party might pass. All heads bowed low—until they almost scraped the floor. Feydor Feydorovich followed suit although he longed to be watching the door when his Czarina made her entrance. Eventually, the music ceased. Feydor waited until he was sure all stood erect about him. Then he straightened. At first, he could not see the throne which stood upon the draped dais at the far end of the massive hall. Then the heads which had blocked his view moved. Feydor stared in disbelief. To his confusion, he saw a thin, sullen-faced lad of fifteen slumped dejectedly in the golden chair.

"It's the Czarevitch!" a woman next to him exclaimed softly.

"And where is our beloved Sovereign this evening?" her

companion asked playfully. Feydor moved closer.

"The Czarina is bored with us," the first woman replied in arch amusement. "She has turned to the pursuit of more bizarre pleasures—"

"And more bizarre bedfellows," the other added humorously. "At this moment she is probably romping through the halls in passionate quest of her low-born colonel."

"That brute!" the first commented in disgust.

"Sssshh—" the other cautioned, looking anxiously about her. Her eyes just then encountered Feydor's. She smiled at him coquettishly, agitating her fan.

But Feydor had no time for flirtation. Somewhere in this vast complex of a palace, Catherine was bored and lonely, seeking new amusement, a mouth to kiss. He decided to act at once—before Irena returned to claim him.

He left the Great Throne Room unobserved by the cluster of foppish noblemen who dallied near the entrance, trading bawdy stories. Their bellows of laughter followed

Feydor out into the high-ceilinged antechamber—to the left of which lay the cloak-rooms. The palace attendants cast a fleeting supercilious glance at Feydor's unadorned head before their rapt attentions were restored to the eye-dazzling spectacle in the Throne Room.

A second corridor led off the antechamber, leading to the right. At the end of it was a large mirrored panel. With a hasty glance over his shoulder to make certain he was not being observed, Feydor Feydorovitch plunged down the corridor. At the end of it, he found two doors to choose between: one to the right and one to the left of the mirrored panel. Feydor saw his confusion reflected in the mirror. Behind him, he heard the sound of voices and heels clicking onto the parquet floors of the antechamber. Without hesitating, Feydor dove into the right hand door.

It, in turn, led into another corridor—a smaller one—with a mirrored panel which again reflected Feydor's cau-

tious progress down its length. To his surprise, there was the same choice between doors. Once more, he chose the one to the right. Once more, the door opened into an identical corridor terminating in a paneled mirror. This time, he chose the door to the left. There was another corridor, another mirror, another set of doors. The pattern was repeated over and over again. Finally, Feydor decided to return to the ball, but, after a few attempts, he realized that he could not retrace his steps. He was lost. Like a rat in a maze, Feydor rushed down the succeeding corridors, opening doors—now to the right, now to the left—always to find himself in a place exactly like the one he had just fled. A clammy sweat broke out all over his body. His face, as reflected in the endless mirrors was taut and haggard, with a wild, trapped look to the eyes.

Was he going around in a circle? he wondered anxiously. It occurred to him that he could be lost in that labyrinth of mirrored halls for days, without being found. The thought added impetus to his

careening through the mirrored alleys.

Then, suddenly, as he paused, panting, to stare desperately at his perspiring countenance in one mirror, a new crawling sensation increased the panic which he fought to control. Feydor felt he was being watched. The hair rose at the back of his neck. He whirled. There was nothing behind him. Only blank wall and mirror surrounded him. Throwing open the door at his right, he hurried to escape the invisible eyes which he felt upon him. It availed him nothing. The almost—physical sensation was upon him, even stronger than before. Faster and faster, he hurried down the corridors, his breath whistling raggedly through his constricted throat. Still, the eyes followed him.

He could feel their cold malice like an icy hand upon his heart. Finally, he could master his rising panic no longer. He flew at the walls, his nails ripping away at the silk covering to reveal nothing but the plaster beneath. Then his ears detected what

sounded like a tinkle of far-off mirth. He held his breath. Had his hearing deceived him? No, there it was again—closer this time.

“Who are you?” Feydor Feydorovitch shouted in a quavering voice he scarcely recognized as his own. “Where are you?”

The laugh was nearer as it gurgled in answer to his frantic query. It seemed to emanate from the mirrored panel. Feydor drove his fist into it, shattering it into a glistening spider’s web of glass. At this, the laugh exploded directly into his ear—a mad, shrill, deafening shriek of devilish triumph!

Then a hand emerged from the door behind him and seized his shoulder in a rigid grip. Feydor gasped once in terror at the touch and then, overcome with vertigo, slumped to the floor...

He revived in a dank crypt deep in the earth below the ornate grandeur of Tsarskoe Selo. He found himself seated on a straight-backed wooden chair which, in turn, rested on a small podium in a

circle of candelabra which illuminated Feydor Feydorovitch's near-naked figure in the center of the encompassing darkness.

Scarcely had his lids fluttered upwards when he was yanked to his feet by the cold iron band which encircled his throat. The metal band was connected by an iron-link chain to a pulley suspended from a hook in the center of the groined vault ceiling. Invisible hands had pulled on the other end of the chain, propelling him to his feet. Now other hands reached out—too quickly for Feydor's dazed eyes to catch—to pluck the chair from behind him so that he was forced to remain standing.

Suddenly, a group of musical instruments filled the crypt with a lively air which bounced from the vaulted arches which a blitheness which seemed to mock Zwerin's sorry plight.

"Come, peasant," exhorted a sneering male voice from the darkness. "Let us see you dance to that merry tune!"

Stung at the patronizing use of the word 'peasant', Fey-

dor Feydorovitch remained motionless, glaring obstinately in the direction of the voice. Then, abruptly, he *was* dancing!—his feet flailing wildly in the air, his hands clutching convulsively at the iron noose by which he found himself suspended a foot above the podium. His throat closed, his lungs strained for air. Once again, unconsciousness threatened to overtake him, but at the very last moment of lucidity he was unceremoniously dumped upon the podium, limp as a marionette whose strings have been severed.

The sprightly music increased in tempo and volume, swelling until it became almost ear-splitting. Clapping his hands to his ears, Feydor Feydorovitch sank to his knees.

"See!" jeered the voice. "He objects to our music. Let him then supply some of his own! Sing for us—you dog of a serf's bastard!"

Fearing a strangled death by the iron noose, Feydor attempted a feeble chorus from his parched and tortured throat which was far from audible in the teeth of the booming music.

"Louder!" ordered his tormentor.

Feydor tried in vain.

"That is not good enough!" said the voice, coming nearer. "I will give you singing instructions."

Into the circle of light stepped a familiar figure in a pair of tight broad cloth breeches and a white silk shirt with flowing bell sleeves. Feydor exclaimed in surprise. It was none other than the Cossack colonel who had cut down old Alexei Mikhailovitch without so much as turning a hair! His heart sank as he glimpsed the venomous-looking black bull whip in the colonel's hand.

"Yes," the colonel said, tossing his head so the light caught fire in his auburn locks. "I will teach you how to sing, pretty boy!"

The whip seemed to leap in his hand, lashing out across Feydor Feydorovitch's naked back like a streak of fire. Caught unawares, Feydor shrieked at the pain. The whip descended again and again, its biting tongue licking at Zwerin's defenseless flesh. Feydor set up a frightened howling,

his body cavorting madly below his iron choker in a futile attempt at eluding the relentless leather sting.

Then—a ripple of delighted female laughter froze Feydor Feydorovitch in his mindless gyrations. All at once, he was transported back to the village road. He could feel the numbing Arctic wind, could hear the pealing mirth spilling forth from the Royal Troika. That laugh! The Czarina! She was in this very room—perhaps only a few feet away, her fabled beauty concealed in the impartial darkness, watching him struggle as a sheep does in the jaws of a wolf!

In an effort to regain face, Feydor Feydorovitch straightened and threw back his handsome head in a gesture of pride. With gritted teeth, he absorbed the angry colonel's lashes without flinching. Even if he died for his impertinence, Feydor knew he must seize this one last chance at seeing his adored Sovereign face to face, at being allowed to kiss the hem of her skirt.

"O Empress of my soul!" he exclaimed imploringly, com-

posing *ex tempore*. "White Star of the Lonely Steppes, Queen of Ice and Fire, Queen of my enslaved heart—"

"Silence, dog!" the colonel snarled, jumping onto the podium to drive his fist into Feydor's mouth.

Feydor Feydorovitch could taste the blood running from his lips. Still he persisted stubbornly, crying out all the louder: "O Consolation of my Pain, I kiss thy Fiery Lash. I long anew to kiss the Spot where thy Strong heels have rested—"

The music had stopped. The colonel desisted his lashing and stood silent, glowering at Feydor. A profound silence filled the crypt as Feydor's throbbing voice went on and on, waxing ever more rhapsodic as he lingered lovingly on every beauteous attribute of the Czarina, growing more and more bold in his poetic wooing until the colonel's face was black with rage and a soft sighing was heard to stir through the gloom.

At long last, the Muse deserted him. He stood, taut as a drawn bow, his senses all

a-quiver at the thought of the listening loveliness whose azure eyes devoured him from the dark.

Then, to his soaring delight, he heard *her* say: "Release him, Sergei!"

The colonel wheeled as if he had been struck from behind. "Your Majesty," he pleaded. "Do not sully yourself by tarrying with this peasant's cur!"

"Is that a command, Sergei?" the voice asked menacingly.

Drooping, the colonel bit his lip. Without uttering another word, he strode onto the podium and unlocked the iron band which held Feydor captive.

"Now, leave us—all of you!" the Czarina barked.

There was a shuffling sound as the room emptied. Feydor stood on the podium, rubbing the raw spot where the iron noose had gnawed into his throat. He peered blindly into the darkness, unable to see a thing beyond the candelabra.

"And now—" the Imperial voice cooed, satisfied that they were alone. "Let me gaze upon your pretty boyish charms—"

"And I upon yours," Feydor retorted boldly, burning with desire to savor first-hand the lush mixture of cream-and-gold which wielded Russia's power with such a certain hand.

"All in good time, my pretty," the Empress trilled. "All in good time. Tell me, boy, did you mean what you said? That you would love me forever?"

"Till eternity and beyond!" Feydor swore dramatically.

"Ah," the Czarina said sadly, "they all say that—at first. I grow tired of man's fickleness. I need a lasting love."

"Take mine!" Feydor shouted.

"Be careful," she warned. "I brook no broken promises uttered in impulse. Think well. Will you stay with me forever—remembering that the least betrayal of gesture or thought will incur a lingering death by torture?"

"There is no torture greater than to be deprived of your glorious presence," Feydor cried in a delirium of joy. At last, he thought, all his wild impossible dreams were to come true. The Empress was

as good as in his arms, and Feydor Feydorovitch Zwerin had the last laugh on all the earnest fools who had counseled him to choose either the buxom Natasha or the solicitous Countess Irena. What need had he of peasant-girl or countess? The world was his!

"Then, come, boy," the Czarina said huskily.

"Come to claim the reward of your vow before your little Catherine swoons with longing—"

Seizing up a candelabrum, he headed in the direction of her voice. Through the darkness, he could not see a long divan upon which a supine figure rested. His heart pounded in his throat. His senses reeled with desire.

"Halt!" Catherine ordered. "Leave the light and come in the darkness."

"But I want to see you—" Feydor protested.

"Later," the Empress murmured, her honeyed voice promising infinite pleasures.

Obediently, Feydor lowered the candelabrum. As he moved his arm, however, the rays from the candles caught a

flicker of gold next to the divan. He hesitated, then raised the light. He could see the golden object clearly. It was a wig on a wooden stand—a wig of glossy yellow hair which had been brushed and curled in an elaborate coiffure which was oddly familiar to Feydor. It was, he suddenly realized with alarm, a duplicate of the coiffure which he had seen painted on Catherine's portrait. A hideous suspicion seized hold of him, compelling him to lift the candlelabrum high over his head—so that the divan and its Im-

perial occupant were revealed.

In the candlelight, she grinned up at him sardonically with her blackened, gap-toothed smile—a flabby, bloated odalisque with rheumy blue eyes and a gleaming skull as bald as an egg. The Imperial rings glittered on her beautiful hands as she stretched them forth commandingly to the aghast and revolted Feydor, murmuring passionately: "Hurry, my dove. Let us put forever to the test!"

THE END

MURDER: SCENE ONE

by Denham Kelsey

Mark Smeaton hurried through the darkened London streets, his nimble feet executing frivolous little dance steps as he went. They carried him onto the rotting boards of the small pier which jutted out into the Thames.

At the end of it was a small ferry-boat rocking idly at its mooring. Mark leaped lightly into the boat. The thump of his landing awakened the boatman who blinked at him sleepily.

"Stepney, my good man!" Mark ordered merrily. "And dont spare your back!"

He settled in the prow of the boat as the boatman poled the small vessel out into the current which would carry them to Stepney in little time.

"An uncommon hour ter be goin' on ter Stepney!" the boatman observed conversationally.

His familiar, friendly tone annoyed Mark. Apparently,

all his finery had not in the least impressed the lowly boatman. He was still cursed with that intangible something which marked him as lowborn. Piqued at this reminder of his humble birth, Mark snapped: "I go to dine with His Majesty's Privy Councillor, Lord Cromwell!"

The boatman's eyes popped with fear at the name.

"Gor!" he exclaimed. "Don't take me amiss, milord. I wasn't pryin' in what don't concern me. Just making a little friendly talk like."

Mark nodded curtly.

He could not blame the man for reacting so pointedly to the mention of Cromwell's name. It was a time of great stress for England, a time of dissension and intrigue, when a careless word from a man's lips could easily cost him his head. Every day, ordinary men

were snatched from the ale-bench and the street for speaking in jest or in earnest idle words which could be construed in the long view as being treasonous to the King. Those men never reappeared. Thomas Cromwell saw to that.

Yes, they were dangerous times. Times of great peril. But, Mark thought with a smile, they were also times of great opportunity for a man who knew how to milk the most from the chances which were handed to him.

Mark considered himself such a man. Oh, he was talented enough. But many players, dancers and musicians before him had had talent a-plenty and had wound up performing for pence on the curbs of London. It took more than talent—even such talent as Mark possessed. He could dance with agility and grace, he performed with equal skill on several musical instruments, he sang in an agreeable tenor, and he was highly skilled at composing impromptu ditties of considerable wit and charm, calculated to flatter those in high places.

For three years now, he had been a favorite with the cream of nobility. He had given many command performances at Court. His pockets jingled pleasantly with the heavy clink of gold sovereigns.

In fact, many people would consider him to be at the head of his profession. But Mark was still not satisfied. Sometimes he felt that he would gladly forfeit all the purses of gold he had received to be included in the august company of the aristocrats he entertained so regularly.

They applauded his performances with vigor, but when it came to receiving him socially, the fact that his father had been a mere artisan was never overlooked. Mark longed to be included in the inner circle of the Court. To have his name mentioned in connection with some flower of the nobility—that was a distinction almost worth dying for!

Now it appeared that his fondest ambition was about to become reality. Cromwell, of all people!—who always viewed his theatrical an-

tics with a visage grim and unamused—had popped into his life as the patron who would guide him into those Elysian Fields he dreamed of. In the pocket of his vest, he carried an invitation in Cromwell's own hand to dine with him that very evening!

It was the greatest possible opportunity. Everyone knew that Cromwell had the King's ear. Whatever Cromwell approved, the Crown was bound to sanction. Mark could envision a long, prosperous career as Court Musician—teaching music to the dashing young Queen, the little princesses, the pretty maids-in-waiting who bloomed like butterflies for a few seasons at Court before marriage or scandal condemned them to doff their brilliant wings in favor of more serious garb.

Yes, if he pleased Cromwell tonight, he was well on the way to realizing his wildest dreams!

He was still lost in pleasant reverie when the boatman pulled the small boat up to the wharf and announced in subdued tones: "Stepney, milord!"

Mark casually tossed him a

sovereign which elicited a deluge of obsequious thanks. Then he set off briskly across the green to Cromwell's great house.

Upon reaching it, he was gratified at the way doors were opened at the mere mention of his name. Obviously, the Lord Privy Councillor had taken pains to see that he was not kept waiting.

A livery-man took his velvet cap and walking-stick and showed him into a long narrow hall in which stood a bare oak-table. Cromwell was seated behind the table, his bullet-shaped head uncovered, his piercing eyes on Mark's face as he made a graceful leg.

"Ah, Mr. Smeaton!" he hailed him, without rising. "Pray be seated—just there opposite me, where I can enjoy the prospect of your amiable face."

Mark obeyed, wondering at the absence of victuals from the wooden board.

Then two men came up soundlessly and stood beside me. Mark glanced at them and stirred nervously.

"Mr. Smeaton," Lord Crom-

well said, "that is a most attractive ring you are wearing. It's a ruby, is it not?"

"No, my lord," Mark corrected smilingly. "I fear it is no such rare gem. It is a garnet, my lord."

Cromwell's clenched fist crashed down on the wooden table with sufficient force to set it vibrating. Mark blinked with surprise.

"You lie, sir!" Cromwell snarled. "I remind you that I am Secretary to His Majesty. I know a ruby when I see it—"

Mark shrugged. "As you wish," he said, not desiring to get into a dispute with this powerful lord.

The dinner was certainly not going as he had anticipated.

"Now," Cromwell went on, baring his irregular teeth in a cold smile, "I put it to you: who gave you that ring?"

Mark stared in amazement. "Gave, my lord?"

"Yes," Cromwell snapped. "Gave! And that vest of satin embroidered with thread-of-gold. How came you by that?"

"I bought it, my lord!" Mark sputtered in confusion.

"Aha!" Cromwell cried. "With what?"

"Gold sovereigns, my lord."

"Precisely," Cromwell said grimly. "And who gave them to you?"

"I received them for performing at Court."

"Received them, you say," Cromwell echoed. "From whom?"

Mark hesitated. Cromwell nodded to one of the men who stood behind him. A rope was knotted around his damp curls.

Fear formed like a rock in his stomach. What was Cromwell's game? He wondered anxiously. Whatever it was, Mark was willing to play it. Anything to stay on the Privy Councillor's good side.

"What do you wish me to say, my lord?" he asked eagerly.

Again the thin smile on Cromwell's bloodless lips.

"The truth, Mr. Smeaton. Only the truth. Tell us now— from whom did you receive the sovereigns?"

"You were present, my lord," Mark pointed out, "when Her Majesty graciously presented the sov—"

"Her Majesty, you say? Her Majesty gave you gold?"

"Yes," Mark said.

"What else did she give you, Mr. Smeaton?"

Mark stared at him. "Nothing."

"You're lying again!" Cromwell snapped. He nodded once more to the man behind Mark. A stick was slipped into the knotted rope around Mark's head and a turn taken in it. "She gave you the doublet you wore at your last court appearance!"

"I did not know that," Mark protested truthfully. "I never knew from whence it came. I receive many gifts from my noble audiences."

"As is only fitting with a gifted performer like yourself," Cromwell purred smoothly. "You are a very handsome man, Mr. Smeaton. No doubt many women have told you so."

In spite of his precarious position, Mark smiled complacently.

"A few?" he said.

Cromwell leaned forward interestedly. "Perhaps you have even captured the hearts of some ladies at Court?"

It was a time when men boasted freely of their conquests. Mark contented himself with raising his eyebrows eloquently under the knotted rope.

Cromwell chuckled lewdly.

"We are both men of the world, Mr. Smeaton," he said. "I can see we are cut from the same cloth. Shall we begin by naming names?"

"Well," Mark said boldly, "There was Mistress Fitzwilliam."

"A pretty piece of work," Cromwell said approvingly. "And—?"

"Susannah Wibley."

"Admirable! And who else?"

"Nobody."

The fist pounded the table again. Another turn was taken in the rope. Mark could feel the pressure of the stick against his skull.

"How about the Queen?" Cromwell demanded bluntly.

So that was it! Mark thought. The King was behind this inquisition. He was jealous of the Queen's meagre attentions to him. A cold sweat bathed Smeaton from head to toe. He

must, somehow, convince Cromwell of his innocence.

"I have never dared to even dream of the Queen in that regard!" he protested.

Another tightening of the stick.

"You deny that she yielded to you?" Cromwell shouted.

"Yes!" Mark cried out.

The stick tightened again. Mark groaned in agony.

"Confess!" Cromwell shouted. "And I will order the cord taken from your head."

"I will never confess to having inspired the King's jealousy!" Mark shouted.

"The King's jealousy!" Cromwell exclaimed. A crafty expression came over his face. "And if I were to tell you that the King is not jealous, that he does not care, that, in truth, he loves another?"

It seemed an amazingly transparent trap for one of Cromwell's reputation for guile. Mark remained silent. The stick turned. He screamed. . .

For hours, the inquisition continued.

"She did yield to you, did she not? Confess. . . Another

turn. . . You are foolish to suffer so for a woman who cares for you only as a plaything, a sop to her lust. . . Do you think you are the only one? There are others who will gladly confess and spare themselves this needless suffering. Use your head, man, before we squeeze it to a bloody pulp. . . You refuse? Very well. . . Another turn, then. . ."

Thrice Mark lost consciousness. Thrice he was revived to suffer anew. The line between truth and fantasy grew steadily more vague as the agonizing pressure on his cranium increased.

Finally the pain ebbed away. He saw himself clearly—lapsed in the young queen's arms. Her sparkling black eyes gazed wantonly into his, her ruby lips drew closer. . .

From afar off a persistent voice, like the buzzing of a bee, kept saying: "She did yield didn't she did yield didn't she did yield did yield. . ."

"Did yield," Mark repeated aloud.

"How many times?" Cromwell demanded harshly.

"Many times," Mark echoed. He laughed. Then his

head slumped forward.

One of them answered with a worried shake of the head. "I think we went too far, my lord. I'm afraid he's gone mad to stay!"

"So much the better," Cromwell snapped.

Thus it was that the actor Mark Smeaton, his mind deranged by torture, played his most important role when

he stood on the block of the Tower of London and repeated his confession, shouting: "I have deserved death!"

For it was that speech which lent credence to the adultery charge levelled by Henry VIII against Anne Boleyn and launched him on his long and successful career as the most nonchalant wife-slayer in history!

THE END

SATAN'S SPAWN

by Pete Brown

“Faugh!” spat the aged hermit in disgust. “So they have sent a mere boy to do a man’s work!”

Bhavarid-la shifted uncomfortably under the old man’s scorn. After his arduous journey on foot, he had anticipated a more gracious reception. Especially since he was releasing the hermit to pleasurable retirement at the High Lamasery after three decades of uninterrupted servitude.

Now he, Bhavarid-la, would take the hermit’s place, and the Lord Vishnu alone knew how long he would be there—perhaps until the elasticity of youth had left his agile young body. He did not complain. It was the will of Brahman that he be confined to this deserted and decaying old retreat high in the foothills of the Himalayas. Actually, he welcomed the isolation. It would make the observation of his austere

vows all the easier—removed as it was from all the temptations that the world behind him had to offer.

He eyed the saffron robes of the old hermit with distaste. They were bedraggled, unclean and bore greasy souvenirs of a hundred meals. There was no excuse for such slovenliness, he thought disdainfully. Simply because he had hidden himself from the eyes of the world for thirty years was no reason to abjure cleanliness. Cleanliness was a personal, holy thing.

He hid his thoughts behind his respectful attitude as he bowed humbly before the hermit, saying: “I will do my best to preserve the rule of the Lord Vishnu in this remote hermitage.”

“Your best!” the hermit snorted derisively. “It’s not your best that’s required here, child. It’s your *worst!*”

He chortled mirthlessly.

Bhavarid-la glanced at him sharply. Apparently, the long years of loneliness had muddled the old man's thinking. He decided to humor him, submitting without protest when the hermit marched him to the low stone wall which overlooked the green valley a thousand feet down.

"Look down there!" the hermit ordered.

Bhavarid-la looked, not comprehending.

"What do you see?" the hermit demanded.

"I see a lush, peaceful valley," Bhavarid-la replied without hesitation. "A place blessed with holy prosperity where people can live their lives free from want."

Satisfied, the hermit nodded.

"All that is true," he said, "but you should have seen it thirty years ago, when I first came here. The fields lay fallow, uncultivated. The streams ran brackish. No bird sang to his mate. The people crept fearfully about by day; by night they huddled together behind locked doors, quivering in abject terror of the power which held them in thrall—

that incarnation of the Evil One who called himself the Lord Futsu. From his depraved desires no living being was safe. He preyed without mercy on the young and defenseless, feeding greedily upon the pulsing life-force which flowed in their veins—"

Bhavarid-la shuddered. "This evil man, where is he now?"

The hermit smiled grimly. "I made certain he was dead."

"You!" Bhavarid-la breathed, shocked.

"Oh, I did not kill him," the hermit said, "if that is what you are thinking. I know as well as you that our holy rule forbids us to take life from any living thing. When Futsu died at the hands of a foreigner as evil as himself, it was I who drove a stake through his black heart and burned his corpse to make sure that his fiendish soul would return to the darkness which had spawned it. But even then my work was not done, for the demon had begotten a daughter in his own foul likeness who had already lured two innocents to their doom. This daughter of Futsu—who calls

herself Darvi—came here after me with full intent of avenging herself for my disposal of her father's soul. She came swathed in red silk and jasmine, the most desirable female I have ever seen, to woo me from my sacred vows—”

The old hermit fell silent.

His eyes glowed as he relived the hour of Darvi's coming. Bhavarid-la found it difficult to picture the scene as it must have been—with the beautiful Darvi flirting shamelessly with the gnarled and toothless old hermit. Of course, that had been thirty years before. No doubt the hermit looked a lot better than he did at the moment.

“What happened?” Bhavarid-la asked impatiently.

“Eh?” said the hermit blankly. He reluctantly returned his thoughts to the present. “What happened, you say? What do you think happened? I am still alive. With the help of Vishnu, I won the battle. The daughter of evil became my prisoner—”

“Your prisoner!”

The old hermit smiled. The smile did not reach his eyes.

“Yes,” he said. “And now she is your prisoner. It is for you to see that she does not escape to vent her unholy lust on yonder valley. The lives of countless hundreds are in your hands. You must be on guard against her every second. She is as wily as a serpent. She will flatter and cajole you to the degree where you will begin to forget what she is. It is then—when you feel your senses betraying you—that you must take up the scourge against her!”

“What!” Bhavarid-la cried. “You mean—strike her?”

The old hermit nodded firmly. “Beat her,” he said, “until she is hoarse from screaming. Only then will you win a few days' respite from her tempting blandishments.”

Bhavarid-la drew himself up rigidly, his entire body quivering with pious indignation. “I could never bring myself to be cruel to any living creature!”

“I knew you would say that,” the old man commented calmly. “It does you credit. I, too, was full of such compassionate ideals once—before I

came here and learned that sometimes one must sacrifice one's conscience to the common good. You must learn this bitter lesson, too. Your immortal soul in this incarnation and the next depends on it. To say nothing of those souls in the valley below who are dependent on your strength for their survival."

Bhavarid-la was silent. He brooded reflectively on the tranquil scene below him. The old hermit studied him with squinted eyes.

"I will pray for you," he said quietly. He turned and walked away.

Bhavarid-la watched him as he descended the mountain road, his spare form diminishing until he vanished altogether. He walked a few paces in the hermit's tracks, looking down at the hard-packed dust.

Suddenly, he gave a cry of consternation! There, in the very mark left by the hermit's heel, was the squashed body of a dead green caterpillar.

"Oh, Vishnu!" Bhavarid-la prayed aloud. "Preserve me from the madness which has overtaken my predecessor.

Forgive him for the cruel murder of this, thy insect creature, the disposition of whose soul is now in thy keeping. The long years of solitude have addled yon hermit's wits!"

He knelt in the dust, taking great care to avoid trapping any wandering ants under his knees. Rapt in contemplation of the infinite, he extended his arms to the listening sky.

It was then—as he meditated—that he heard the song. At first, he mistook it for the soft whistling of the breeze through the dark pines which surrounded the lamasery. Then, as he cocked his head, he realized that it was a human voice which sang to him. And he suddenly remembered what he had forgotten, that he was not alone in the place. There was another—the woman who had been kept prisoner for thirty years!

By now she would be old—old as Bhavarid-la's mother who had borne him at fourteen. Her face would be wrinkled and lined, her eyes dull, her hair streaked with grey—

But the voice—by Vishnu, the voice was that of a girl,

thrilling and sweet!

Rising from his knees, he followed the thread of voice to its source. There were, he discovered, only two rooms in the hermitage. The door to one was open to the elements. The door to the other was barred on the outside. It was through this second door that the hauntingly vibrant voice poured.

Bhavarid-la hesitated for an instant. Then he lifted the bar from the door and opened it.

The singing stopped. Bhavarid-la peered into the dark stone room, his eyes adjusting rapidly to the lack of light. Then he saw the creature who was chained against the wall and he knew his earlier conviction to be absolutely correct: the hermit was mad!

Thirty years, he had said. For thirty years, he claimed to have kept this female prisoner. But Bhavarid-la, looking at her with his healthy young eyes, knew that this girl had not yet seen her eighteenth year. Her gleaming hair, her great dark eyes, her glowing velvet skin—all were suffused with the vitality of youth.

She smiled at Bhavarid-la,

the whiteness of her teeth dazzling even in that dim cavern of a room.

"Have you come to free me from my captivity, oh handsome monk?" she asked gently in voice which throbbed like the low tones on a lyre.

"What is your name?" he asked, his eyes drinking in her beauty.

"Darvi."

The name which the hermit had uttered in such vindictive tones stirred Bhavarid-la like the bell which, in his school days at the High Lama-sery, summoned the acolytes to prayer.

"How long have you been here?" he asked.

"Thirty days," she replied promptly.

Days, not years!

"And how came you here?"

"The old one—he stole me from the fields and carried me here—a victim to his shameless passions!"

Bhavarid-la stared at her, speechless with shock. She noticed his eyes lingering on her supple form and she preened, smiling.

"Free me from these

shackles," she whispered invitingly, "and I will lavish you with my warm gratitude. The old man has taught me many things—"

The blood rushed to Bhavarid-la's head. His heart beat longingly in his breast. Then, suddenly, the words which the old hermit had uttered resounded in his brain: "—when you feel your senses betraying you, you must take up the scourge—"

Bhavarid-la looked about him wildly. He saw the scourge propped up in a corner against the wall—a venomous, many-tongued instrument of agony. Snatching it up, he brandished it over his head. Darvi cried out and cringed against the wall. He saw the long-accustomed fear in her big black eyes.

Then he began flogging himself about the head and shoulders with the scourge—striking harder and harder until he felt the temptation against his holy vow of celibacy melt away and give place to pain.

Darvi watched him in amazed silence. Then, when he had finished, she laughed gaily

and began to writhe in a highly suggestive manner. The temptation which Bhavarid-la had driven out with the scourge returned, more powerful than before.

"Stop!" he commanded. Darvi laughed again and redoubled her gyrations until Bhavarid-la felt ready to explode with desire for her. Again he pleaded with her to stop, but she persisted. He felt himself weakening—

In desperation, he struck out with the scourge. Again and again, he lashed her tender body, watching it twitch in anguish, until at last she hung from her shackles, limp and sobbing.

Asudden disgust for his inhuman behavior flooded Bhavarid-la. With a contrite cry, he threw the scourge from him.

"Forgive me," he begged. "I have punished you for my own weakness."

"You 'holy men' are all alike!" she accused tearfully. "All hypocrites. You are as bad as the old one—coarse and cruel. He too made me suffer

for his own sin of wanting me!"

"He said you were evil," Bhavarid-la told her.

"And if I were," she countered, "do you not believe in the power of goodness to overcome my evil?"

"Yes!" Bhavarid-la said firmly. "There is no power equal to the power of virtue."

"Then," she coaxed softly, "unchain me and prove it. The key is behind the door."

Her eyes gleamed.

"I can't," Bhavarid-la said unhappily. "I must think. The hermit said the people in the valley depend on my keeping you here for their safety."

She giggled. Then she commanded: "Look at me!"

He obeyed.

"Am I such a figure of terror?"

Bhavarid-la felt sheepish. She was, after all, only a slim whip of a girl, with wrists and ankles like reeds.

Abruptly, she drooped against the wall, the defiance emptied from her. "Go ahead," she said wearily, "beat me. I can see I have no hope. You are like he was. And, as days pass, you will grow more and

more heartless—just as he did. Soon you will go from beating me to eating meat—"

"Never!" Bhavarid-la shouted. "I have never tasted meat and never shall!"

"Oh, yes, you will," she said cynically. "All of your virtuous pretenses will slip away and you will wallow in your vices, false monk!"

Bhavarid-la closed his eyes. He could see himself as she did—as he had seen the hermit that afternoon, trampling carelessly on caterpillars! He had sworn to protect life as a sacred thing, to be compassionate. Already he had raised his hand against a helpless girl. She was right—it was only a short step from that to trapping game and eating it!

He shuddered at the thought. He recalled the ardor with which he had taken his vows. Was he going to allow an old man's intense jabberings to obscure his gleaming goal of sanctity? If he did—in no time at all he would be nothing but an obscene parody, a fallen priest, an unholy man, a hollow shell—

Opening his eyes, he looked at her slumped and dejected, her girlish face a closed book. She looked so helpless that his heart went out to her.

It was with a great sense of relief at knowing he was doing the right thing that he reached behind the heavy door for the key.

She did not move or lift her head as he inserted the key in

the rusted locks.

It was only after he had freed her and was returning the key to its accustomed spot that he heard a light scurrying movement behind him.

Then he shrieked with horror as the monstrous thing which she had become swooped down on him with cavernous red eyes and yellow fangs!

THE END

GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT

by Ernestine Durrell

It was seven-thirty a.m.

Craig Carver arose stealthily from his side of the mammoth circular bed—so as not to waken Lydia. He wanted to prepare a surprise for her that would absolutely kill her. Absolutely.

Actually, Lydia seemed in no danger of awakening. She had gulped three nembatal tablets before going to sleep the night before. Now she slept the stentorous sleep of the drugged, her relaxed mouth curved in the enigmatic smile which one society columnist had fatuously dubbed "...Lydia Custer Carver's Gioconda smile".

It was that sensual, mysterious little smile which—along with the money, of course—had originally appealed to Craig. It was the same vapid, silly smile that had palled on him after six months of marriage. Now the smile gave the lie to the fact that Lydia had

sobbed herself to sleep.

The argument had started with Craig's announcement that he had given the servants the next day off. Lydia looked troubled.

"I wish you'd said something to me about it first," she said.

"Why?" he asked, bristling.

"Well, because—" she replied, sounding flustered, "I had something planned for them to do."

"What was it?"

"Never mind," she said.

"You're a liar," he barked. "You didn't have a damn thing planned for them. You just resent my doing anything on my own around here. I suppose I should ask the boss-lady before I dare to breathe the air in her house. After all, she pays the air-conditioning bills!"

"I don't feel that way at all," Lydia protested, "and you know it!"

Then he hit her, with his open hand, first on the one cheek, then—as her head snapped back in reflex—on the other. Immediately, he realized that he had made a mistake. Suppose the medical examiner noticed bruises on her face. That would not be so easy to explain.

The trouble was that it was so tempting lately to work out his grievances on Lydia. It was almost routine for him to beat her up at least once a week. It gave him a strange, savage thrill to see her cringing under his blows. Last week, he had gone so far as to strap her with his leather belt. She never retaliated as she easily could have by simply phoning the cops. Craig suspected that she liked it.

Bending over the bed, he examined Lydia's sleeping face with anxiety. There was a slight swollen redness on the one cheek but the other was smooth and unblemished. With a bit of luck the examiner would not even notice anything.

Pulling on a Sulka silk robe, he left the bedroom and went

downstairs. He caught sight of himself in the huge mirror at the foot of the staircase and straightened self-consciously. Then, still reflected in the mirror, he went directly to the white leather-upholstered bar where he downed a straight double shot of Beefeater's Gin and followed it with a Bromo-Seltzer. His quivering nerves appeased, he returned to the mirror.

"Happy Birthday," he said softly.

He was forty-five years old. He still had most of his hair and all his teeth. The daily workouts in the pool kept him in pretty good shape. But there was a general slackening of the skin around the eyes and the chin nothing short of a face-lift could repair. Time was closing in on Bolo the Jungle Man.

Soon it would be difficult to recognize him from the twenty-year-old photo inset the Magazine ran in its newspaper ad: "And supervising our EXCLUSIVE Cabana Colony with its OLYMPIC-SIZED POOL and FREE MATS is CRAIG CARVER—Jungle

Man of Screen and TV Fame."

He had made his last movie in 1949. He still collected occasional residuals from the television series. The Hotel Magnifique paid him two hundred dollars a week plus his bar bill for a daily appearance at poolside and the use of his name in their advertising. It was easy, steady money, but it was not enough. Enid demanded more—lots more. And if Craig couldn't satisfy her demands, she would rapidly find someone who could.

Only Lydia's death or a sizable divorce settlement could secure for Craig the kind of money he needed. Lydia was too enamored of him to be unfaithful and too much of a glutton for punishment to object to his rough treatment of her. Murder was the only solution. Craig proposed to murder Lydia sometime that morning.

He pulled open the glass wall that looked out onto the bay, the pool and the dock. Across the bay, shimmering in the early morning sun, were the towers of downtown Miami.

Craig did not stop to admire the skyline.

He went directly to the filter-pump for the swimming pool which was camouflaged by a hibiscus bush in a recess behind the pool. The pump was not going. In order to get it started, Lydia would pull a switch inside the house which supplied the juice for the pump and for an outlet in the patio which Lydia frequently used with an extension cord to plug in her spot-reducing machine. Every morning Lydia plunged into the pool before breakfast. The spot-reducing machine she used in the afternoon after luncheon. She would not, Craig mused grimly, be using it that afternoon. She would be floating in the water, face down, until he returned home that evening.

He fetched the extension cord Lydia usually used, handling it with a handkerchief. Plugging one end into the patio outlet, he carried the other end to the pool and dangled it just above the water's edge. Displacement of water caused by the addition of Lydia's body would raise the water level over the socket

which would have the current flowing through it when Lydia threw the inside switch. As long as she swam, she was safe. But the instant she grounded herself by standing in the shallow end or touching the metal ladder, she would be roasted to a turn. It would be all over in a matter of seconds. All that then remained was for Craig to come home, discover her, and feign a grief that would require more acting ability than Bolo the Jungle Man had called for.

The simplicity of his scheme was the beauty part. The servants, when questioned by the police, could testify that he had warned her time and time again about her careless use of the spot-reducer so close to the pool's edge. Lydia's fingerprints, furthermore, would be on the switch handle.

Now the important thing was to get dressed quickly and be out of the house when Lydia awakened. He wanted to be in his canvas-backed chair by the side of the Magnifique's pool—being admired by middle-aged ladies from

Detroit and fat kids from the Bronx—when Lydia took her final plunge.

He drove his lavender Thunderbird up under the canopied main entrance to the gigantic Hotel Magnifique and opened the car door. He took out the ignition keys and tossed them to the parking attendant. "It's all yours, Pete!" he called.

Then he mounted the ten broad marble steps leading to the glass-enclosed lobby of the monster-hotel. Pausing before the door, he straightened his navy blue blazer jacket, smoothed back his wavy hair. It was like going onstage every day—passing through that lobby. Whipping off his sunglasses, he bounded lithely through the open door, head up, chest out, gut sucked in. Once inside, he paused again and waited.

To his left, he heard a woman saying softly: "Don't look now, but isn't that What's-His-Name of the Jungle in the doorway?"

His mission accomplished, Craig headed determinedly across the buzzing lobby to the arcade of shops which led

to the Cabana Club. Sequined sweaters, Tabu perfume, Bain de Soleil lotion, beaded evening bags—such was the stock of the tiny boutiques. Then there was a shop whose window was completely draped in white shantung. Gold lettering across the glass read: Naño and Enid, Artistry in Motion. There was a smaller enscribed afterthought in the corner: Cha Cha. Merengue, Pachanga, Twist, Tango, Fox Trot, etc.

The highly synopated rhythms of Un Poco Pelo sifted out under the closed door. But the couple within were not doing the Cha Cha. They jumped apart nervously as Craig threw open the door, the man—a leather-faced little baldie with protruding blue eyes who wore a brown Cubaverra jacket and blue suede shoes—pushing the woman away from him. Craig, in a sudden, towering rage of jealousy, noticed that there were traces of Frosted Orchid lipstick across his little pursed mouth.

He glared at Enid, who blithely ignored the angry question in his eyes, saying:

“Mr. Perl, this is Craig Carver, our celebrity in residence.”

Mr. Perl’s eyes popped a little further out of his head. “You don’t say!” he exclaimed, pumping Craig’s listless hand. “My grandson watches you on TV. He’s crazy about the chimp!”

Craig said nothing. Enid filled the void: “Your next appointment is at ten tomorrow morning, Mr. Perl. Don’t forget now. We’ll take up just where we left off—”

She batted her fake fur lashes at Mr. Perl who goggled and said: “You betcha, sweetheart. Nice meeting you, Bolo!”

Craig grunted, his eyes fixed on Enid. He did not bother to see Mr. Perl out the door.

Usually Enid came right into his arms. Today—sensing that he needed reassurance—she deliberately withheld herself from him. The bitch! Craig thought. He stared hungrily at the quivering curves under her form-fitting silk slacks and her clinging jersey blouse, trying to analyze his feelings for Enid.

As usual, he failed.

He knew her for a phony—from her overbleached bone-white hair to her 20-carat zircon ring. He knew about her greed and her total incapacity for loyalty. She was a witch. He went right under her spell when she turned those swimming green eyes on him. The eyes were real. It seemed to Craig that they held all the answers for him. For example, they made him glad that he had not waited until tomorrow to put the socket in the pool. Enid might not be around tomorrow.

“Come here,” he said eagerly.

She was lighting a cigarette. She took her time about extinguishing the match, rolling the smoke around on her pink tongue before she asked coolly: “Why the hell should I?”

“Come here and you’ll find out,” Craig said, his pulses pounding, his hands itching to touch her. Her elusiveness always made her more desirable to him. Each time, it was like taming a wild animal.

“There’s no future in it, Craig,” Enid said without giv-

ing an inch. “I’ve been thinking things over. You got a wife. I got nobody, no security for the future. I gotta think about my future, baby...”

She took a deep drag and added significantly: “Mr. Perl’s got no wife.”

Craig looked at his watch. The hands pointed to eleven-twenty. Lydia rarely stayed away from the pool after eleven.

“Neither have I,” he said slowly, speaking half to himself, half to her.

Enid stared. “What happened?” she demanded. “Did she finally cut out on you?”

Craig didn’t answer. She shrugged in annoyance and tossed back her white mane.

“Anyway,” she said coldly, “if you got no more wife, then you got no more loot—”

He gave her a long, penetrating look before which her defiant eyes finally faltered uncertainly. It elated him to see her back down for once. “I have no wife,” he said loudly, “and I have fifteen million dollars.”

The words trilled on his tongue like a melody.

What a beautiful phrase, he thought rapturously. Fifteen million dollars! He felt like singing it out at the top of his voice.

Enid was convinced. He could see it in her face. She held out her arms to him. "Bay-bee!" she cooed.

Suddenly, all desire for her deserted Craig. He had been assaulted suddenly by the exciting thought that fifteen million dollars could buy a dozen Enids. Now that she was his—and he could read her submission in her face—her appeal for him had lost its tensile strength.

"Come here," he said again, testing her. She came running to wrap herself around him.

It was, Craig thought wonderingly, just another female body against his. Breasts, belly, buttocks, thighs—all very nice, but nothing extraordinary. Craig was amazed that he had never noticed it until then.

"What's the matter, lover?" Enid breathed anxiously.

"Nothing," he said, gently disentangling himself from her arms. He headed for the door. She followed him timidly.

"Where you going?" she asked worriedly. "Are you coming back?"

He smiled at her. Bolo, King of the Jungle, smiled at Missa, the slave girl.

"Take it slow," he said.

He spent the afternoon buying drinks at the poolside bar for anyone who spoke to him.

"What's the occasion, Mr. Carver?" asked the bartender.

"It's my birthday," Craig explained. "The day of my birth. Today I really begin to live."

(Tomorrow they would shake their heads lugubriously over it, saying: "And there he was, having such a good time on his birthday, never suspecting for an instant that his poor wife was floating around, dead, in that pool—")

"Drink up," he said. "Let's have another round."

He was pretty woozy when the parking attendant brought his Thunderbird to a snappy stop in front of the hotel steps. He passed the boy a five. "Thank you, sir!"

It was a farewell present,

Craig thought. Farewell to the Magnifique and its FREE mats. No more pretense at making a manly buck. From here on in, it was caviar for breakfast, his own man at last—

The house was in darkness as Craig pulled into the driveway. That was as it should be. Behind the tall garden gate leading to the pool all was silent. Craig resisted the strong temptation to go straight to the pool. He must make no u n u s u a l moves, everything must seem perfectly normal—

He could almost hear the Chief of Detectives re-staging the discovery of the corpse: "He walked to the door and rang the bell, wondering slightly at the lack of lights inside the house. When he received no answer to his ring, he fished in his pockets for the keys. He put the key in the lock and turned it—"

The door opened. Craig reached inside, feeling for the foyer light switch.

The lights snapped on, dazzling him. "Surprise!" yelled a

chorus of voices. Craig blinked blindly at the sea of faces which confronted him.

"Happy Birthday!" they roared.

Then he was lifted aloft on a half-dozen burly shoulders. "For he's a jolly good fellow," they sang merrily, "for he's a jolly good fellow—"

They marched him jubilantly around the foyer and into the living-room. Then they headed for the open glass wall.

"No!" Craig cried, sensing their intent. In a frenzy, he squirmed to escape the hands which held him fast. The marching celebrants laughed at his panic and tightened their grip. They carried him determinedly towards the pool. "For he's a jolly good fellow—"

"Let me go, you goddam idiots!" Craig screamed, wrestling frantically.

"One!" they yelled.

"Two!" they yelled.

"Tha-ree—"

He spun out over the pool and crashed into the water. He surfaced immediately, his mind spinning crazily. Under the laughter and shouts he

could hear the steady hum of the filter-pump. He treaded water while the guests yelled: "Come on out, Craig! Let's get the show on the road!"

Two feet away from his face was the metal ladder. To touch it meant death. On the other hand, he could not get them to turn off the pump switch without making what

amounted to a confession of guilt. He could not seem to think his way out of the trap he had fashioned for Lydia. In his dilemma, he sought her eyes in the crowd. She was there, all right, missing none of it. He could see her face.

She was smiling her Gioconda smile.

THE END

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