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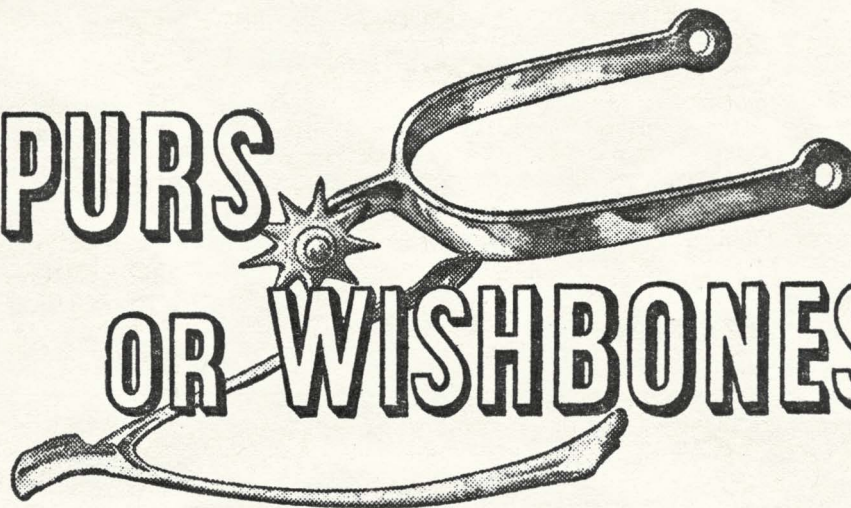
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TERROR TALES



Volume Nine

May-June, 1938

Number Two

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 What had happened to those lovely dancing girls who had vanished so silently, leaving their men behind them—ruthlessly murdered? What monster of evil could have created the satanic orgies which ended so horribly?

Bride of the Serpents.....J. O. Quinliven 34
 I struggled blindly in the relentless grip of the deadly quicksands—while the girl I loved was a helpless victim in the hands of the mad sculptor! Could I do nothing to save her from the hell of frightfulness that lay before her?

THREE SOUL-SHAKING NOVELETTES OF GHASTLY TERROR

Mistress of Satan's Hounds.....Frederick C. Davis 52
 Once before a lovely woman had fallen before the savage fangs and fiendish desires of that hellborn pack—and the whole county still shuddered at the thought of the monstrosity she bore. Now, Jeff and Laura could hear their ominous, lustful calls coming closer. . . .

Pleasure Cruise To Hell.....Donald Graham 78
 The yacht rolled heavily in the path of the approaching hurricane, and the only shelter in sight was the home of unfathomable evil—Madman's Isle! Fear raged through their hearts like a roaring sword of fire. . . .

When the Banshee Calls.....Wayne Rogers 106
 Would it never come; the merciful thrust of the knife that would put an end to agony almost unendurable? Or was it her doom to be forever one of the living dead. . . .

THREE MYSTERY-TERROR SHORTS

Beauty and the Butcher.....Holden Sanford 25
 In my hand is a bloody knife and beside me the crimson fragment of a human ear! And, God help me, I know it's the ear of the woman I love!

Kiss of the Flame Blossom.....Donald Dale 69
 Whether she was woman or devil, I will never know, but when she stood before me in all her awful beauty, all thoughts of love and honor fled from my mind and I arose to answer her call—to embrace the Blossom of Fire!

Cat-Woman.....Ray Cummings 94
 I feel the eyes of my bride upon me—watchful, waiting, slumberous—like the eyes of a cat on a mouse. Soon, I think, she will . . . *pounce!*

Black Chapel.....A Department 120

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THE HOUSE ROCKED LIKE A SHIP AT SEA!



Writes Mrs. Mildred R. Fredregill
of 1239 Ninth Ave.,
Helena, Montana.

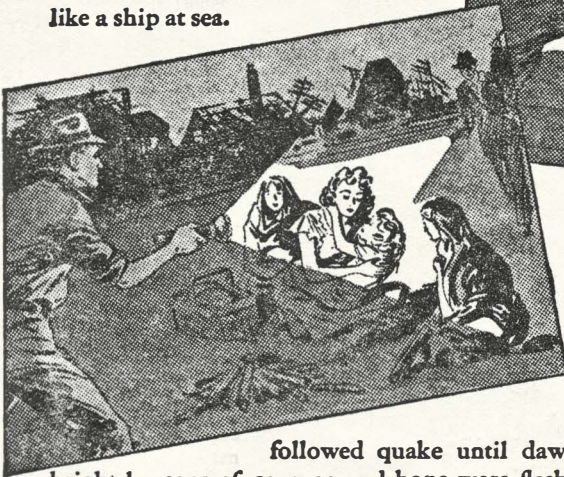


"A terrific roar woke me. Above the screaming of my baby I heard crash of falling plaster. I flipped the light switch but no lights came on... but under my pillow was my flashlight.

"I rescued my four-year-old from her crib, carried her to the protection of a doorway, huddled there for hours while the house rocked like a ship at sea.

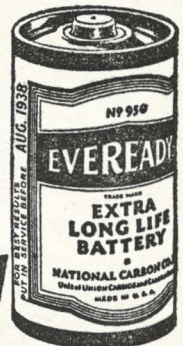


"Finally my flashlight attracted help; we were taken to the safety of an open field.



"Then we spent a long night of horror as quake followed quake until dawn. But everywhere, like bright beacons of courage and hope were flashlights with fresh, DATED 'Eveready' batteries, like the one that helped me save my baby, then signalled our rescuers.

(Signed) *Mildred R. Fredregill*



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Queens of Beauty

*A Long Novel of a City Gone Mad
With Lust and Fear!*



Through a smoky haze, Kirk stared at the scene in incredulous horror. These were the girls who had disappeared, and whose escorts had been found so brutally murdered! The freshest and loveliest girls in the whole country; and now they were somehow transformed into slathering, lustful beasts!

and Horror

By GEORGE
EDSON

CHAPTER ONE

Beauty on View

THE music stopped, and Kirk reluctantly let Joan Wendell out of his arms. Then, glancing down at her, he saw her face.

"Hey—what's the matter, honey?"

Those lovely features, which had been judged the most perfect in the nation, were twisted by an uneasy frown.

"Let's sit down, Kirk." She said that quickly, taking his arm. "People keep staring at me. And over there—an old man . . ." She gave a wince of revulsion.

"He's looking at me as if—as if he actually—owned me."

Kirk tightened his lips, shot an angry glare around the tiny dance floor of the nightclub. He knew well enough what she meant. He'd seen men staring at her, first at her face, then at her gracefully shaped body, and he'd already socked a couple for what had been in their eyes.

Suddenly he spotted the old man she had mentioned, a shrunken, toothless creature who had too long cheated the grave. He *was* looking at her as if he actually owned her.

"By heaven, I'll—"



"No—please, Kirk!" Joan clutched his arm harder and tried to draw him toward their table. "Don't have any trouble. Just let's sit down."

He let out a slow breath, relaxed with an effort.

"Okay, honey."

"Well, that's the price of being a beauty queen," he muttered with a grimace as he sat down beside her. "Getting the eye in a pleasure city like this—where guys have only one idea in their heads."

JOAN'S gaze lifted swiftly. There was a hurt look on her face.

"You know I never wanted to be a beauty queen, Kirk." Her voice was low, a little unsteady. "You know I was forced into the contest by the managing editor. And—and at the time you were all for it yourself."

"Yeah, I know," Kirk said bitterly. "I guess I was just so damned proud of you I wanted to show you off. I didn't think what that meant."

Joan's eyes glistened with tears. "That's all I ever cared," she told him. "To have you think I was beautiful—that's all I ever wanted."

Kirk looked at her quickly, swallowed. He reached for one of her hands and pressed it.

"Sweet kid," he murmured huskily. Then straightening and grinning: "Let's forget all this muck. After the banquet tomorrow night we can trek back home. In another month your contract to be a newspaper reporter'll run out, and you can sign a new one—to slave for me—as my wife. Let's just think of that."

Joan forced a responsive smile, but it didn't last. In a moment the same uneasiness, an uneasiness which bordered on fear, began to show through.

"Oh, I wish we didn't have to wait! I wish we were going tonight!" Her free hand clenched her knotted handkerchief. "I can't help feeling those eyes—every-

where!" They stare at me all the time.

"*Those* eyes?" Kirk was stiff again, his lean face hard. "What do you mean? Whose?"

"I—I don't know. Nobody's in particular. Just eyes—horrible, evil eyes. I—I even feel them looking through the window when I'm in my room."

Kirk relaxed. The hard lines in his face softened.

"But your room's up five stories, dear. And there isn't any fire escape on your end. You haven't actually seen a snooper at the window, have you?"

"No. There's never anything there when I look. But then a minute later I seem to feel them again." She shivered. "Oh, I know I'm foolish! I know nobody could get to my windows! And yet . . ."

"Sure, honey, I understand," Kirk said gently. "It's just your imagination playing tricks on you. Why shouldn't it, though, after you've watched rotten eyes peer at you all day? You're tired, too. That'd help. . . . What do you say we take you right on home for some sleep as soon as Ruth and Morgan show up?"

Joan nodded a relieved acquiescence.

BUT it wasn't quite as easy as that. When Ruth Dennis, another girl who had been in the beauty contest, and Jed Morgan, a reporter who had been covering the event, returned to the table from the dance floor they brought along a couple of men. Kirk and Joan had to wait a bit to chat with them before leaving.

One, chubby and red faced, was Frank Pollard, promoter of the beauty contest in Island City. He was a little high.

"Bigges' show they've ever had in this burg!" he crowed. "Forty-eight mos' beautiful girls in the country! Forty-eight of 'em!"

"But one much more beautiful than all the rest," the other, a reporter named Gil Goring, said softly. He was a thin man

with a dissipated face and sardonic eyes. The eyes were on Joan. "Will the queen deign to dance with the humble scribe?"

Joan said: "We were just going home, Gil. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Goring shook his head. "I'm afraid the sorrow's all mine. But I couldn't really expect a dance with me to hold any inducement when you're bound for a private rendezvous with young Lochinvar here."

Kirk glanced sharply around. He had never particularly cared for the reporter from Chicago, and he didn't like the insinuation in the last remark.

"Miss Wendell's my fiancée, Goring," he said in a tight voice.

Goring shrugged his shoulders in a tragic gesture, murmured: "And she could have so much."

Kirk flushed angrily, then felt Joan's hand on his arm and held himself back.

"Now, now, boys," Pollard the promoter, said in a placating tone. "Let's not have any squabbles. Everything's in fun. All just good sport." He glanced toward the dance floor where, with the orchestra playing again, several of the beauty contestants were dancing. "Man, what a collection of honeys!"

"A great time for a bunch of rich playboys," Jed Morgan laughed.

"Or a bunch of degenerates," Goring suggested. "The kind with X-ray eyes and—"

"Please, Gil!" Joan begged. At the mention of eyes she had stiffened against Kirk. Her hand tightened convulsively on his arm.

"Sorry," Goring said with a sardonic expression of apology.

Kirk glowered at him, then looked around at the others. "We've got to be going along," he told them. "Joan's tired. You staying, Jed?"

Morgan glanced at his girl, Ruth Dennis. She nodded, and he said to Kirk: "Yeah, I guess we'll be staying a while."

"Okay—well, so long." Rising, Kirk helped Joan from the booth.

But that was as far as they got. A sudden shrill scream rose above the sound of the music. A girl whom Kirk recognized as one of the beauty contestants, her face a white blotch of terror, came running wildly out of the ladies' room.

"Something—something horrible—tried to come in the window—get me!"

CHAPTER TWO

Horror Begins

AT ALMOST the exact moment the girl ran screaming out of the ladies' room of the Gaiety Club another girl, also one of the forty-eight beauty contestants hurried furtively out the side entrance of a small hotel. She was small, and dark, with eager eyes. She had a date, but had been forced to wait until her chaperon had gone to sleep to keep it.

She didn't take a cab. The appointed spot where her swain was supposed to meet her wasn't far. She started to walk, down the side street away from the boulevard and then along another still darker street.

"Oh, I hope he waited!" she breathed fervently to herself. "I didn't think it would take so long. . . ."

Her thoughts were all on the man she hoped to see. She didn't even glance around. So she wasn't aware of the hunched form which glided from an alley and began to follow her, narrowing the distance between them with each silent step.

She was just a young kid aching to be with a man who intrigued and fascinated her. Not knowing that he was at the Gaiety Club, had never, in fact, intended to keep the date with her himself at all.

She was nearly at the end of the darker street now. Her heart was beating more rapidly; her cheeks were flushed with

anticipation. It was just around the next corner, where he had promised to be waiting for her in his car, near an open lot.

She wondered if she should let him kiss her right off—or if that might make him lose respect for her. Perhaps she had better be more demure.

And then suddenly, through her absorption, she had a vague uneasy feeling. A quick sense of nameless fear. With a cold chill prickling along her spine, a tightness in her throat, she cast a searching glance over her shoulder.

Her breath stopped coming completely when she did. The cold chill prickling along her spine became an icy numbness over her whole body. She tried to scream, but her throat was now so constricted that only a pitiful little whimper worked through.

Something—something with a ghastly inhuman face—was leaping for her!

ALSO at almost the exact moment the girl ran screaming out of the ladies' room of the Gaiety Club—and the moment the poor girl who had been so eager to meet her supposed lover had sneaked furtively out of her hotel—another pretty girl in a different part of the city was stepping into a cab. She, too, had been one of the forty-eight contestants in the beauty contest Joan Wendell had won that afternoon. She was the country type, healthily buxom, with a round frank face.

She wasn't alone. With her was a young man, obviously as much from the country, whose love was in his eyes.

They had just come from a drugstore where, now that the need for abstinence was over, the girl had been eating ice cream. The young man gave the cab driver the name of a hotel.

"You should've won, Mary," he repeated for the twentieth time as the cab rolled off. "Gee, you were by far the prettiest girl here."

The girl smiled indulgently, sweetly.

"But I guess there were some politics," the young man continued. "I guess the whole thing was fixed. The contest was run by newspapers and this Wendell girl works on one." He gave a little shrug of burly shoulders. "That is, she did. I s'pose she'll go into the movies now."

The girl was still smiling. There appeared to be no envy about her.

"Joan Wendell's awfully pretty," she said.

"Well, anyway, I'm glad you didn't win," the young man told her. He shook his head. "Gee, I guess you'd never've wanted to marry me if you had. Just a farmer. You'd've wanted to go into the movies."

"Silly!" the girl said. "Of course I'd have married you just the same. But I knew I never would win. I can't see how I ever won the state contest."

"Well, I do!" the young man told her. He gazed at her fondly.

By this time the taxi had taken them from the drugstore on the brightly lighted boulevard to a darker section of narrow twisting streets. Then it careened off one of them onto a lower part of the waterfront.

"Hey!" The young man noticed suddenly where they were. "Hey, driver, I said—"

That was as far as he got. The cab braked to such an abrupt stop that the rest choked in his throat.

The driver swung out to the street, turned. From a dark doorway slouched two misshapen figures.

The young man lunged forward, twisted the cab door open, beginning furiously: "What the devil's the—" And then, just as he leaped down from the running board, he saw the driver's face. His breath caught. For a second he stared numbly, incapable of further movement.

That second was enough for the driver

and one of the two creatures who had slid from the dark doorway, to glide back to the car door. The creature grabbed the young man's arms from behind. The driver sprang forward like an animal, uttering a vicious snarl. Clawlike hands whipped out. Blood gushed from the young man's throat. He slumped into a limp heap there on the pavement.

During all this the poor girl had sat paralyzed, eyes wide with horror. But at last a little sound began to trickle past her stiff lips, work into a scream.

The second creature from the doorway pulled open the other door of the cab and slipped in beside her. He reached for her throat. . . .

JOAN'S face was still pale when she and Kirk finally arrived at the hotel where she was staying with an aunt who had accompanied her to Island City for the contest. She'd been pretty badly shaken by the affair at the Gaiety Club.

"But honey, there was nobody in the ladies' room when they looked," Kirk reiterated for the third or fourth time to her. "And there were no signs that anybody had been in there."

"I—I know," Joan said. But—

"Look, dear," Kirk interrupted persistently, "it's up two stories. The only way a person could reach the window would be by coming across the alley from the next building—and that's almost inconceivable. Besides, if a man did get over, how could he get back so quickly? No, the girl had been drinking—we found that out—and the liquor inflamed her imagination. Just look how she described the creature she claimed she saw: a face without any features! Good Lord, that proves it was all in her mind!"

"A face without any features—just hideous eyes," Joan mumbled, repeating the whole of the other girl's description.

Kirk gave a silent sigh of hopelessness. He had been afraid she'd never get over

that bit about the eyes; it tied up too well with what she had imagined herself.

"Well, tonight's our last night in this place," he told her. He smiled reassuringly. "You're so tired you'll soon get to sleep and forget the entire business. And then tomorrow night, by this time, we'll be on our way home, and you won't ever have to think of it again."

Joan forced a little answering smile. "Oh, I know I'm foolish to be so uneasy Kirk. And to make you worry about me. Just forget it. I'll be all right in the morning."

"Sure you will, honey," he said gently.

They had reached the door of Joan's and her aunt's suite now. Kirk stepped in to say hello to the aunt, a genial woman of whom he had always been very fond, but he stayed only a couple of minutes.

"Want to give Joan a chance to get to bed," he explained.

"You see that you get to bed, too," Joan said with mock severity. "No more of those all-night poker sessions, my fine fellow."

Kirk grinned.

He was feeling better when he went downstairs. Joan had seemed to snap out of it a little. She was tired; she'd sleep soundly, and in the morning she'd be okay. He hummed softly as he swung through the lobby to the street and hailed a cab.

He didn't see the misshapen figure watching him from the shadows opposite the hotel. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Beauty Thieves

KIRK had been bunking in the flat of the Associated Press correspondent in Island City, a man named Bob Carlton. Several years before he had been on a paper with him in a small southern city.

When he got back there after leaving Joan he found the place cluttered, as usual, with bottles and reporters. Among the reporters was Gil Goring. Goring had brought along Frank Pollard, the chubby little promoter of the beauty contest.

Kirk's host, Bob Carlton, a big genial chap, sat behind a littered desk in one corner, his legs crossed over one edge, and was regaling the others with a story.

"Hi, guy," he tossed at Kirk. "Get in on this. It'll give you a tip for married life."

Goring was smirking questioningly. "Did she show you the door for trying to play too rough, Lochinvar? You didn't stay very long."

Kirk's fists clenched.

"Stow it, Goring!" Carlton growled over his shoulder. To Kirk: "Pour yourself a drink, fella. . . . Well, starting again, it seems a young chap married a widow who—"

But he didn't get any farther. The door suddenly burst open, and the United Press correspondent in Island City rushed wildly into the apartment.

"Jeez, hell's broken loose!" he blurted. "Three guys've been found murdered in different parts of the city in the last few minutes!" He gulped. "Their throats had been torn—as if by something with claws!"

Every man in the room had come to his feet.

"Throats—*torn!*" somebody echoed hoarsely.

"And that ain't all!" the United Press man babbled. "One of the girls from the contest had been with each one of those guys—and now they're missing!"

"You mean—*they* did it?" an incredulous voice croaked.

Kirk breathed: "God—Joan!" and lunged for the telephone on Carlton's desk. Was she safe? Frantically he gave the number of her hotel.

He got the hotel operator, called for her suite. He heard the buzzer, once, twice, three times, but still there was no response. And then, abruptly, the line went dead.

White-faced, he dropped the receiver, whirled toward the door.

Bob Carlton, who had been watching him intently, said: "I'll go with you, Kirk," and strode after him.

But two more things happened before they even reached the middle of the room. Suddenly, with one brief warning flicker, all the lights went out. And from somewhere in the distance outside came a terrific blast.

"God—look!" a horrified voice husked.

A fiery red glow was streaming in the windows on one side of the room.

"The bridge to the mainland's been blown up!" somebody cried excitedly. "Blown all to hell!"

Kirk had been so startled by the explosion that he had halted in his tracks for a moment. But now he continued his rush for the door again. These queer happenings, first the telephone going dead, then the lights, then the explosion, made the menace in the city take on a gigantic significance. Something hellish was at work.

Carlton was still behind him. And behind Carlton came the rest of the gang who had been in the room, all chattering crazily.

Though the street lamps were also out, the street was bathed in a red glow from the burning timbers of the ancient bridge. Kirk stopped on the sidewalk to look for a stray taxi. Carlton and the others straggled from the apartment building after him.

Suddenly a figure appeared from another direction. It was Jed Morgan, the reporter who had been in the foursome with Joan and Kirk at the Gaiety Club.

"Jeez, that was the bridge!" he jabbered when he got near them. "I could

see it from the corner! They blew it up!"

"Yeah, we know," somebody said.

"Good God, what's happening in this city?" Morgan demanded in his shaky voice. "The only bridge from the mainland blasted! No lights—no telephone! Someone must want to make the whole place helpless!"

"Someone's after the girls," Pollard, the promoter, told him hoarsely. "Three of 'em've already been snatched."

"The girls!" Morgan echoed. He trembled. "And I've just left Ruth alone!"

By now Kirk had given up hope of finding a cab anywhere near there. He whirled and started to run down toward the boulevard. . . .

JOAN went to her bedroom soon after Kirk left. Pulling down the shades, she started to undress. She repeated to herself all the arguments he had given her, trying to convince herself that the faceless creature the girl had claimed to see in the ladies' room at the Gaiety Club and the eyes she was always sensing on her were just figments of the imagination.

"That's what they've got to be!" she mumbled aloud. "They can't be anything else!"

And then, as she shed her last filmy undergarment and stood nude, she felt them. Eyes—horrible lustful eyes. Fixed on her body, hot, desirous.

She grabbed some of her clothes again to hide her nakedness, spun fearfully around, flicking a searching glance at each window. But there was no space under the shades, no possible opening for eyes to peer through. She looked swiftly around the room, under the bed, in the little closet. All was just as it should be.

"That proves it—it is my imagination," she whispered with a quivery sigh of relief. And she let the shield of clothes slide down from her breasts, drop back to the chair.

She tried to laugh at herself for having been so foolish, but she couldn't quite throw off the shakiness the illusion had given her. She went over to the bed and turned on the bedside radio. A little music might help. Pulling on her nightdress, she sat on the edge of the bed and struggled to relax. . . .

While Joan was listening to the radio, hearing no other sounds because of the blare of the dance orchestra, the glazed window in the bathroom of the suite slid slowly up. A grey, clawlike hand was pushing it. A shadowy grey face was at the opening. . . .

Joan's aunt, hearing the music from the bedroom, began to hum in tune with it. She smiled contentedly. She had been very relieved to find that Joan was still satisfied with the prospect of marriage to Kirk, that winning the beauty contest hadn't turned her head and given her ideas about the stage or the movies.

"I guess everything's going to be all right," the old lady said half aloud to herself during a brief pause between two pieces from the orchestra.

She didn't see the bathroom door swing slowly outward. And because of the music, which had commenced again, she didn't hear the whisper of creeping footsteps. Too late she sensed the menace behind her.

She started to her feet, whirling around at the same time and what she saw made her eyes widen with sick horror.

But no scream came from her mouth. For grey clawlike hands clamped on her throat. She choked once, and that was all. . . .

In the bedroom Joan yawned sleepily, and went over to turn the main lights off. She raised the window and then came back to the bed, where the reading lamp still burned. A moment later she darkened the room and settled herself for sleep.

Yet even in the dark these lusting evil

eyes seemed to burn at her. The dimness all about her was filled with fantastic flitting shapes—horribly menacing.

She made herself lie still on the pillows, and tried desperately to relax and fix her mind on other things. But it was impossible. The feeling of eyes burning at her out of the darkness wouldn't be stifled.

"No—no—they're not there!" she whispered in a frantic voice. "They're not—*God! Kirk! Help!*"

She leaped completely out of bed now, quaking with terror. For she had actually seen them! Eyes—awful glowing eyes! This was no illusion. It was real! And so was that hideous, featureless face!

She stumbled wildly across the room toward the door. One foot caught on the bottom of her nightgown. She went down. With a hysterical whimper she tried frantically to regain her feet.

Too late. Clawlike hands seized her throat. She tried to fight free, but they held like claws of steel. Her head began to whirl, her strength fail, and slowly, with the sound of a gloating chuckle in her ears, she felt herself slip toward unconsciousness. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

City of Chaos

KIRK was nearly crazy by the time he and Carlton finally reached the hotel where Joan and her aunt had been staying. It had taken them almost twenty minutes to get there. Kirk jumped out of the cab before it stopped, and with Carlton coming right after him, raced to the dark entrance.

Two feeble candles in the lobby gave them enough light to locate the stairs. They pushed through a huddle of frightened people in front of the desk, started up.

"If only I'd stayed near her!" Kirk moaned hoarsely. "If only I'd believed

her about those eyes! God, if she's gone—"

"She may be all right, Kirk," Carlton panted in a hopeful voice.

"Then why didn't she answer the phone when I called her? They rang her three times before the line went dead—three times!"

They were at the top of the third flight of stairs now, going through utter darkness. They climbed the other two in tense silence. Kirk led the way down the hall, striking a match with a shaky hand.

"Here's the door!" he panted, and hurried to it.

He tried it first, wildly, frenziedly. It was locked. He began to batter on it.

But there was no response.

"Come on—help me break it in!" he said to Carlton.

He hunched his own shoulder and rammed the door. Carlton followed suit. In a few moments the door gave, burst open, and they plunged into the room.

Kirk shouted: "Joan—Joan!" He fumbled in his pocket for another match and struck it.

Carlton whispered: "God!"

Then Kirk saw the same thing—Joan's aunt, lolling back in a motionless heap in the big chair, her glassy eyes bulging from a discolored face, her throat torn horribly as if by some clawing creature in a fiendish rage.

Sick with horror, trembling with fear for what he would find, Kirk stumbled to the door of the bedroom he knew had been Joan's. The match in his hand sputtered, went out. He managed to get another one going.

His terrified eyes swept the empty room in one swift glance, took in the rumpled bedclothes, the torn bit of silk, obviously from a nightgown, on the floor. He twisted frenziedly, rushed to the door of the bathroom, then the aunt's bedroom. A moan quavered past his lips.

Carlton husked: "Is she . . . ?"

"Gone!" Kirk sobbed. "She's gone! The thing that killed her aunt's taken her!"

He slumped back against the door casing, his shoulders hunched, and let the match drop to the floor.

"But maybe—maybe she isn't—" Carlton began, and then stopped.

They were both thinking the same thing. Maybe she wasn't yet dead. Maybe the creature hadn't yet strangled her or torn her throat. But he certainly would as soon as he'd finished with her.

As soon as he'd finished with her. . . . Kirk uttered an anguished groan. That might give them a little time before her death. But . . .

"Come on!" He whirled toward the hall door again. "We've got to find her! God, we've got to—quick!"

HE LED Carlton back down to the lobby and at a headlong run through the huddle of people in front of the desk to the street door.

"Go around that side of the building," he told the other reporter. "I'll go around this. Shout if you see anything." And he plunged in the direction he had chosen for himself.

They met in the open space behind the hotel, neither of them having seen a thing.

"We'll have to get the cops on it, Kirk," Carlton panted. "We haven't got

a chance by ourselves. Just us two—and all the city to cover."

"If only we had some lead!" Kirk muttered desperately. He had started back toward the street again. "Something to go on—but we haven't got a thing!"

They reached the front of the hotel once more, stopped. Kirk licked his lips.

"I suppose you're right," he said dully. "The only thing to do is get the police." His lean face grew even more haggard. "God, the damned loss of time! With the telephones dead we'll have to go all the way down to headquarters ourselves. Let's get going!"

He whirled.

"Wait a minute," Carlton said, grabbing his arm. "Listen, you go down to headquarters and get the cops started on a search. I'll hurry over to the mayor's apartment at the Hotel Arden and get him to deputize a party of citizens. . . . Good idea?"

Kirk nodded, and again swung off.

He found a parked cab a couple of blocks away, located the driver among a babbling mob of people on the corner, forced him into reluctant service. And a few minutes later he was in front of a looming building downtown.

Kerosene lamps were burning in the main room on the first floor. Kirk immediately spotted the police commissioner. He was standing near the desk with Gil Goring, whose face still held a



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sardonic smirk, and tall strange man.

The other man was jabbering: "I tell you I saw three of 'em—three of 'em!" His whole body quaked as he talked. "And they didn't have any faces! Just grey heads—with holes where eyes should've been!"

"Curious creatures, eh?" Goring murmured casually to the commissioner.

But the commissioner, who seemed to have aged ten years since Kirk had last seen him, ignored the remark.

"God," he muttered, "if only we could get the militia here! But the damned muck between here and the mainland at low tide—they must've counted on that. It's why they blew up the bridge. Now we're helpless—helpless!"

"Boy, is this going to make a yarn!" Goring gloated. "I can see the—"

"What do you mean—helpless?" Kirk demanded hoarsely. He had elbowed through a throng of tense listeners near the doorway. "Where are your men? They can comb this city until they find these girls and the devils who kidnaped them! That's what they've got to do!"

"And meanwhile leave other people—and the few girls from the contest who haven't already been taken—unprotected?" the commissioner sighed wearily. "I haven't got enough men. Pollard, the promoter, took the last two to guard some girls at the Arden Hotel." He shrugged. "All we can do is wait for morning—and then, with high tide, we can get the militia over here."

"Wait for morning!" Kirk cracked out bitterly. "Don't you realize what'll happen to those girls before ever morning comes?"

The commissioner looked at the floor.

"Being loved by things without faces," Goring mused. "That certainly wouldn't be such a hot prospect."

The obscenity made outraged fury flare in Kirk's eyes. Fists clenching, he took one impulsive step toward the other re-

porter. But then he restrained himself. There was no time to waste on personal fights. He wheeled to the throng of people in civilian clothes near the door.

"You men—how many of you'll come with me?" he demanded. "We'll do what the police can't do. Drag the city! Find the girls and these damned fiends!"

He strode swiftly back through them to the hall, gesturing for them to follow him.

"All of you who call yourselves men—come on!"

But he walked down the hall alone. Not one of the men in that crowd made a move to go after him.

HE HURRIED over to the cab which had brought him down to headquarters. Apparently the driver had been afraid to continue on anywhere by himself.

"Arden Hotel," Kirk snapped at him, climbing in. Some of the girls were still there if Pollard had taken two cops there to guard them.

He sat on the edge of the seat, face taut, as the taxi jolted off. For the last little while something had been stirring deep down in his mind. It had started just before he had arrived at headquarters. Some vague memory which had some connection with this horror in the city.

"God, if I could only get it!" he mumbled haggardly. "It might give me a lead to what's behind this thing! If I could only remember! Somebody did something tonight—said something—made a mistake. . . ."

His cab was halfway across town to the Arden Hotel now. He clenched his hands over his knees, lost in utter concentration.

Abruptly his body stiffened. For a long moment he sat absolutely motionless, an incredulous expression on his lean face. No! It was impossible! Yet there it was,

as clear in his mind as his own name. There it was, pointing a definite finger of guilt.

He leaned forward.

"Hey—hurry! Get me to the Arden!"

THE ARDEN was a huge old hotel on a corner of the boulevard. Kirk's cab pulled in behind a line of cars whose headlamps were furnishing the street in front of the entrance its only light. Kirk jabbed a bill at the driver, jumped out. His lips were set in a hard line as he strode swiftly toward the door.

But suddenly, before he reached it, he stopped. A man had stepped through into the glare from the headlamps and, without noticing him, had hurried the other way along the street.

It was the man he had hoped to find still here!

He started after him impulsively, body quivering, eyes feverish. No. That wouldn't do. The devil would certainly deny all guilt, and somebody would prevent the beating which would finally make him confess. Better follow him to a more isolated spot.

He began to do that, staying just near enough to keep track of the moving figure in the darkness beyond the reach of the headlights of the first cab in the line.

The trail led straight down the boulevard for several blocks. Kirk kept his distance, and at last the figure turned down a side street toward the waterfront.

He went on following the figure instead of overtaking it. Straight down the side street, block after block, until they reached the waterfront itself. There the figure suddenly paused, twisted around. Kirk ducked into a doorway, cursing. He held his breath for a moment, then let it out in a quick sigh of relief. No, he hadn't been seen.

The trail now led down the waterfront toward a district of more ramshackle piers and warehouses. It ended at the

mouth of an alley between two of the warehouses. There the figure suddenly disappeared.

Kirk hurried forward, and he too ducked into the alley, abandoning caution in the frantic fear of losing his quarry. But not even the dim light from the sky penetrated that narrow gap; he could see nothing. He thought he heard a squeak which sounded like a door swinging on rusty hinges.

HE GROPED wildly up the alley. If that had been a door he must be at the place where the fiends had taken the girls! But if it hadn't, and he had lost the trail—God! Once more a picture of Joan struggling in the vile embrace of one of those creatures rose in his mind. He stifled a sob which tore at his throat.

"It's got to be the place!" he whispered hoarsely. "I've got to find her!"

He felt along the walls, stumbling frantically from one side of the alley to the other. He struck one spot where a door had been boarded up, groaned, plunged on. And then, abruptly his heart leaped.

He'd reached another—not boarded up!

Swiftly, with a hand that shook, he pawed for the latch, tried it. He drew in a quick breath. The door was unlocked! He started a wild push, restrained himself suddenly. He remembered the squeak he had heard. God only knew how many of the creatures might be inside. Maybe he'd better get help. . . . But again the vision of Joan's luscious body being defiled by one of those damned fiends burned through his mind. No, he couldn't waste the time to go for help! Every minute, every second, might be infinitely precious!

Once more he began to push on the door. But now with care to keep it from squeaking, making a desperate effort to control his frenzy to hurry.

And in a moment he had it open enough

to slide through, quietly and carefully.

He stopped for a second as soon as he got inside, held his breath and listened. Yes—the faint murmur of voices! He was in the right place! Grimly he groped forward.

After a few steps he came to another door. He eased that open. Dim light flickered from some sort of a passage off to his right. He headed toward it.

But suddenly his ears caught a little scuffling noise. He stopped, whirled.

Whirled—too late. The faceless monster was on him. Grey clawlike hands were at his neck, tearing, tearing, before he could strike a blow to protect himself, and then horrible pain streaked down his body and numbed him. He felt himself go limp. One anguished sob worked past the agony in his throat just as blackness closed over him like a dark veil.

“Joan. . .!”

CHAPTER FIVE

House of Wanton Laughter

SLOWLY Kirk swam back to consciousness—a hell of remembrance. There was an excruciating ache in his throat and churning nausea in his stomach. A groan surged up from his chest.

Joan! God, how long had he been out? What had she been forced to suffer?

He tried to push himself to his knees, found he couldn't. Pain almost made him faint again when he attempted to move. But he finally managed to roll over on his side.

He discovered that he was on the floor just where the creature had attacked him. Light was still flickering from the passageway toward which he had been headed, and there was still the sound of voices.

With a desperate effort he forced himself to relax. He must conserve his

strength for the work ahead. For long seconds of mental torture he made himself lie motionless, gritting his teeth against the agony each breath caused in his torn throat.

The voices in the distance rose from a low murmur to an excited babble as he waited there. Then he heard a sudden burst of raucous male laughter and above it, shrill and abandoned, the laughter of women.

That sound gave him a shock. Good God, women—those creatures! Getting pleasure out of the suffering of their own sex!

But an instant later he heard something which gave him more than a sickening shock, something which made him stiffen with incredulous horror.

The general clamor of mirth dwindled off. One laugh, however, stayed at top pitch longer than the others—and it was a laugh Kirk recognized.

It was the laugh of the girl he loved!

For a moment he remained utterly numb, not even breathing. Joan, down there with those monsters—laughing—laughing like a wanton harlot! Dear God, what had happened to her?

In an insane frenzy he pushed up to his knees. Pounding in his head was the single wild thought that he must somehow get her out of here.

The blackness of oblivion kept trying to close down on him again, as he wobbled crazily to the passageway.

From beyond a half open door came the sounds of the revelry. He staggered on.

Each step took a terrific toll. His throat seemed to be on fire, sending consuming flames to every part of his body. He managed to get almost to the end of the passage, but there his legs, utterly spent, suddenly gave away under him.

He was near enough, though, to see through the doorway. It gave on some stairs descending into a subterranean

chamber, and he stared down in sick horror.

For dancing lewdly before an audience of leering old men, their young bodies stripped almost naked, eyes burning with passion, were a group of girls from the beauty contest—who had supposedly been kidnaped against their wills!

And one of them was Joan!

AS HE watched, the dance grew wilder, and suddenly Joan gave an abandoned toss of her head, flung herself into the eager embrace of one of the men. The same toothless creature, Kirk saw, whose possessive stare earlier at the Gaiety Club had made her shudder! But now she let his foul hands paw her, rip away more of her clothes!

"No—no!"

Those two hoarse cries tore past the agony in Kirk's throat, but they were drowned out by the bedlam of noise in the cellar. Frenziedly he struggled back to his feet. All reason, all sense of caution, had left him. The sight of the girl he loved giving herself to that lecherous ancient had driven him stark mad.

He stumbled through the doorway and down the stairs.

He got nearly to the bottom before any-

one noticed him. Then, abruptly, one of the old men saw him and shouted. Two of the ghastly faceless creatures came running from somewhere, rushed at him.

Desperately Kirk leaped the rest of the way down to the chamber floor, tried to duck and get past them. But it was hopeless. One of them caught his arm, swung him around, and the other smashed him viciously on the jaw. He reeled back.

They sprang after him, eyes gleaming madly out of holes in their faceless skulls, grey clawlike hands slashing at his head, his throat, his chest. He made a frantic attempt to fight them off. But there was no use; more faceless monsters had joined them and were clawing at him. Strength flowed from his body with the blood from new wounds. He tottered dizzily and went down. They were on him like a pack of wolves lusting for the kill.

But then, above the whimpers of the faceless creatures, a terrified voice shrilled: "Those things—they're killing him! Make them stop! Good God, make them stop!"

Other terrified voices echoed the plea.

And abruptly a firm voice snapped a command. The fiends ceased their clawing, straightened, shuffled back into a ragged line.

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The firm voice Kirk had recognized as that of the man he had followed to this hellish place. Peering painfully up, he saw a figure in a black robe and hood. Sardonic eyes were gazing at him through slits in the hood.

"Ah, no, we wouldn't let you be killed for the world. Not for the world. That would be murder—and we can't have such a thing on our consciences."

Uttering a little chuckle, the man turned to the ancients who had forgotten their orgy in the sudden burst of fear.

"Don't be upset, gentlemen." Now he spoke in a soothing tone, gesturing with a black-gloved hand. "This intruder will be taken care of. Oh, quite harmlessly, quite harmlessly—but I assure you he will never talk about what he has seen. He's just a callow youth who imagined one of these girls loved him. He didn't realize they could really love only mature men like yourselves, men who know how to inspire passion."

THE soothing tone kept growing more unctuous.

"Look at them. Don't worry about this foolish kid. He'll be fixed, as I promised you the girls also would, to remember nothing of this night. So feast your eyes on these luscious beauties you've picked. See how they've fallen for you! Didn't I tell you they would? . . . Go on with your dancing, girls."

The girls, who were still swaying their hips, appearing to have hardly noticed the interruption, again continued their obscene posturing. Several grabbed hold of ancients who had drawn away, pulled them back into shameless embraces.

Joan was one of these, tugging the toothless old man of the Gaiety Club into her arms, pressing her almost naked body lasciviously against him.

Kirk stared at her in sick horror. She must have seen him plunge into the chamber, seen him almost be killed—yet even

that hadn't stifled her perverted lust.

"Joan—Joan!" he croaked.

But she paid no attention.

The hooded man laughed, murmured: "She isn't very faithful, is she?"

"You—you damned devil!" Kirk rasped past the agony in his throat. "You've done something to her—given her some drug!"

And with insane fury he pushed to his knees.

"Slap him down—a couple of you," the hooded man tossed calmly toward the line of faceless creatures. "Then tie him."

That was done swiftly, despite Kirk's struggles, and in a moment he had to watch the unholy orgy progress with no hope of being able to interfere.

It grew wilder and wilder. The ancients, their momentary fright forgotten, responded eagerly to the advances of the girls. Mottled, flabby hands caressed firm white breasts and thighs. Withered mouths groped for smooth young lips, pressed against them.

But finally the hooded man broke it up.

"All right. Get your money ready. I'll assign a room to each of you when you pay the agreed sum."

KIRK stared bitterly around the chamber as the old men fumbled in their pockets, produced rolls of bills. So this was it. Each of them had bought one of the poor kids. Contracted for her in advance, obviously—and that explained why the one who now was with Joan had looked at her in the Gaiety Club as if he owned her.

"For God's sake—all of you—listen!" Desperately, clenching his fists against pain, Kirk grated the words out. "You can't do this! These girls—they're only kids. You can't ruin their lives! You've had yours. Give them theirs!"

"Gag him," the hooded man snapped to one of the faceless creatures.

The creature nodded, hunched across

the room, laid powerful hands on Kirk.

"Please—please!" Kirk begged frantically. "Let them go! Let—"

That was as far as he got. The creature clamped one hand over his neck, ripped off a piece of his bloody shirt with the other, and stuffed it brutally into his mouth.

"Pay no attention to that prattle," the hooded man told the ancients. "The girls are young, yes—but they're just ripe for love."

And Kirk knew his last forlorn hope had been futile. Any spark of decency these ancients might have once possessed had been stifled by lust. They had paid no attention to him. They jammed around the hooded man, impatient to be assigned a room for further debauchery.

"All right, sir, you're the first." The hooded man took a sheaf of bills a quivering hand proffered him, counted them, nodded. "Correct. . . . Number one."

The business progressed rapidly, and each old man, as soon as he was given a number, hurried from the chamber with his willing property.

Kirk yanked wildly at his bonds. But it was useless. They wouldn't give. And he could only watch the clamoring group dwindle until the loathesome ancient who had bought Joan got his chance with the hooded man.

"Ah, the queen of them all," the hooded man murmured. "You are lucky, sir. A night with the most beautiful girl in the whole country. . . . Room number ten."

The ancient leered gloatingly.

Kirk writhed in terrible anguish. His Joan—defiled by that lecher! Her sweet young body contaminated forever by that loathesome debauchée who should be mouldering in his grave!

Twisting with a superhuman effort, Kirk tried to shout to her through the gag. She didn't even glance at him. Her eyes looked straight ahead.

And then she was gone.

FOR a few minutes utter insanity gripped Kirk's brain. Gone! Gone! The girl he loved! To sate her unnatural desires in a monstrous embrace! Frenziedly he strained at his bonds again, tore at them until the coils dug through the skin on his wrists, bit into the flesh.

The voice of the hooded man, the voice he would once have thought that of a friendly acquaintance, murmured: "My, my, such activity."

Kirk realized dimly that he was the only one of the mob left in the chamber. All the old men had departed with their girls. The faceless creatures had disappeared.

"It's very amusing to watch you," the devil went on. "I think I'll let you live another hour. It will be most entertaining. . . . But for the moment I have a little duty."

He glided to a doorway opposite the one leading to the rooms.

Entirely alone in the chamber now, Kirk began to yank even more feverishly at the bonds. For an instant they had seemed to give. He gritted his teeth, braced one hand on the stone floor and twisted the other.

Dear God, would the rope loosen more? Yes! It had—just a bit! Hope welled into his heart and he worked madly, unmindful of the excruciating pain. Braced first his left hand, then right, on the floor. Kept yanking and twisting, yanking and twisting. And every few seconds the coils eased under the constant pressure.

At last, suddenly, one hand slipped through them! He was free!

Swiftly he pushed to a sitting position, tore at the rope around his ankles. That came loose in a couple of seconds. He clawed up to his feet.

Three faltering steps brought him to the doorway through which the old men had taken their girls. It gave into a long corridor dimly lighted by a single kerosene lamp in a bracket fixture on one

wall. He started stumbling past closed doors with crude chalked numbers on them.

Number ten was the room he wanted. There was number one—two—three—four. . . .

And abruptly a door just ahead of him began to open. He jumped sideways, slid behind it as it swung back toward the wall.

"But I—I didn't do it!" a terrified voice croaked. "Oh God, I didn't!"

Through the crack between the door and the jamb Kirk could see into the room. One of the old men was being dragged toward him by two of the faceless creatures. His mouth and hands were covered with blood.

Then the thing on the floor was visible, the thing away from which he was being dragged. God! Kirk gave a convulsive shudder. The old man's girl—horribly mutilated! So mutilated that there was no chance that she still lived!

"I DIDN'T do it—I didn't do it!" the terrified voice kept repeating wildly. "I just got dizzy and—"

"I'm afraid that won't do," the cold voice of the hooded man interrupted from just inside the doorway. Evidently he had come around here by some back route. "We caught you in the act. This'll be a pretty serious business. However, maybe we can find an out."

Kirk pressed himself flatter against the wall. The whole inside of him was frozen with fear for Joan. The same thing would happen to her, too, if he didn't save her quickly. Clearly it was a part of the diabolical scheme of horror. Yet he couldn't go to her now. That would be utter folly, complete disaster. He had to wait.

Seconds dragged like hours while the faceless creatures pulled the whimpering ancient into the corridor, started down it with him. Kirk held his breath, and prayed

that none of the men would think to close the door. He waited until their voices were dim with distance, then slowly, cautiously, he edged out where he could watch the little group. After what seemed an interminable age they reached the end of the corridor. He pushed away from the wall, staggered on to the door marked number ten and flung it open.

With one quick glance he took in the sickening scene on the couch near the table holding the small lamp: the girl he loved writhing passionately under those pawing hands.

As he lunged across the room the old man had jumped up and tried wildly to avoid the rush. Terror crawled in his eyes, made his shrill cry break. But Kirk didn't stop. He slammed one fist to the side of the distorted face and the other to the point of the quivering jaw.

The old man crumpled.

Staggering drunkenly in exhaustion, Kirk started to get Joan. Then he heard the faint scrape of a footstep and whirled around. The black-hooded figure was coming at him with a knife.

He managed to sway sideways in time to avoid the first vicious thrust, but dizziness made him lose his balance. One hand clutched at the man's knife arm, missed it, and he went down. Through the nauseating hum of approaching oblivion he heard a snarl of triumph.

He shook his head frantically. He mustn't go out! Joan would be lost! He mustn't—mustn't! And with the sheer power of his will he forced back the cloud which was trying to swallow him.

The hooded man had crouched down now, knife raised high. It flashed through the air like a streak of fire. Desperately Kirk heaved himself over. Hot flame seared the point of his shoulder. He heaved back then, grabbed the arm which had swung the knife and wrenched it. The weapon plopped to the floor. He got hold of it, raised it as the hooded figure

tried to crush down on him. The blade drove through the black robe.

With the hilt protruding from his chest, the fiend slumped into a motionless heap beside Kirk. The hood had slipped up to expose his face. It was the face of Jed Morgan, the reporter who had been with Ruth Dennis in the foursome at the Gaiety Club.

Kirk gave the features one bitter glance and turned to Joan. The lust had faded from her eyes suddenly; she stared at him in dazed fright.

"What—what—"

"Quick—we've got to find a way out of here!" he managed to croak. Feebly he wavered to his knees, to his feet, stumbled toward her. "Try to—" And then a moan tore past the hell of pain in his throat.

It was too late! Footsteps—the faceless devils—they were coming!

With feverish desperation he spun, staggered back to Morgan, pulled the knife from his chest. There was no hope against that pack in this tiny room. But the knife could be put to another use—and far better that she die now by his hand than be left to live through the rest of this night.

He returned to her, the knife gripped tight. She stared at him in questioning terror. Her fingers fumbled up to her neck.

"Kirk. . . ?"

He raised the knife. The footsteps had pounded closer, were almost at the door. He steeled himself and began to swing down.

"Kirk—Kirk!"

He stopped the thrust just before the point of the blade would have plunged into her heart, twisted wildly. Those cries had come from behind him and had sounded like. . . . Yes! It was Bob Carlton! Bob Carlton and two policemen! He uttered a hoarse sob of thanks to a merciful God. . . .

HE WAS lying in a bed in the hospital eight days later, and he had just been allowed his first company. They had been afraid he might try to talk before his throat had time to heal sufficiently.

The first visitor, of course, was Joan. She crouched by the side of the bed with tears glistening in her eyes, her hands clutching his.

"Oh, Kirk—they hurt you so terribly!" she whispered. "You—you might have died!"

Kirk smiled tenderly. "I was scheduled to—but they made the mistake of waiting."

Joan was silent for a minute. But then with a shudder: "It was so horrible. I was in bed—and suddenly I really saw eyes. I—I hadn't heard a thing from the other room when—when he killed—" Her voice broke.

Kirk didn't attempt to say anything. He just pressed her hands tighter. He knew how she had loved her aunt and knew that only time would soften her grief.

"I tried to run," she continued after a minute, "but he caught me. Caught me and started to strangle me—and then I don't remember anything until I suddenly saw you fighting in that room." She shuddered. "I—I've heard, though, about how we'd been bought by those old men. How—how they'd each had the choice of a girl in the contest for one night. And then that we were all meant to be killed after—after. . . ."

Grim little lines etched themselves into Kirk's face.

"It was a hellish plan," he muttered. "Those behind it intended to have it to bring them plenty of money. That's why they were willing to go to such incredible lengths to get it started.

"Of course all the old men were rich. Well, they'd been given drugs in drinks, and when the drugs took effect each of their girls would be murdered. Horribly

—as Margery Lane was. Then blood was going to be smeared on every man's hands, even on his mouth, so that he'd think he'd done the thing in a fit of perverted passion. That figured to be a sweet set-up for blackmail."

"With the bridge blasted, telephones and lights dead, the city was helpless. The masked thugs had the place to themselves."

There was a moment of silence. Then Joan frowned.

"What did they do to us—I mean did they drug us too? To keep us from trying to fight?"

Kirk nodded. He didn't explain that the drug had also been an aphrodisiac to make them crazy with passion in order to keep the old men excited until the rest of the hoax was worked.

"How did you ever know Jed Morgan was behind it?" Joan asked. "You must have known, because Bob Carlton says that you followed Morgan to the place where the creatures had taken us. Says that's how he got there, followed you and then went for the police."

"I should've spotted the devil sooner," Kirk grunted in a bitter voice. "It was all a little thing he said. I was trying to get you on the telephone when the line went dead. I started for your hotel, but before I even left the room the bridge was blasted and the lights put out. We all ran down to the street. Morgan appeared

while I was looking around for a cab. He said he'd seen the bridge go from the corner. Then in a sham tone of horror he wanted to know what was going on in the city with the bridge blasted, lights out and telephones dead.

"It was all right about the bridge, of course, and the lights. Those on the street were out too. But how could he have known that the phones weren't working either? Nobody'd told him, and he couldn't have been on the corner when the bridge blew if he'd been in a phone booth somewhere when the lines went dead."

"I—I don't see how you ever noticed that little slip," Joan marveled.

"I didn't for a long while," Kirk said wryly.

Joan smiled through her tears.

"So I rushed to the Arden where Ruth had been staying," Kirk explained. "I thought he might be there putting on some kind of an act of grief over her disappearance. Luckily he was. . . . Yet, despite that break, we wouldn't be here now if it weren't for good old Bob. He saved the day by following me and then going for help."

"He ought to get a decoration," Joan said. "But—but you ought to get a dozen."

Kirk grinned, wanly yet happily. "I'm getting you," he told her. "But we'll decorate Bob by tricking him up in a dress suit to be our best man."

THE END

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BEAUTY and the BUTCHER

by Holden Sanford



What awful power from the Pit of Pain placed a bloody knife by my bridal bed, and on the white night-table—the severed ear of my bride!

AT FIRST I was conscious only of a blazing pain in my head and reality remained in a hazy borderland. Then slowly the vague memories of the past evening came back to me. Last night my fiancée, Loretta Kane, had given a banquet for the entire wedding party—we were to be married in a week's time. Still half conscious, I tried to recall the end of the evening but without success. There had been trouble of some kind—I couldn't remember what—and the gay party had come to an ugly conclusion. Purposely I hadn't drunk much, but the last thing I could call to mind was struggling against a feeling of intox-

ication, raging at myself for being such a fool. How I'd gotten home, into bed, was a blank in my mind—and Loretta, I couldn't remember escorting her to her house!

In an instant I was bolt upright in bed looking wildly about—at strange furniture and an unfamiliar room. I was still dressed in my evening clothes of the night before.

"Fool, fool!" I groaned, swinging my legs to the floor and getting unsteadily to my feet. What had caused me to wake up in a strange house at an unknown hour after having deserted my fiancée the previous night—beautiful Loretta, the most-

photographed deb of the season? And she was marrying a damned . . . but suddenly my mind snapped out of it and I stood transfixed in the center of the room. *What was that object on the dresser?*

Little pin-points of horror prickled up my spine and surged through my scalp as a sanity-shaking dread seized my mind. Standing before the dresser with my mouth stupidly agape, I gazed down at a bloody carving knife which was neatly laid beside my gloves and top hat. How did this knife get here? What had happened last night? Where was I? *What had I done?* Suddenly I strode over to the bedroom door; I'd rouse someone in the house, find out where I was and what had happened. I was jolted to a stop in front of the door—it was locked from the outside. I was a prisoner!

Panic surged over me in that instant and I beat the door with my fists. After a moment I heard running footsteps pounding down the hall outside, and I ceased my clamor.

"David!" a voice called through the door. "Shut up that racket; you'll wake the whole countryside."

With relief I recognized Paul Markheim's voice, one of the guests at the dinner the night before who was scheduled to act as my best man at the wedding. My older brother had been Paul's best man, and I was returning the compliment seven years later.

"Then open up," I shouted. "Am I supposed to be a prisoner?"

There was a short silence from the hall, and then Paul's voice asked hesitantly, "Are you . . . sure you're . . . all right, David?"

My anger flared up again. "Of course I'm all right. Open up; snap into it!"

I heard the lock click open and the door swung slowly inward. Paul was standing in the hall, back from the door.

"Come into the library," he said. "Something awful has happened; there's

hell to pay. I don't know what to do."

I followed him down the hall and into the library, dimly realizing that this was Paul Markheim's new country house, a good fifty miles from the city where the banquet was held.

"What's happened?" I asked in a strained voice.

"Loretta's missing," he replied tersely. His shaking hands put a cigarette between his pale lips. "Her family's been telephoning all over town. They even called here. I said I thought she was with you, that everything was all right."

"You knew damned well she wasn't with me," I blazed up. "And you knew I was locked in that room. Do some explaining, Mister!"

Paul raised his hand and pointed at me. "Explain that," he said, and I looked down with horror at the dark red stains on my stiff shirtfront—stains of dried blood.

I SAT dumbly on the couch, my mind a whirlpool of conjecture, while Paul repeated what he knew of the night before.

"Everything was going nicely," he said, "when suddenly the drinks you had had began to tell on you. Loretta appealed to me for help, so I quietly asked you if you hadn't had enough, but that only made you angry. You became surly to the whole crowd—even to Loretta—and I was afraid a fight might start. Then suddenly you disappeared, I didn't see you for some time. Then Loretta disappeared too, and I went searching for the two of you, fearful that a quarrel might develop. Well, I found you all right. You were out on the front lawn, semi-conscious."

"Oh, my God," I groaned.

"Loretta wasn't anywhere to be seen," he continued, "but I noticed that your shirtfront was stained with blood. In your hand was—"

"Yes," I interrupted dully. "I saw the knife; it's in my room."

"I couldn't break your grip on it," Paul said. Then his voice became more strained than ever. "But there was something else there that you didn't see!" and he walked to the library table, taking out of the drawer a soiled bundle, evidently a pocket handkerchief stained with blood. He unwrapped it before me.

Great God! My head reeled and spun. Nauseating horror slithered up and down my backbone and the pit of my stomach curled with revulsion. Lying in the handkerchief, blotched and stained with blood, was a severed human ear—a girl's ear—with a small diamond earring still in place! *And that earring I knew to be Loretta's!* I had given them to her myself as an engagement present.

"I didn't know what to do," Paul continued hurriedly. "I wanted to be loyal both to you and to Loretta. She was missing—abducted or crazed with pain and horrible mutilation. If the police found you they'd surely throw you in jail. So I quickly put you in my car and drove directly out here where you'll be safe—until the truth of this thing comes out. I might just as well tell you that I locked you in your room last night partly as a protection from that murderous knife you still had, and partly to be sure you wouldn't escape.

"You know that I have a wife and children I love dearly," he went on, "and in the name of that love I intend to find the truth of this horrible mutilation. I'll be impartial but just. What have you to say for yourself?"

"Call the police," I said dully. "I can't believe I've done this thing—I *know* I couldn't have done it. It's a gruesome plot against me. Perhaps she was kidnaped—*that's it*, Loretta *was* kidnaped and this whole thing is a camouflage to throw the police off the trail. God knows what they are doing to her now, to what indignities and horrors she's being subjected!" At that thought a frenzy came over me and I leaped to my feet. "*We've got to find Loretta—now, right away!*" I screamed at him. I wheeled about toward the door, when a firm command behind me made me turn.

Paul had an automatic in his hand. "You will not leave my sight until this whole thing is over," he said. "You may consider yourself in my custody. I'll accept your word of honor not to escape." I nodded, and he put the gun away.

At that moment the telephone rang and Paul picked it up. His voice became excited as he talked, and when he had finished he slammed the receiver down and swung toward me.

"That was Loretta's father, Judge Kane," he burst out in an excited voice.



"He said he'd just received a mysterious telephone call from their summer home—a girl's voice—but the call was cut off. He's notifying the police, but we're much closer. Let's get up there pronto!"

"Come on!" I shouted, and we were downstairs and out of the house within a minute. Paul's car was at the door and we slammed into the front seat and were roaring out the driveway and up the highway like a flash.

I'LL always remember that ride—Paul Markheim bending over the wheel, his eyes riveted on the road ahead, the screeching tires wailing like demons as we slithered around turns, the motor hitting a high-pitched whine as we roared into the straightaway.

During that whole ride a kaleidoscopic series of horrible mental pictures and torturing thoughts flashed through my mind. Had I, a normally light-drinking man, butchered the one I held most dear in a fit of drunken rage? Had alcohol made me a fiendish demon bereft of all moral control, mutilating my own sweetheart? Or was I the victim of circumstances accidentally or deliberately arranged to point the finger of loathsome guilt at me? Could Paul be at the bottom of this devilish abduction? But Paul was ten years older than I, the father of two children and husband of a lovely wife. He seemed to be fighting to find Loretta's mutilator, even to the point of suspecting me! I was bewildered, dazed, fearful, hurt beyond physical pain. Then, a hail of gravel smashing against the mudguards like gunfire, we slewed up the private driveway and slammed to a stop before the front of the quiet, seemingly deserted house.

In a bound Paul and I were out of the car and up the steps. The front door was locked and with a curse I smashed my fist through a pane of glass, reached in and opened the door. Paul still had his automatic. He drew it now and we

started to make a swift but silent search of the house. We were just before the living room door when a harsh voice lashed out a command from behind us:

"Hold it! Stand where you are! Reach!"

Slowly my hands went up toward the ceiling, and I noticed out of the corner of my eye that Paul had managed to slip his gun in his pocket unobserved by the man behind us before putting up his hands.

"March into the living room!" the voice grated.

We marched in, hands in the air, and turned to view our captor. It was Jacques, Loretta's chauffeur! His eyes shifted uneasily from one to the other of us, the ugly, snub automatic wavering slowly back and forth, ready to blast out at any hostile move. His look blazed cold, vindictive hate.

Suddenly every muscle in me tensed with hope and fury. I could see that Paul was getting ready to take a desperate chance. In a flash he threw himself to the floor, out of the range of the gun, his hand darting to his pocket for his own gun. In that same second my tensed body launched forward arrow-like, arms flailing the air. Like a cat, with amazing agility, Jacques sprang backward his gun blazing searing lead at the same instant. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a red well of blood spurt from a long crease in Paul's forehead. In the next instant I was crashed to my knees from midair by a smashing molten pain that halted my charge like a steel door. I tried to struggle to my feet again, my only strength the thought of Loretta's slender beauty, but a ton of blackness crushed me to the floor and sickeningly I drifted into senselessness.

I DON'T think I had been out for more than a minute when I was conscious of an urgent voice whispering my name, calling me back to my senses.

"David, David! Snap out of it, boy!"

With pain searing my eyeballs and weakness paralyzing every muscle of my body I rolled over and saw Paul lying not six feet away from me. He had been securely bound, hand and foot, the flesh wound along his forehead apparently only sufficient to stun him for a moment.

"Quick, David," he whispered. "Now's our chance. That devil has left you for dead, or else has gone for more rope to hog-tie you as well as me. Hurry, boy. Loosen these bonds and we've won. Just one last effort!"

Groaning, I rolled on my face and crept toward him. It seemed an eternity of pain to crawl those six feet and fumble at the knots that secured Paul's arms. My right arm was useless and my shirt and coat were drenched with blood. As I fumbled ineptly a horrible sing-song of dizziness rang and buzzed through my head.

At length Paul's arms were freed. Then, getting to his feet, he pulled me up beside him and supported me on waver- ing legs.

"That fool didn't even search me for a gun, David," he said. "Come on and be in at the kill. I think he's gone to the cellar—perhaps Loretta's held captive there. God knows what he's doing to her now!"

Paul's words caused the hot strength of fury to flow through my veins, and I threw back my shoulders and steadied on my feet.

Paul led the way out through the but- ler's pantry and into the kitchen. Down below we could hear frightened voices, and my heart quickened when I recog- nized Loretta's soft tones.

Paul went down the cellar steps first, gun in hand, and I crept behind him. When my eyes came below the level of the eaves of the cellar roof an involuntary gasp of horror and rage escaped my throat. Over against the wall at one end of the cellar stood two girls, both stripped

MEET BIG BEN

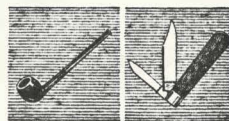
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of all their clothes except for thin, filmy underwear. Loretta's black silk-and-lace ensemble gave off a dull sheen from the unshaded lamp overhead. Both girls stood with their arms straight up in the air, suspended by ropes tied about their wrists and fastened to a ceiling-pipe overhead. The girl with Loretta I recognized as one of the bridesmaids, a young, shy little thing I did not know very well, named Helen. She was crying softly, probably at the shame and degradation she felt at her indecent, helpless exposure. Judge Kane sat at one side of the room, roped tightly to a chair, his agonized eyes never leaving Loretta's pale strained face. Jacques stood before the girl who was weeping in such a hopeless heart-broken way, his hands fumbling with the rope which bound her.

The paralysis and shock of the stark evil of that scene held me speechless for a moment, but as revulsion and fury arose within me my voice returned and I screamed a curse at the damnable torturer in the room below. At that sound he spun toward us, his hand streaking for his side pocket. But his hand never reached his side, for Paul's savage .32 Colt split a vicious reply that froze Jacques' motion. For a moment he stood immobile, an expression of amazement and unbelief on his face, then he gave a wet choking cough and sprawled his length on the floor at the girls' feet.

Both girls screamed and Judge Kane bellowed like a bull as Jacques fell, and in that instant I started forward to Loretta, pity and tenderness surging within me. It was deliverance! But a rough hand stopped me in my stride and swung me about. It was Paul—and in that instant of surprise and confusion I was wide open for the smashing right hook that lifted me off my feet and crashed my body against the wall beside the girls. I was too weak from loss of blood and exhaustion to rise and fight again—I lay

against the wall helpless, groggy, stunned. My mind couldn't reason why it was Paul's fist that had turned against me, jolted me helpless in our moment of victory.

AT no time did I lose consciousness after that blow, but the weakness caused by my wound and my light-headed helplessness made the whole scene that followed seem like the ghastly nightmare of a diseased mind. Paul gave one glance in my direction and then contemptuously looked away, wiping the blood from his knuckles. Loretta was suspended just above me and I heard her whispering, more to herself than to me.

"Oh, David, David! What have you done? Jacques was trying to help us. He became suspicious of Paul Markheim when dad and I disappeared last night so he trailed us here—but he made the mistake of coming alone. He had just arrived when he saw you and Paul coming in; naturally he suspected that you were in league with Paul, so he tried to capture the two of you. He was just setting us free when he was shot." Loretta didn't say any more, but I heard her choke back a sob that came to her throat.

The whole vile scheme was apparent to me now: Paul's tricks with bloody knife and the supposedly human ear; his cunning insistence that I was his prisoner; his faked telephone call to get me here; and worst of all, his duping me into setting him free so that he might *mutilate and torture the girl I loved!* My agonized eyes turned to Loretta, to the round maidenly firmness of her out-thrust breasts, to the rippling grace of the muscles that ran through her slender shapely legs, to the soft, gentle curves of her virgin thighs and the satin-smooth rose-petal skin of her abdomen. The fury of my impotent rage within my shattered body almost brought tears to my eyes.

During this long moment Paul Mark-

heim paid no attention to us, while Judge Kane remained helpless in his chair breathing with great, hollow gasps, and little Helen's virgin breasts heaved spasmodically with each sob of shame. Bending over a table, Paul Markheim had removed a long flat metal case from his pocket and was busily absorbed with its contents. Finally he straightened up with a hypodermic needle in his hand. Then he rolled back his sleeve and jabbed the needle into a vein, pressing the plunger home. He stood for a minute holding the table as the trembling of his hands and the twitching of his face stopped and a flush of color suffused his white face. After a second he strode over in front of us, his eyes unnaturally alight, blazing with the false unbalanced courage and evil assurance of the confirmed dope fiend. In his hand he held a long, narrow-bladed knife, his eyes tauntingly on Loretta's slender white body, his face blazing with a drug-maddened lascivious expression, evil in every line. Then his eyes turned to Helen's body and he reached a hand slowly toward her, chuckling vilely at her cringing fear, gloating in his madness at her shrinking, trembling figure. When his hand touched her body Helen's racking sobs were arrested by her welling terror, and she stood stiff and frozen, scarcely breathing. Markheim's fingers groped into the depression between Helen's firm, erect breasts, grasped her sheer underclothing, and with a single powerful sweep of his hand stripped her completely naked. A crimson flush overspread her face and she made pitifully modest attempts to writhe her torso and legs into a position to conceal her nudity. In a partial coma I lay against the wall unable to move, only able to watch with agonized eyes, steeped to the very soul in this insane orgy of unnatural, demented lust. Judge Kane roared violent curses that filled the room, while Loretta moaned in sympathy, her white body writhing.

TIRING soon of this torture, Markheim raised his knife and advanced toward the girl. There was none of the lustful pleasure of the unnatural madman who inflicts pain for his own pleasure in Markheim's attitude. Instead, he seemed to enjoy a certain perverted, drug-crazed humor in the victim's terror and attempts to escape. Furthermore, like all drug addicts, he blamed society for his own pitiful enslavement and inflicted pain and suffering on others to have revenge for his own torment. Poor Helen was the victim at the moment, and I saw her horrified eyes follow the slowly advancing knife as a bird watches the snake which is to kill it. Her scream ripped through the room and I saw a long red gash on one of her hips, a trail of blood running down the back of her leg. Next a bloody gash appeared on one breast, another on her abdomen. I closed my eyes and clenched my hands after that, trying not to hear the pitiful screams and moans and the wild thrashing of her body. After an eternity of horror the thrashing movements stopped, and the little figure hung limp and motionless in the bonds.

I knew that Judge Kane had been trying not to see or hear the dreadful torment and mutilation, just as I had. When he spoke now his voice was tired, dead, toneless.

"Markheim," he said, "you're a foul beast. I told you before that I'd give you anything you wanted if you'd spare these girls—money, anything. What more could you possibly want?"

"Plenty more!" Markheim snarled. "I'll take and do anything I please and when I'm tired you'll give me everything I want anyway—for your daughter's life! I want—*must have*—two things: money, lots of it, and revenge!"

"For God's sake, Markheim," I managed to gasp weakly, "you've got plenty of money—more than you need; and why revenge from Judge Kane?"

He swung his eyes toward me and I saw the fearful unreasoning blaze of narcotics burning there. "Money?" he snarled. "Lots of it? Perhaps you don't know that my wife and children left me a week ago when my wife learned of my habit. Perhaps you don't know that Judge Kane slapped a restraining order on our joint bank account—and that my wife can easily prove the money was all hers in the beginning. Maybe you don't know that drugs cost money and lots of it—and without drugs I'll go mad, rot in an insane asylum! I'll get money, and I'll get revenge on the one who is responsible for my whole downfall—all from you, Kane!"

"After I've had my pleasure with the charming Loretta," Markheim continued, "the learned Judge over here," he gave a mocking bow in the Judge's direction, "will sign a few checks on various of his banks, confirm those checks by telephone, and the bridegroom, accommodating David, will go to the city and return with the cash—if he wants to see either of you alive again! After that, you'll pardon me if I take the first boat for Europe and points East."

As he was speaking, Markheim had been slowly advancing on Loretta. Out of the corner of my eye I had caught sight of a slight motion on the part of Jacques. It surprised me because I had thought him dead. Then I suddenly remembered . . . *the gun was still in his pocket when he was shot down!*

Would he regain consciousness? Would he remember the gun if he did? Oh, how I prayed at that moment. As if in answer to my prayer I saw Jacques move again. By this time Markheim was directly in front of Loretta. Brusky, roughly, he reached out and ripped her underclothes from her, revealing her statuesque, marble-like body in all its sylphlike slenderness and warmth.

"I cannot be quite so tender with you, my dear," Markheim said with a cruel

leer. "I'm afraid a little amputation will be necessary. Now, Judge, how much am I bid for a shell-pink ear? Or, perhaps, you would prefer a little soft, virgin breast?" The Judge's eyes were closed, his teeth clenched until the jaw-muscles showed white under his skin. Even Loretta didn't make a sound during this deliberate torturing delay. She was saving her father that much.

WILDLY, the sweat of despair and cold horror on my brow, I looked again at Jacques. *God in Heaven!* Jacques had managed to get the gun out of his pocket—after how many minutes of excruciating pain and mental agony I could not say. Huddled as he was on the floor he had managed to bring the gun up on Paul Markheim. His eyes starting from his head, the perspiration of suffering incarnate on his brow, Jacques was trying to gain a last reserve of strength—only enough to pull that trigger! I could see the black pools of agony in his staring eyes, could hear the quick pain-seared gasps for breath as he struggled to pull the trigger of that gun.

A scream from Loretta wrenched my eyes to the gruesome drama in front of me. Markheim, oblivious to Jacques struggles, had continued with his torture of the father and daughter. With fiendish slowness he had cut a light circle around Loretta's left breast. He was laughing in unholy delight at the pain he was causing both Loretta and the Judge.

A sudden gasp made my eyes snap back to Jacques—he had collapsed in exhaustion, a thin stream of bubbly blood running from his mouth. I knew then that he could never fire that shot. Then, as I watched, his arm that held the gun began to straighten out on the floor. Agonizingly, by fractions of an inch, his arm straightened along the wall toward me. It was his last hope, but I knew I could never reach that gun . . . *then his plan flashed into my*

mind! He was placing the gun under Loretta's feet!

At that moment Loretta gave another scream, and I saw that Markheim had cut her a bit deeper. The Judge groaned and ground his teeth, and my blood turned to ice. Markheim screamed with mad laughter.

At that instant Loretta felt the cold steel of the automatic against her foot. With superhuman presence of mind she didn't look down, knew what it was. Slowly her toes gripped around the gun, then, with a sudden movement, she skidded it across to me.

Markheim stepped back, suddenly alarmed. But my fumbling hands had grasped the gun, had closed on the butt, two fingers twining about the trigger. Markheim's gun was laying on the table where he had left it. His eyes never left mine and they shone with a tortured fascination as he looked straight down the staring black hole that was the actual eye of death. Sweat broke out on his face and the knife dropped from his nerveless hand; he seemed to have no thought of any possible escape from this certain death.

"I'm doing you a favor, Markheim," I croaked, "in sending you straight to hell. It won't be as painful as your life here on earth would have been."

Then the gun roared and blasted him back across the table behind him where his own gun was. But he didn't try to reach

for it. He stood up again on rubber legs and slowly walked toward me again as though asking for more. The stupid, lopsided grin on his face leered with an unbelieving wonder. Again my gun exploded and the force of the slug spun Markheim around in a circle like a top, at length slamming him in a sprawl at the foot of the table. He lay where he fell, never twitching a muscle.

Staggering drunkenly, I picked up Markheim's knife and cut Loretta's bonds. Then I turned toward the unconscious Helen, but I never completed that trip. The room was suddenly filled with soft black feathers and I drifted into them with a long sigh. Unconsciousness surged over me.

WHEN I came back to reality, I was in a hospital and Loretta was at my side. She tied in what little details I didn't know and gave me the end of the story: Jacques and Helen would recover with rest and treatment; she, herself, hadn't even had to go to bed; Jacques' suspicions had first been aroused when he discovered that Markheim was spicing my drinks with generous shots of chloral hydrate, a powerful sedative, and some other knock-out drug.

The nurse told me I would be up and about in a week. I knew that Loretta and I would be married immediately, but I didn't have to ask the nurse that: I could see it in Loretta's eyes.



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Bride of the Serpents

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Between the grim grey walls of that canyon of dread desire I fought blindly, as the quicksands of hell closed round my feet, to save the girl I loved from the lusting hands of the great sculptor—who held a commission from the Prince of Pain himself!

by J. O. Quinliven

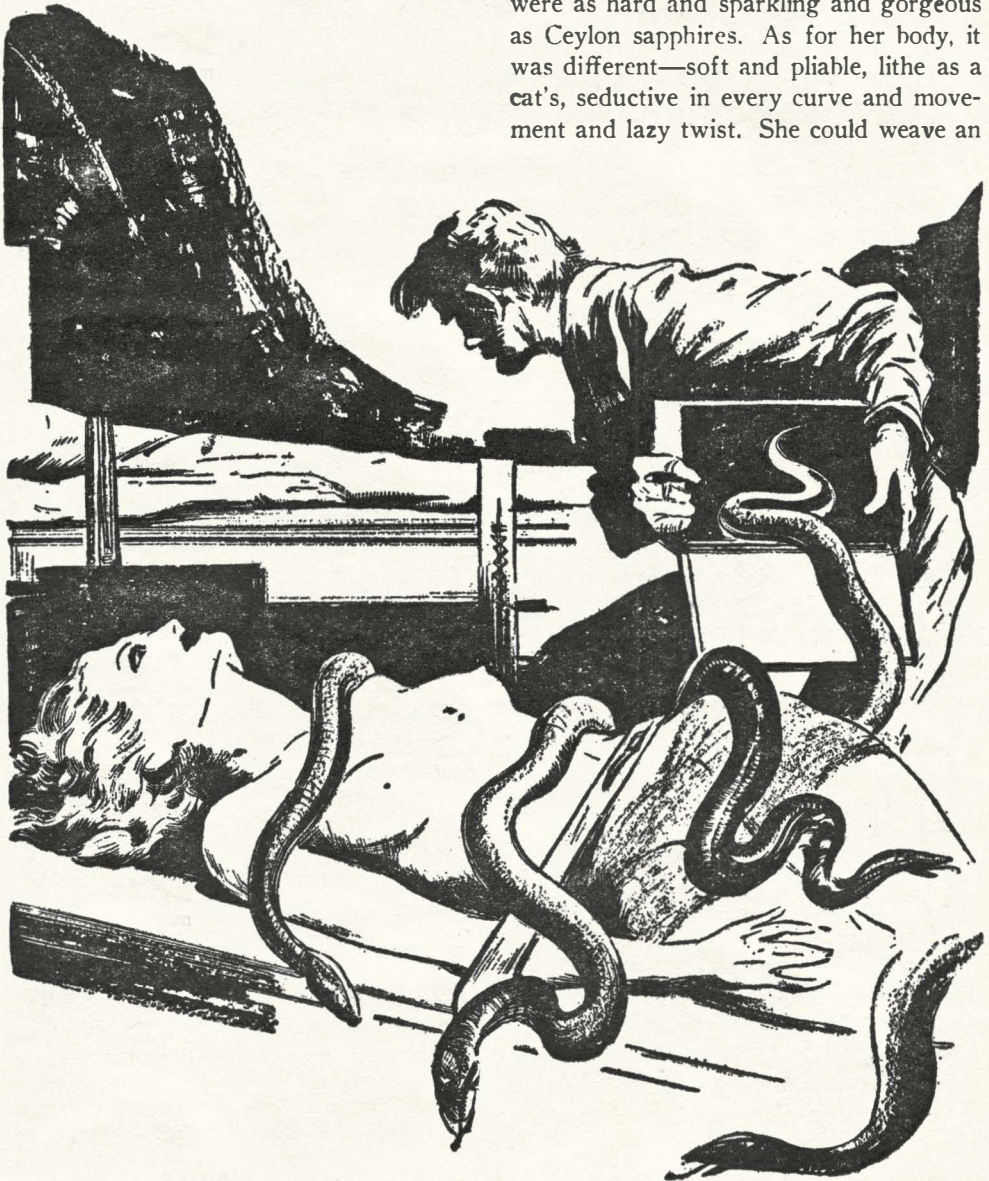
CHAPTER ONE

The House of Passion

I USED pretty big words when I told Mary Harmon that I could find her brother. He was a classmate and chum of mine, and she was worried to death. That's why I said, "Hell itself won't stop me till I find him." I did not

realize how aptly the promise was phrased.

I knew where to search. Ted was a great one for chasing any pretty girl that gave him the come-on signal. She was a beauty—that last girl I had seen him with at the roadhouse north of our town. She had black hair that reminded me of something hard and brittle like metallic rock—black basalt for instance. And her eyes were as hard and sparkling and gorgeous as Ceylon sapphires. As for her body, it was different—soft and pliable, lithe as a cat's, seductive in every curve and movement and lazy twist. She could weave an



evil, a terrible deathly spell over a man!

Some days after that night at the roadhouse Ted told his sister he was going to the desert on a surveying trip. And that was the last thing Mary heard from him.

I worked on the one clue—that girl with the feverish, sapphire eyes. This was three weeks after his disappearance, but I lost no time in investigating the identity of the girl. She was married and lived in a Spanish bungalow in a lonely olive grove twenty miles from the roadhouse. The proprietor of the joint told me I would better let well enough alone. He could not remember my friend Ted Harmon but he remembered the woman. He had seen her before. In fact she made up to some of his regular patrons. "They'd go off with her and never come back here again. I've wondered sometimes what happened to them."

He advised me to stay out of it. "You look like a straight young guy, only you got a reckless face, and you look mad. Let your pal get out of his own love tangles."

"What else do you know about her?" I persisted.

"Her husband's a professor or scientist, something like that. And there's another reason for you to watch your step. These Mex cooks that work in my kitchen, and my Mex orchestra, they cross themselves if you mention that man La Verne—her husband's name is Doc La Verne. They won't tell me what they know about him and the woman, and I wouldn't believe it anyway—they got so many superstitions. But one thing I'm saying, if you want to find your pal, don't bump into the Doc and tell him you're looking for a young guy who's hanging around his wife. It might irritate him."

I drove straight out to the olive grove and the lonely Spanish house. Few cars used this road now. There was only one gas station, I found out after many miles of thickly timbered foothills. A little fur-

ther on was a gloomy hacienda, a rambling Monterey adobe house darkened by cypresses.

A fat half-breed woman with muddy eyes answered my ring. Craftily I asked for Dr. La Verne instead of for his glamorous wife. But it was Mrs. La Verne who came down, and I introduced myself. "You may not remember I met you at the La Paloma roadhouse some weeks ago." Yes, she remembered me very well. She asked me to come in.

She was something to rave about, something beyond the natural beauty of any woman I know. She was dressed in negligée so flimsy that I could catch the glow of living skin in spots where the curves of her body tightened the sheer silk. I remembered how stark and unashamed her costume was that other night at the roadhouse. She had seemed nude above the waist then, except for a small wisp of fabric over the tips of her young breasts. That was in public, but tonight she was completely covered by the negligée, sheer though it was, and this struck me as a rather grim inconsistency.

THERE was a divan in a corner of the room and she asked me to sit there. She had the half-breed servant bring highballs. I took the drink and waited for the casual moment when I could bring up the subject, or rather the mystery of the vanished Ted Harmon. The lithe flaming woman watched my eyes which at that moment were drawn, magnetized by the beauty of her cream colored neck and one bare shoulder down which she had let her negligée slip. I glanced away guiltily from her look and stared for a moment at the room.

It was rather meagerly furnished in Mission oak and Hopi rugs except for some pieces of sculpture which stood out in magnificent relief against the simple background. One piece was like the upper half of the Venus de Milo, except that

the head was missing as well as the arms.

It is seldom that a piece of statuary will affect me, but this thing was uncannily life-like. With the wrought iron lamp shedding its light in just the right way, the statue, even though incomplete was like a glimpse of a girl's figure seen in a window when the shade is drawn only part way. Besides, the workmanship was so fine that the veins in the marble actually simulated human veins, human life!

But as I say, I was no Pygmalion who could fall in love with a statue. I turned to the hot and living vessel of life—the lovely woman sitting there on the divan.

I managed to say casually, "A friend of mine is very much in love with you. He was there at the roadhouse that night. Ted Harmon. How have you two been getting along?"

She tried to remember the name. "Oh yes, the boy you were with. He brought me home. A nice young boy. But I haven't seen him since."

This was a lie, but I could not very well say so. Nor could I ask if he had come into this house with her when he brought her home. But I must get it out of her some way. I decided to pretend I had come for another reason. I could pretend that I too was infatuated with her. It was an easy rôle. She had the servant bring us another drink and the colors in the room grew hotter and more vibrant. That bit of statuary over there looked so real that the horrid thought struck me that it was a cadaver!

I blurted out, losing my sense of diplomacy, "I haven't seen Ted Harmon either—since that night."

Her eyes looked at me, green and glowing like a Persian cat's. "Did you come here to ask about him—or to see me?"

"To see you," I said quickly.

"Then why don't you look at me?"

She was very proud of her beauty, lifting her throat so that I could catch the

play of color on the cream, the slow shadows reaching like fingers down her neck, playing over her naked shoulder. My eyes dropped but were trapped again by her slipped foot, the high delicate arch of her instep, traced with blue veins, the straight smooth line of her leg and the curve of the flesh—not muscle, but soft white flesh warming to coral at her knee, fading again to the matchless purity of her thigh. Her negligee had been masterfully arranged to reveal more and more of that bewitching beauty.

She read everything in my mind. "Your friend did not come in with me that night, if that's what you're driving at. You see my husband was home. But," she added with a gentle squirm as if in response to a sudden heat in the room, a sudden thrill of rampant life, "he's not here tonight. He's up in the mountains at his studio where he does most of his work. He's a sculptor you know."

I SHOT a quick glance at that broken statue. And again the life-like tenseness of the still muscles, the nuggets of alien garnet which tipped the breasts, mystified me. "I thought your husband was a scientist of some sort."

"Yes, a geologist, but sculpturing is his hobby. There is some of his work." She pointed to the woman's torso. "That other piece—" she nodded to the darkness where another statue stood, complete and perfect—"that is not his work. Perhaps you recognize it as just a copy of the Perseus holding the Gorgon's head."

The Gorgon's head! The Medusa with the beautiful face and the hair of snakes, the most horrifying beast of all antiquity, the very sight of which turned any beholder into stone! My mind heated with the highballs, frenzied with the increasing revelation of this living girl's body—jumped to a wild, almost insane answer to the mystery of that torso. A human being turned to stone—that was the an-

swer! But I must have been crazy. I knew it even then. I rejected the whim instantly. Besides this girl—the black-haired living one—had gotten up so as to stand between me and the statue at which I was staring wild-eyed.

She distracted my mind completely—as completely as though I were a dog drawn from the cooling trail of a fox by the scent of more luscious meat thrown in its path. The girl stood there with her negligee draped over one shoulder like a Grecian goddess. There is little doubt but that she had drugged that drink. The hour that ensued was the misty nirvana of a hashish eater—all the vibrations of the earth singing in harmony. In my arms I held the warm yielding substance of human life merged in perfect cadence with my own life so that I was twicfold enriched with all the ecstasies of existence.

It broke off like a dream with the girl's wild cry—a cry like a wounded bird's. I had heard footsteps in the house, but I paid no attention, thinking they were merely the ponderous slow steps of the fat servant. Besides they too struck a harmony in my ecstatic body, like the slow bone-tingling pound of a voodoo drum in the bodies of crazed dancers.

"He's here!" the girl screamed voicelessly, leaping up from the divan. "He's not in the mountains as he said. He came back to catch me at this! He'll kill you,—no, something worse! Into that door, quick! Down the hall!"

She shoved me through one of the Indian hangings and I found myself in a dark hall with a faint glow of starlight filtering through the Moroccan filigree of a window at the further end.

I might get out, but my crime was known. Even if I escaped, the husband of the girl knew that someone was in the house for he had seen my car out there in front of the verandah!

And since he knew, I had a strange foreboding that all escape was futile.

CHAPTER TWO

The Lair of the Serpents

THAT dreadful whim that had struck me—the connection of the life-like stone torso with the old legend of Medusa—gave me a madman's strength. I was able to wrench the rusty old ironwork from the crumbling mortar of a windowsill. At a dead run I reached my car, gunned it to its full power, with only one thought—to put as much distance as possible between myself and that house of horror. Yet even as I sped down the road I heard the faint throb of a high powered motor ahead of me. Was it possible that Dr. La Verne had foreseen my escape and beaten me to it? I knew in my bones that I would never escape. Nothing could hide me from the vengeance of Dr. La Verne. If I went to the ends of the earth I should never feel free from his relentless pursuit—and my soul quivered at the knowledge.

I stopped at the little gas station to see if there might be some other road by which I could get back to town more quickly.

As the attendant unscrewed the radiator cap and got his water can, I asked casually, "You didn't see a car pass this way a little ahead of me?"

The attendant stood a moment staring. "Sure. It was Doc La Verne. He stopped here a second, looking back up the road till you came along."

He finished pouring the water but kept looking up at me trying to squint through the windshield.

"Who's Doc La Verne?" I asked innocently.

"Crazy guy lives up the road a ways. Has a wife who's a lulu. Raises hell when he's off in the gulches studying rocks. Then when he gets home he raises some hell of his own. Check your oil?"

"What kind of hell?"

"Oh ho! You asked me somethin'. And I don't know the answer. I only know one of the young birds who used to go up to see her, well I saw him over in Bolton in a wheel chair. They said he had a disease which turned his blood into kind of cement. Kind of ossified lookin' hands he had. And another fellow used to stop in here for gas. Well he come by one night and I thought he'd be picked up for drunk driving and I held him here. But he wasn't drunk. He was babbling about a girl's head with snakes onto it. Just ravin' mad, that's all. Guess your windshield's all right now, mister."

I turned and drove off. Of course I drove up towards the mountains—instead of down to the valley where that fiend was waiting for me.

I rode two hours finding only a few crossroads which petered out in mountain ranches or old borax mines. Then to my consternation I found that the meter read empty!

I thought back. Was it possible that La Verne had had time to puncture my gas tank while I was in the house? Of course! He could have done it before he came in to surprise his wife in her peccadillos.

I WAITED for a car to come along. Several had passed me, for the road was not entirely deserted even at that late hour. There would be others. I did not wait long. A rancher in a rattletrap snorting car, chugged on down the road from the direction in which I had been heading. Had he come from the opposite direction I might have been careful. If my pursuer had learned from the filling station boy that I had taken this road, he could follow, chasing me on up into this wilderness!

The rancher stopped.

"Can't spare more'n a gallon," the leather-faced little fellow said. "Know how to siphon it out?"

"If I had a long tube of some sort."
"Here's one."

It must have taken nerve for such a little runt to knock me out as I bent over his gas tank. But he had his orders. The Doctor, hearing that I had gone up the mountain road must have telephoned ahead to a henchman—this "rancher". He directed him no doubt to ride along the road till he met a man who needed gas.

I woke up in a thick walled adobe hut. The room was empty, with one grimly ironed window, a massive redwood door locked and bolted, a smoky lamp. The full glare of the lamp fell upon the floor where I saw a crudely carved chunk of rock, as if a petrified log had been dragged in from the mass of boulders outside the barred window. But as my dazed eyes cleared, squinting, I saw that the carving was not the haphazard work of erosion but the fine delineation of a master sculptor. My eyes shot up to the dimmer light above the fan of the lamp. The hair stiffened on my scalp. Above the misshapen and twisted legs the torso assumed more perfect shape, knotted with agonized muscles so that the figure seemed like one of the Laacoön Group, writhing in the clutch of serpents. But the upper half was not a marble statue. It was not stone, but flesh!

I could see the hard sheen of greyish granite in the legs, the flat dead white of limestone, the chipped spot at the knee caps and ankles which revealed the layer of rock beneath. But above the waist the skin seemed looser and more rounded. There was a tinge as if iron in the limestone had turned it red. Still higher, the figure was like life, and the face, congealed in a grimace of torture, was a face not of stone but of flesh and bone and human skin! Half of that hideous thing was petrified rock, the upper half a corpse!

As I gazed sick with horror, I heard a

low, heart-tearing moan echo in the room.

My forehead turned icy cold and wet. The moan came from this very room! I could have sworn to that, laid down my life in testimony of it. But there was no one in the room—except myself cringing against the wall like a trapped animal,—and that huddled corpse on the floor.

And from that corpse which was my sole companion and cell-mate, the moan came—like a faint and terrible cry from the depths of hell!

FOR a long time that seemed to stretch into an endless purgatory I watched those lips. But they did not move. They were as stiff, the muscles as drawn and knotted as if the poor wretch had lock-jaw. I know now that the disease was due to the mesoblastic cells depositing bone substance about themselves and growing enormously until the membranes and cartilages of the whole body were turned to stone.

Again that bestial grunt of affirmation. My brain whirled. I understood the principle of petrification well enough to realize just what had happened to this wretched human body. In ordinary petrification of wood, shells, a body of whatever the host of the infiltrating minerals may be, the original structure is perfectly retained. The scientist who worked in this hellish laboratory must also have developed a technique which left the heart and lungs of the victim unimpaired. And also—what was most horrible of all—the brain!

In a sudden panic I banged my shoulders against the door, the iron bars of the window, the thick wall. I was for a brief moment a madman in a cell. But I found out quickly enough that these iron bars were not like the filigree in the window of La Verne's home. Here was a real fortress, cement, reinforced no doubt with steel. I looked up, frustrated, crazed, at the beamed ceiling. I might break through up there and crash the tiled roof.

I swung myself up on the carved beams, but the tiles were not the only obstruction up above. The ceiling like the walls was built of solid cement, making a box. And I was boxed in. While my fellow prisoner, this hideous corpse-like thing, kept muttering the one word, "Forever!"

It was the sound of wheels crunching in a pebble wash that brought me to my senses. I dashed to the window.

I saw first the motionless and bizarre group of pointed rocks—stiff human shapes on the bank of the coulee. And I heard a moaning which might have been the wind, although I felt that it was the moaning of the souls of La Verne's victims, condemned to stand there like pinnacles of granite and quartz through eternity. Then I saw a big roadster and a giant wolf of a man stepping out, etched blackly against the glow of the horizon. Dr. La Verne had arrived!

And I saw that he was not alone. A lithe, feline form got out with him. In my imagination and memory I could feel the heat of that body, the softness, the rhythmic tremor of all her eager and urgent flesh. It was La Verne's wife!

She walked gracefully, although I could detect a shuddering stoop to her slim shoulders, and then as La Verne swung his flash, I saw something winking at her wrists. She was manacled!

Just what had happened I could not guess, unless the enraged cuckold of a husband had taken this deed of his wife as the last straw. This time the wife was to be punished as well as her companion. And I could guess, remembering that broken female statue in her home, just what her punishment was to be!

AGAIN, left alone with this hideous thing which was a stark example of what I myself was to become, I felt another surge of panic coming on. But this time I fought against it. I took the lamp

and systematically examined every square of rock in the floor. While I searched I heard the thing in the corner grunting wildly. "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" He could see me very plainly as I pounded at each crack, picking at it with my nails, scraping the powdered silt from every scratch. I know now why he was warning me to leave that floor alone!

I found a crack in which I could barely hook my nails. This did no good, but by pounding all about the crack with my boots I detected a different sound to the thump, a resonance. I pounded with my heels, chipping off just enough of the cement to make a hole for a grip. I pulled upward. A large slab of granite opened, and I saw a black passageway, but it was scarcely large enough for a man to poke his head through.

I stared frustrated, but then reached down, thinking the hole might widen further down. I heard the frantic bleat of that half-corpse as I made this gesture. And instantly I knew what that futile cry meant. I felt a sharp sting on my wrist as I groped in the darkness of the hole, then, snatching my hand upward I saw two tiny gashes where something had pierced it.

Instantly my mind flamed with the hideous fear that I had been stuck with a hypo needle, or rather two needles so that the wound would simulate the bite of a snake. It was more than simulation I discovered a moment later. For as I stared enraged at that gaping black crevice in the floor, I saw a flat-headed snake crawling out. It came slowly, hissing, lifting its head so that it watched me out of its pale eyes, licking the air with its quivering black fork of a tongue.

I picked up the cement slab which had been a sort of trap door to the nest of this monster and brought it down crashing. It smashed the serpent's head to a flat bloody mass, but the body whipped and wiggled and convulsed so that I stag-

gered back to keep my legs out of the tangle. Although I knew the thing was dead, its body was possessed of more fury than in life.

But this was a puny fear compared to what was coming. Another serpent oozed out of the hole, its waving magic movement freezing me into a tense moment of staring. Then I reached for what was left of the slab. It had smashed to bits, such was the frantic violence of my stroke, but with these bits I pelted this new monster that had crawled into my cell. I kept it off, cutting it in spots so that the beautiful movement turned into something lame and bedraggled and jerky. I was so obsessed with keeping this wounded thing in a corner that I did not notice two more serpents crawling slowly out of the hole!

I had opened up a veritable nest of them. No wonder that bleating yelping cry had tried to warn me from attempting to escape through the floor. I could not cover the hole up, for the slab which had fitted with the perfection of a spider's trapdoor was crashed to pieces. The hole gaped and vomited its writhing mass. I could do nothing. Nothing, that is to say, except to reach for the lamp, when the largest of the serpents coiled in the middle of the room facing me, rearing, its neck puffing, its head swaying backward ready to hurl itself full length upon me. I could understand what is meant by a bird freezing to immobility while a snake crawls to its nest. I froze,—not in my shaking limbs, but in my mind. I did not think what I was doing. I don't believe any man on earth could have thought at that moment. I acted on a muscular impulse alone, hurling the lamp straight at that rising swaying head.

The last I remember before that light crashed and sputtered out was the picture of the "statue" against the wall. It was the Laocoön masterpiece in actual life before my eyes—a statue contorted in

horror, covered with writhing serpents.

It might have been a looking glass at which I gazed in that horrified instant. For I was that man—if not in actual reflection, at least I would be his perfect counterpart before the light of another day!

CHAPTER THREE

Scream From the Night

I COULD not measure that darkness either in time or intensity. It was infinite in blackness and in length. The pain of that bite spread from my numbed arm, boiling my blood until it coursed like vitriol through all the veins of my body. My heart pumped madly, but I did not writhe or struggle against the pain. Perhaps I could not, or perhaps it was that intuition of a terror-stricken animal that made me cower and congeal. I lay still, knowing that if I moved a foot or a hand I might touch another one of those venomous things crawling all about me.

Unmeasured time must have passed, for the drowsiness crept into my mind. I fought desperately against the coma that smothered me. I remember I awoke at fitful intervals seeing now the light of day pouring through the iron bars, now darkness. It might have been two days, three, that I lay there. One clue I had to the long passage of time was my hunger. It was the raging hunger of a drunkard for more liquor, the thirst of a marooned sailor who has swigged salt water!

My fiendish captor must have known this for he had food sent to me. When I awoke and stared into the glow of daylight at that barred window I saw food on the sill. It was in tin cups which could be thrust through the bars. My nostrils sucked at the yearned-for smell. I struggled to my hands and knees, but before going to that sill I looked over the floor that I must cross. The serpents had all

crawled away, perhaps to their nest under the floor, perhaps through that window and out into the open.

I got up, feeling thick-jointed and dizzy, and lurched to the sill. I grabbed the first morsel my hands lit on, then I remembered! Here was the first dose of powders this devil physician was serving me! Or perhaps the venom of that serpent was the first!

I glanced over to that ossified thing in the corner, expecting his warning half dumb yelp. But the warning was not necessary. Nor could it be given. For the miserable wretch was dead. I could tell it by his face, turgid and misshapen, bloated beyond the lineaments of a human being. I understood what had happened when I saw the two tiny wounds on his cheek. One of the snakes had bitten him. And the bite being near the brain had finished this miserable soul. Perhaps it was a mercy.

I stuck to my resolve not to taste the food. Instead I took all the food and water that was left on the sill and emptied the cups into the hole in the floor.

Through my bars I had caught sight of this food carrier unlocking the door to another hut. I noticed that he had a bunch of keys. Apparently he was a half-breed Indian,—La Verne's caretaker, cook and jailer all in one.

Each time he served me my doses I pretended that the hellish stuff was working. I crawled to the sill. Then I dragged myself across the floor as if my feet were already paralyzed. Finally I just lay there moaning like the weird call of the wind in that cemetery of needle rocks outside.

The wind I noticed had a new sound to it—the chug of a wheezy old motor, the rattle of a tinny car, then the crunch of wheels on gravel.

I crept to the window. Subconsciously perhaps, I had an inkling that a search had been started for me, and for Ted Harmon who had disappeared so many

days ago. Perhaps Ted's sister had gone to that roadhouse—I had mentioned it to her—and she might have learned there just what I had learned. What if Mary Harmon had been trapped while searching along that same fatal route which I had followed!

As I peered over the sill towards the car I saw the gnarled little rancher get out, and from the other side of the car stepped a slim young girl! Mary Harmon had been tricked, there was no doubt about that. And if she had any intuition of the trap she was in, her frantic anxiety to find her brother had smothered it.

As she started up the sand wash with that detestable little runt, I had to make the most maddening decision that ever faced a man: Either to yell out a warning to her that she was walking into a demoniac web, or to hold my tongue and carry out my long and patient plot.

I DO NOT know how I did it. Every cell in my body burned with the frenzy to howl and shake those bars and hurl myself against the thick door. But I held back just long enough to think. What if I did warn the girl? She was trapped anyway. If she tried to run she would be caught before she got a furlong away. For there was no doubt but that La Verne and perhaps others were watching the whole scene. By the grace of Heaven I held my tongue. And it was only a short while later that the halfbreed brought me another dose of the bedeviled drugs in food.

His knob-jointed brown hand poked through the bars. And it stayed there.

My own hand thrust out, clutching the man's throat. I gripped it till his eyes popped, and he must have thought that hand was already stiffened with the petrification of rock.

"Give me the keys," I whispered calmly. "Or shall I tighten these granite fingers around your throat?"

I got the keys, unlocked the door to my cell then slipped around to the outside of that barred window. The halfbreed jailor was slumped against the wall like a rag doll tossed there and forgotten. Although I had choked him into a purple-faced stupor I did not know how soon he would come to. I yanked him to his feet. His eyes rolled wild and dazed as I ripped off his coat and tied the sleeves around his head. I bound his hands with his belt, then dragged him into the cell and locked him in.

Crouching between a rain barrel and an adobe wall I took a quick survey of the surrounding shacks. High granite cliffs hemmed in the little gulch, overhanging five rambling adobe houses. In the dusk which was falling fast the needle rocks loomed all about the gulch bottom—a graveyard of stark, bone-grey monuments. The wind wailing through these gaunt forms chilled me to the marrow. The whole gully seemed to be filled with moaning voices.

I knew that every step I took was fraught with danger. La Verne might be peering out of any window for all I knew. like a spider in the middle of a web. I kept under cover. I had no clue as to which shack I should search first. As I was creeping behind a cactus fence, shuddering at the weird sounds which the evening wind had evoked, one sound louder than the others curdled my blood. It was a woman's scream, wild, maniacal, and so harsh that I thought for a moment it came from the mouth of one of those granite images! But vaguely I felt something familiar about that tortured and terrified utterance. I remembered the scream of La Verne's wife at the climax of our love scene back in the olive grove of the foothills. I knew then what must be happening. La Verne had started to mete out his punishment on his adulterous mate.

The scream came from the first long

hovel near the cliffs. I was certain of the direction, for the sound came in increasing throat-tearing outbursts. For a short while at least, I hoped desperately, Mary Harmon would be unmolested.

I prowled up to the back door of the house intending to deal with La Verne first of all. After that I could hunt for Mary and then for poor Ted—if he were still alive.

Because of the mad screeching I got into the house without my footsteps giving any warning. Just within the door I found myself facing a hanging of heavy cloth. Parting it cautiously a bare inch, I saw that the low-roof hovel had but the one long room, dim, foul with the smell of chemicals, and misted with their smoke. I had the feeling that I had stepped into an operating room, but this gave way to the more abhorrent air of a charnel house.

ONE white body lay stretched on a table, hideously stiff. Another body, more livid, lay on a slab adjacent to the first. This body was not stiff: It writhed. And from its gleaming swelling throat came those deafening shrieks.

It was the unclothed and ravishingly beautiful body of La Verne's wife!

As I stood there congealed except for the slugging of my heart, my eyes dilated so that I could see another form in the shadows: a stoop-shouldered runt, fumbling with some bottles and vials on a sideboard. He did not have to turn for me to recognize him on the instant. He now was the "rancher" who had trapped me, the one who had trapped Mary Harmon and brought her to this gulch but a short while before. The instant that I saw him I thought of Mary. Where could she be now? What had he done with her? He had turned her over to his master, La Verne, no doubt about that,—but where then was La Verne?

I saw things clearly now. I saw that the runt was filling a hypo needle. I saw

the woman clutching at her breasts with her manacled hands, and kicking her legs in an attempt to free them from the rope that bound her ankles to the table. And one thing else I saw:

That man on the adjacent table was Ted Harmon!

He lay there stark and stiff, asleep or dead, I could not tell which. His face was chalky, the chalkiness not of bloodless flesh but some sort of powdery inorganic stuff like marl!

My first impulse was to rush to the side of the poor wretch who was my best friend. But I knew I must deal with that little runt first. Not only that, but I must make sure where La Verne was before I showed my hand. Although this long laboratory comprised the whole shack, a door in back led to a lean-to room. It would be awkward if La Verne were sitting there complacently watching this drama. And it was not unlikely.

The woman on the table stopped her screeching all of a sudden. She had seen that hypo in the runt's thick-jointed hands. I saw her eyes bulge, her forehead wrinkle and shine with blobs of sweat. She panted wildly, her lips gibbering, "Not that! He won't do that to me! He won't let you do it! Not to my body! He wants my body always—as it is—not hardened to something hideous!" She panted harder, arching her torso so that her back lifted from the table, all her muscles undulating, jerking in her desperate intakes of breath.

The ugly, brown runt chuckled at his work. "A nice little party! That's what we're going to have. The Prof's got it all fixed. He thinks up good parties, the Prof does! You and your boy friend on the table, lying next to you. A nice party with the Prof sitting by and watching."

A spasm of horror gripped me as I realized what these words meant. First of all they convinced me that La Verne must be close at hand, and that I must lie

low a moment longer. And they meant something more. La Verne had planned a sardonic punishment for his beautiful wife. She was to lie here with one of her lovers—a last adulterous liaison—while her wronged husband worked his miracle of transformation upon them both!

I imagined some unspeakable scene practiced by Voodists and the worshippers of Damballa, in which some of the orgiastic participants were corpses. That is to say, corpses that have not yet passed wholly into the realm of death, but that still possess a certain uncanny power of movement as of living bodies. Was it possible that La Verne had concocted a revenge learned from the jungle worshippers whose rituals were older than history! Was it possible that his wife was to end her career of faithfulness by one last *accouplement*, lying in the arms of a dead lover?

“He’ll enjoy the party, the Prof will. And so will I!” the runt was laughing dryly. “You lied about me once, because I told on you. You said ‘I’d made a pass at you’,—thinking the Prof would get jealous and fix me—like he’s fixed all your boy friends. But he wouldn’t believe you. He knew I wouldn’t dare make a pass at his wife. And he was right. He took my word instead of yours. Only I’m paying you back for your lies. I’ll stay and watch too. There’ll be three of us watching, me and the Prof and the new guest I brought him tonight. Nice little guest—your friend’s kid sister!”

I heard a moan from the table which, although it had all the anguish of a tortured soul, gave me a new hope. It had come from Ted Harmon’s rigid throat and it told me at least that he was still alive.

“The Prof told me it’s got to be a viper this time,” the runt went on, sliding a small wire covered box from the shelf. “Got to have some snake venom first so’s the chemicals will work faster. ‘A viper

for Cleopatra’. That’s what he calls you—a Cleopatra. ‘Let it crawl down between her breasts’, he says, right there where she always shuddered when I touched her. If she didn’t want my fingers on her’, he says, ‘let her see what a viper feels like crawling over her flesh instead of my fingers!’”

The woman’s hands snapped helplessly to her breasts but were stopped by the clink of manacles before she could reach or cover them. I saw just that one gesture before I jumped.

The runt turned just as I leaped across the floor. In that split second he had sensed what was coming, and with the wire covered box held up above his head he spun around.

My fist dropped him easily and the box fell from his stiffened hands. It fell crashing on the table. And as it broke open, La Verne’s wife gave one scream of terror, then her head sank back, her nude cream-colored body relaxed, her face rolled sideways in a dead faint.

I dashed instantly to the side of my stricken friend on the next table to the woman’s. I threw my arms about him but my own gesture startled me, made me jerk back with a sickening qualm. My arms hugged something stiff and hard. Every muscle in Ted Harmon’s shoulders and chest was taut as though with lock-jaw. I had once taken a dog in my arms that was afflicted with trismus so that his flesh was tightened to a hardness that could scarcely be distinguished from his bones. That was what I felt when I put my arms about my friend!

“Bob!” he was moaning. “Get her first—don’t mind me!”

“But those damned snakes!” I cried. “That box is smashed open. They’re crawling!” I left his side and stamped on one of the frightful little things near my foot. I crushed another and still another as Ted kept moaning.

“No, Bob! For God’s sake—my sister

—save her first! You *must* save her first!”

I had never known such resignation and such infinite love as Ted Harmon bore for that young sister of his. What did even these vipers matter in this moment which was so precious! It was a terrible decision to make—to leave poor Ted there with those snakes wriggling on the floor and on that table next to him. There was nothing in the world that mattered to him now—except to find Mary. I gave one glance at the table where the box had crashed and then I saw what had been lurking far back in my brain, what I had actually *expected* to see sooner or later:

A small viper, indescribably perfect in its movement was on that woman—crawling down, as the runt had said, between her two smooth breasts—a picture of Cleopatra painted by many artists. And in her hair—

I could not look. The vipers had squirmed into her hair and were wriggling in it so that I saw in real life the picture of the dread Gorgon of ancient times—Medusa with the hair of snakes, that turned all beholders to stone!

CHAPTER FOUR

Satan Drives A Bargain

WHEN I rushed out into the night I had no remote idea where to find La Verne or his captive. The gulch had turned dark except for the lurid afterglow of sunset. This light filled the air coming not so much from the sky as from the walls of quartz which threw back the uncanny light. It gave an effect of red foul air breathed out of the earth itself, a light that was as ghastly and unnatural and vaguely brilliant as phosphorescence. All about me were the forms of human beings enslaved in granite or sandstone, perpetually rigid and perpetually silent except for that baffling sound that seemed to come from their throats—too human for

the wind, too inhuman for reality or life.

I saw lights suddenly go on in one of the further cabins. Ghost-like they glittered in the murky dark.

La Verne must be there—with Mary Harmon. What was he planning—what awful fate was he preparing for this innocent girl?

As I went cautiously, step by step, towards that lighted window I heard La Verne's voice—and then the voice of Mary Harmon, usually gentle but now high pitched with excitement.

“Where is he? I don't care about anything else. Where's my brother?” She kept repeating the question, on the verge of hysterics. “Why did you ask me in here to talk about it? I want my Ted!”

“All right, all right, young lady,” La Verne's voice came smoothly. “But take it easy. You're scared to death because you heard that woman screaming a while ago. Well, she's just a patient, a young woman with fits. She's quiet now. So what are you afraid of? Just calm yourself.”

“Calm yourself, when you won't tell me what's happened to my brother!”

“All right, he's here, as I said. What about it? He came into my home and despoiled it. I have the unwritten law on my side.”

The girl gasped. “Where is he? Where in God's name is he?” Mary Harmon cried frantically. “You've killed him! He's dead!”

“Oh, no, not by any means. But what if he were? He would have been dead pretty soon, except that you came along. You've moved me to pity. You're a very lovely young girl. Don't redden your eyes. I'm going to give him back to you.”

I heard another gasp from her, partly incredulous, partly in thanks to a merciful Heaven. I was close enough now to hear every word. But the sand slithered suddenly about my feet and I stopped, fearful of being heard. I stood stock still, as a

wolf will freeze when it creeps up to a calf before the murderous leap.

"But I'm making a bargain," La Verne said softly, smoothly, "before I turn your brother back to you."

I stiffened. I knew what the bargain would be, and when she had fulfilled her part he would turn her brother over to her—a corpse, or rather a frightful semblance of a corpse which was half alive—the thing I had just seen! I lifted my tense head so I could just peer upwards at an angle into the room. I saw Mary's face and the sudden spasm of repugnance on it. It was a lovely youthful face, a stranger to evil, blandly innocent. But it flushed now and turned wiser with this flood of shame and disgust. One more word and I would leap over that sill! But I must not fail. When I leaped I must get his throat in my hands without a split second's miscalculation. I could not try it twice!

The girl answered hotly, "What do you mean—a bargain?"

"Probably not what you think," La Verne wheedled. "You can see that I am a sculptor. These are some of my works in this room. I want to make a likeness of you in Carrara. It's just a little favor in return for the immeasurable favor I'm doing you."

My eyes clung to her face. It had smoothed out, turning young and innocent again. Of course she would do this. She would have done much more, anything on earth, to save the brother she loved. Posing for this villain was pretty easy payment. She nodded quickly. "But bring him to me first."

"I'll send for him. But meanwhile we will start the sitting. I don't think you'll want to stay here very long, so why lose time? Needless to say, I want you to pose in the nude. So you may as well disrobe right now."

I saw the blood surge up the white column of her throat, into the lovely oval

of her face and then ebb away instantly leaving her pale and hard and resolute. Again she nodded and I saw her hand go up to her shoulder where her frock was fastened.

My fists clenched, then opened, clawing. I must reach that window sill without a sound, then leap over. Whatever I did I must hold back my burning rage in my throat. I held my breath and kept my feet planted immovable on the ground. Then I leaned to take my first cautious step.

But as I leaned, I found that the sand had ebbed up somehow above my ankles. I tried to lift one foot slowly so that the sand would not sift and betray me.

I could not lift it!

Just why, I could not imagine. **Except** that a strange pulling force of that ground under my feet gave me a sudden horror that I was in quicksand!

CHAPTER FIVE

Cauldron of the Doomed

I WAS not sure it was quicksand, because the pulling power seemed to be not only at my feet, but through my shins and knees. My brain was obsessed with something more horrible even than quicksand—those gravestone images anchored forever to the earth, looming all about me in the gulch bed. Was I to join that stark silent company!

It might have been my exhaustion from hunger, the after-effects of that poisonous bite which I had managed somehow to live through. Or it might have been my brain, starved for blood and nutriment, dreaming nightmare dreams, obsessed with hideous hallucinations. At any rate I felt that numbness in my legs spread through my whole body. Was it possible that the snake bite had been a hypo and that the dread disease had taken hold in my blood and nerves despite my refusal of that food!

A wild demoniac yelp rushed to my throat but I choked it off. Of all times a shout would be the most disastrous now. I struggled with a suppressed fury like an epileptic. I bent down, clawing at the sand. Sounds came to me from the window, whipping me to an insensate frenzy. For they were sounds that evoked the picture of a young girl stripping off her clothes—I heard the drop of a slipper, the snap of a garter, the slithering of some silken undergarment to the floor. Mary Harmon would be nude now, displaying the most secret and lovely charms of her young figure before the eyes of that foul rascal—and I could not move to help her!

I felt the suck of the sand about my ankles as I sank deeper. My feet seemed to reach for the minerals of the earth for which they had a mysterious affinity. I felt the magnet deep in the earth's core inviting me, pulling at me, taking me to itself! I—I myself—was possessed, inoculated perhaps, with something which would respond to the magnetism of those rocks in the accursed ground!

Exhausted, yet trying vainly to suppress my wild panting, I doubled at the knees, but then hearing Mary Harmon's voice again, I tensed every muscle, straightened myself as best I could. For the moment I forgot my own danger of discovery as I lifted my head and peered across that sill. La Verne was intent upon looking at that naked girl.

She was throwing off her last filmy shred, and without any false modesty. It was no time for that! Mary Harmon was no prude or Puritan. That slim youthful, pearl-tinted body was nothing to be ashamed of. Rather it was a lovely and glorious thing with delicate shoulders, high breasts that were round and firm and perfect, narrow hips, slim white legs—a naked girl in the first matchless flower of maturity. Even those vile eyes roving her from head to foot brought no tinge of shame to her cheeks. She was thinking

not of her nakedness, but of saving poor Ted!

The horror of that scene had distracted me from my own plight. I was knee deep in that hungry sand now. There was no chance of extricating myself without help. My own muscles were bound by an inner force as malignant as the sucking earth. I listened to La Verne and I watched that maddening scene move to its climax, forgetting that my head was in full view above the window sill. But La Verne did not look in my direction. His dark deep eyes gleamed as he drank in the ravishing beauty of that naked nereid who bravely stood up before him. He could see nothing else except those youthful feminine charms revealed like a gorgeous banquet to his gaze.

THE end came when I saw the complacent fiend step up behind the girl and take her in his arms. She broke away with a scream and ran to one of the windows. But he followed, his hands outstretching, his fingers clawing at her flesh like roots hungry for soft and luscious earth. His jowls and neck turgid and red, the blood puffing his eyes, his mouth gaping with one bestial pant of dammed-up breath, he lifted her and buried his face against her throat.

She could no longer scream, but she fought, with the insensate fear of a trapped bird. Although she freed herself again, her writhing and the very consciousness of her convulsing body whipped him into a fiercer onslaught. He was so crazed that he was deafened, at least for that one moment, to my shout. He caught her as she stooped to pick up a garment to wind about her waist. She had managed to cover herself with a frantic twist, but he tore the silk, ripping it away, with a vicious, triumphant sneer.

I do not know what I shouted when I made that last attempt to lunge for the window. I yelled like a beast tearing its

lungs in a reverberating roar. It was time to yell now, since that was all that I could do. It would at least distract that madman from his feast. It might even give the girl a slim chance to run.

La Verne heard me this time. He dropped his arms, releasing the struggling body which was now reddened on the hips and thighs and torso by his savage paws. They both turned to me at the same instant, but it was only Mary who rushed to me. La Verne just stood there gaping and flabbergasted.

The girl dashed to the window, leaped over the sill like a dryad and jumped into my arms. She was astonishingly light, her hot supple limbs melting easily, softly in my frantic clutch. She was panting desperately, her flesh like fire, still convulsed and writhing but squeezing hard against me, every muscle of her shuddering.

But I did not dare to hold her long. "It's quicksand!" I gasped. "Jump! Then keep going till you find solid ground!"

I knew well enough that the quivering sand was only in one spot, a sink-hole and a trap to guard that window. The girl jumped, helped by the swing of my arms, and her bare feet touched rimrock.

I COULD well imagine what La Verne was thinking. The girl was free of his clutches, but only momentarily. If he stood there gaping too long she would reach his car which was just beyond the corral. This possibility must have occurred to him, cutting every other thought from his mind. He went straight after her. He did not waste any time going around by the door. He came through the window after her. Needless to say, he knew of the quicksand below the sill, but he also knew its limits. He vaulted over the sill with a long leap that would have cleared the trap according to his estimate—except for one complication. I reached up as he hurdled over me, and tripped

him with the last of my waning strength.

I just managed to catch him by one foot. He fell headlong, his arms sinking down up to the shoulders in the sand-covered mire. He was a heavy man and he went deep. He flayed about like a hooked fish, then roared for help as I got a better grip on him. And he kept howling as I pulled myself closer to him and got my hands on his windmilling arms. Then he stopped dead still, grunting like a jiggered horse. He was not the type to solve problems by hysterical screaming. He must have guessed that his screams would be unanswered. He knew he was in a fix, that his time was come, and without doubt he had an honest terror of that sink-hole of quicksand which would suck a man into the earth to depths that would never be fathomed or known! But he kept his wits. He saw Mary Harmon, a gleaming nude spirit in the shadows, dragging a plank. It calmed him, for there was hope—hope that is to say, if I did not murder him on the spot.

"We're both sinking!" he screamed at me. "There's no bottom to this. Let her save us both, and I'll save her brother from the curse I put on him!"

"To hell with your promises!" I shot back. Although I was waist deep in the sucking ground I had only the one thought—to kill this devil so Mary Harmon could escape. I saw her dragging the plank almost to the edge of the quivering sand. "Stay back!" I shouted. "You aren't free yet!"

She would not listen. She kept tugging at that heavy plank, falling, getting up and dragging with all her strength. And every moment I was sinking deeper, pulling La Verne down with me.

"Leave that plank," I cried, "and go get Ted. He's in that shack!" I pointed down the gulch to the laboratory. "Get him and the two of you get out of here!"

"A lot of good it will do you!" La Verne choked as my fingers reached his

neck. He was calm enough to think, and to use guile. "There's no doctor in the world can save her brother if you kill me!" Inch by inch we were going down but he kept raving. "I've got the powders and oils that will make him well—antidotes I've worked on for years—"

I loosened my grip for one tiny moment. While the girl was trying to slide the end of the plank out towards us, the ooze crept up to our chests. We had only a moment more for bargaining before the earth took us forever from the world of breath and speech. The bargain must be made on the instant.

"Where are your formulas—your antidotes?"

"In a safe—" he began, but then my fingers tightened. If the formulas were in a safe, then they could be found. And there would be chemists to decipher them. Ted Harmon would get all the treatment that science and this devil's research had to offer. With a final surge I dragged myself over my victim's shoulders and pressed his head downward.

It was like pressing a lump of dough, squashing it in the softer batter.

But when he was buried, I found that I myself was too far under to reach for that plank. And to my despair I saw the girl walking out on it in an attempt to help me. I screamed to her to stop but she came out and leaned, reaching her white naked arms towards me. If I tried to grab for them I knew that we would both be trapped.

It was at that moment that the headlights of a car flashed dazzlingly on the girl's white body.

THE suddenness of this glare had a strange effect. I felt as if I had awakened with a burst of morning sunlight in my eyes, coming abruptly out of a night of hideous nightmares. With the sharp light on Mary's unclothed body and on the forms of those stone images all around

her, I saw the vivid contrast between flesh and stone. The juxtaposition of the two—the stone bodies and the living one—convinced me all at once of what I knew later to be the truth: Those graveyard images were not flesh. They never had been flesh. They were the work of the desert wind and sand through the ages. Many had been finished off by human artifice into something more than the grotesque erosion shapes, but they too were indubitably stone and nothing else. La Verne had worked there, not as a chemist but as a sculptor. The strange hobby had been a partial outlet for his demented and criminal passion for the beauty of the human form. But his works of sculpture were not petrified bodies; they were beyond any doubt granite or sandstone, marl or marble.

The Medusa legend, the turning of a human being to stone, was only a figment fired up in the brains of his half-hypnotized victims.

But I was hypnotized no longer. The coming of that car which I believed meant rescue, and its flood of light thrown upon Mary's naked form, broke the spell of horror. Everything cleared within my brain. I even understood, in that moment of inspiration, what had happened to Ted Harmon and to that petrified corpse I had seen in my cell. It was merely some chemical secret La Verne possessed,—a calcification of all the parts of the body by the use of lime salts and other unknown chemicals.

Curiously my mental awakening came at the very moment the quicksand reached and pulled with a gigantic and fearful suction at my arms and shoulders. Thus, it is said, a drowning man will have a vast flood of vivid thoughts in his last moment of life. I knew at this crisis what a mouse must feel like when a gopher snake starts its slow swallowing, taking its victim bit by bit—the hind legs, the stomach, the front legs, and the rest!

My last thought as the earth took me into itself was that Mary Harmon was saved. I saw her waving to the men in the car. She knew that they were a rescue party—two deputies who had helped her in her hunt for Ted, and then trailed her somehow to this gulch.

I caught one flashing glimpse of her—a frail young nymph running stark nude, her rose-tinged body transparent and spiritual in the harsh light, a picture evoked out of the dim past when men worshipped the virgin goddess of the moon and the hunt and the forest!

As the lips of the ground closed in that last great suck about my neck, my chin, I wondered if the rescue had come too late! I wondered if Ted Harmon would be saved from his hideous malady, and I wondered if La Verne's statues, after all my conviction, were really rock or flesh!

I still wonder, months after I was

dragged half dead from that pit. Despite the word of every chemist and geologist who has examined his carven statues, I believe La Verne's power was not of science but of hell. I have changed my mind. The legend of the Gorgon's head turning men to stone is true. I have seen it! And what happened to La Verne's wife, who disappeared that night, is proof enough for me:

A statue has just been found by a prospector not far from La Verne's desert laboratory. It is not a crude image like something buried in layers of geologic history and unearthed from the stone age. It is a perfectly formed woman, unclothed, matchless and seductive in form. And the hair is smoothly etched in basalt, with carnelian tipped breasts and eyes of pure sapphire.

I remember that figure well.

No man on earth could forget it!

THE END



Out of the bowels of the earth they came, old and lank and blind—and their cold, dead hands sought warm, fresh youth. The whole town shud-

dered with uncontrollable terror, and parents clasped their daughters close in their arms. For they all had heard the dread whisper—

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I was certain at that moment that the rotting eyes of the ghastly severed head on the table turned over in their sockets so that they stared at Margaret—focused on her panting heaving breasts—and the putrid lips stretched in an evil lascivious grimace. . . .

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MISTRESS OF SATAN'S HOUNDS

by
Frederick C. Davis

*Was that monstrous little body which
Jeff and Laura found the child of
the lost serving girl—or was it
some thing of the half-world brood,
sired by the Hounds of Hell!*



*Unless You Are Prepared to Stay Awake All Night,
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CHAPTER ONE

Hear the Hounds of Hell!

WE WERE listening for the cry of the hounds. Though everyone living within earshot of the State Prison was busy in our usual quiet, routine way that evening, we were waiting to hear the voices of the bloodhounds come bay-



ing out of the distance—throaty, animal voices proclaiming that the escaped convict had been tracked down and captured.

It had been hours since the first shattering clangor of the great alarm bell had appraised the countryside of the escape of a prisoner from the great grey pile of the prison which sat like some squat misshaped guardian on the outskirts of the village. The searchlights on the granite

turrets had swung their beams into the surrounding woods; cars loaded with armed guards had rushed out to block the highways, and the warden had swiftly thrown a ring of men into the hills in an attempt to encircle the fugitive. But Ira Clegg, the keeper of the bloodhounds, had taken up his part in the chase unhurriedly. He had loosed his ugly band of dogs upon the scent of the fleeing man with ominous deliberation, grimly confident that the quarry could not escape them. He had good reason for his confidence. Never yet had the

great beasts failed him. Their unerring noses would follow a scent to the end of time—or until the poor haunted wretch gave himself up, driven mad by the ceaseless baying always at his back.

We had listened to the fierce voices of the hounds as they skirmished into the woods, farther and farther, relentlessly following the fugitive's trail; and now we were waiting for them to return, to hear them crying out the savage victory of the man-hunt.

I had gone to Laura Blayne's home soon after dinner. She was a girl of gay, heady spirit. With her slender figure, her light brown eyes and her sparkling, honey-colored hair, she was as delightful and as intoxicating as champagne; but this evening she seemed preoccupied. The merriment that usually bubbled within her was gone. Taking her hand, and finding that it seemed chilled, I asked anxiously:

"What's distracting you, darling? We've got to make the final arrangements for our wedding, you know—but you're scarcely listening."

Her smile was a bit forced, I thought. "It's really a silly thing to worry about, Jeff," she said, "but somehow I can't get it off my mind. Something that belongs to me is missing.

"Something valuable?" I asked quickly.

She shook her head. "No, but—you see, when we went to the dance last night, I wore that lovely pair of step-ins that Aunt Hetty gave me for my birthday. I was going to launder them this evening, before you came, but when I looked in the hamper I couldn't find them. I searched everywhere, but—they're gone."

"Don't let it concern you too much, honey," I said with a smile. "I promise to provide you with all the beautiful lingerie you deserve. Is anything else missing?"

"No—nothing else."

I couldn't help chuckling. "Do you think someone stole the step-ins?"

Laura looked at me strangely and said, in a quiet tone, "I *know* someone stole them."

"But who could have done it?" I protested, still amused. "There hasn't been a servant in this house since Nilla Lejune left yesterday. Surely you don't imagine that someone sneaked in from outside solely for the purpose—"

"That's exactly what happened, Jeff," Laura broke in. "I found one of my bedroom windows wide open. Someone had crawled in and—"

"Look here, darling," I said. "It's not worth getting worked up about. There are so many things about our wedding that must be decided tonight—"

"Jeff!" Laura's fingers closed tightly on mine. "It makes me afraid, somehow. It must mean something. It's so strange, there must be a reason—"

IT WAS then that we became conscious of the sharp, fierce barking of the hounds.

Looking out the window, Laura and I saw Ira Clegg passing on the road with his pack of dogs. They were huge beasts, with great, drooping jowels. Everybody in the village disliked them. Though we rarely saw them, we heard their barking day and night and had grown to heartily detest the brutes. Now their fangs gleamed as their piercing voices rang through the darkness.

Straining on their leather leashes, they were pulling Ira Clegg along behind them. They seemed to be savagely eager and there was a strange urgency in their voices, as if their sanguine hunting instincts had not been fully appeased. It was with a start that I realized they were heaving themselves toward the gate of Laura's home.

"They—they're trying to come in here!" Laura exclaimed breathlessly.

Ira Clegg dragged on the braided thongs that were hooked to the dogs' brass-studded collars.

"Satan!" he shouted at them in his rasping tone. "Moloch! Baal! Orion, Anubis! Stop it! Come back! Wait! Do you hear me, you devils? *Wait!*"

What did it mean, that last snarling word? Wondering, I stared at the gigantic bloodhounds as they thrust their black, wet noses at the gate. They complied with Ira Clegg's grating order—but reluctantly, I thought. They seemed to be obediently bridling a wild impulse to jump the fence and leap to the window from which Laura was gazing. Their great red-rimmed eyes, shining blackly and fiercely, were fixed on her.

"*Wait!*" Ira Clegg had snarled at them. But why? What did that ominous order imply?

The question shot a sudden, unaccountable fear through me; and there was no answer in Ira Clegg's inscrutable face. Lean, grotesquely tall, his long arms stretching with the effort to restrain the powerful dogs, he gazed into the window at Laura—gazed with eyes as black and evil as theirs—gazed with craven eyes that were set in a cruel heartless face.

Laura shrank from the window. I opened the door and stepped out to shout at Ira Clegg above the hungry barking of the dogs.

"Get along!" I said. "Get those damned brutes away from here!"

At the sound of my voice, the hounds became ominously silent. Their canine gazes seemed to be a black threat. The intensity of the anger in their eyes sent another sharp chill through me . . . Ira Clegg said nothing, but stared at me fixedly, sullenly. Then, still silent, the hounds and their keeper turned from the gate.

I took Laura into my arms, and felt her trembling. As the hounds loped away in the darkness, she listened fearfully to their throaty baying—listened until their voices became faint in the distance. Ira Clegg and his dogs must have reached the isolated hollow in the hills, where he lived, before

she raised her frightened eyes to mine.

"What the devil's the matter with us?" I said quickly, then. "Why should we be upset by Ira Clegg and those damned hounds of his?"

Before Laura could speak, a car drew to a stop in front of the house. As two men alighted from it, an ambulance sped past, on its way to the State Prison. Sheriff Qualen and Randall Crain came in soberly.

"There's no need to ask if Ira Clegg's bloodhounds cornered the convict," I said. "They always do."

SHERIFF QUALEN was a big, tough, gruff man; but he seemed to shudder. "They got him, all right," Qualen said. "In my time, I've seen other bloodhounds, besides Ira Clegg's, follow a trail. I've seen 'em run their man into a corner, then frisk around him and lick his hand. But not those dogs of Ira Clegg's. Once they corner a man, they attack him like starving wolves. This poor devil—he's so badly bitten and clawed, I doubt if he'll live."

"I wonder why Ira Clegg's dogs are so damnably savage?" Randall Crain said. He was a handsome, dapper young man, who had come to the village only recently, seeking, he said, a quiet place to spend his vacation. "He trains them to be as fierce as wild jungle animals, of course—but I wonder how?"

We had all wondered about that, and none of us knew the answer.

"Was it Len Glander who broke out of the prison, sheriff?" I inquired.

Len Glander was the most notorious among the inmates of that great grey fort outside the village. A thoroughly conscienceless racketeer, he had been convicted as the overlord of a State-wide vice ring. Recently rumors had been whispered about that Glander might yet outwit the law, that the prison was not strong enough to hold him.

"No, it wasn't Glander," Sheriff Qualen answered. "Glander's too smart to've tried

it. He's learned that he wouldn't stand a chance of getting away from Ira Clegg's hounds—same as every other one of those convicts realizes. The poor devil who broke out today was a stir-bug who didn't know any better."

Randall Crain said suddenly, "Look here. Qualen and I had just started out, trying to find Nilla Lejune, when those sirens let go. Now that the convict has been caught, we've decided we'd better make a general search for her. She's still missing, and something may have happened to her. Will you join us, Jeff?"

"Certainly," I said.

Nilla Lejune was a buxom girl of eighteen, none too bright, who lived with her father in a little shack in the woods. They fed themselves on the few dollars she made by doing general housework for several families. She had been coming to Laura's home every day, and she had also been taking care of Crain's place. But yesterday she hadn't shown up. Crain had failed to locate her, then had asked Sheriff Qualen's help.

"Strange thing," Qualen said. "Nilla's father is half crazy with worry over her, but I think he knows where she's gone. He won't tell us much—seems to be afraid to. But there's one thing he keeps muttering about—he keeps saying that somebody stole a pair of Nilla's old shoes, just before she disappeared."

"Somebody stole—!"

I choked off my own words. Icy fear trickled again into my heart as I turned quickly to gaze at Laura. Suddenly she was deathly white. Her lips were trembling; and her eyes were full of dread.

"I—I knew that, Jeff," Laura said in a whisper. "Nilla told me about it, the last time she was here. It worried her terribly—she seemed to be listening and watching, as if she expected something to happen to her."

And Randall Crain went on. "That's not all," he said grimly. "Nilla was cleaning

up my place, when suddenly she became so terrified she ran out of the house. Later, when I searched, I didn't find a sign of her, but I did see Ira Clegg and his dogs."

A little cry came from Laura's lips. She seemed to realize some frightful significance in this. The dread in her eyes grew sharper as Crain went on.

"Ira Clegg's dogs were following a trail," he said. "They seemed to be half crazy—wild with the scent. They were barking in a horrible, savage way. They were so fierce—like starving, four-footed demons—"

AT THAT very moment we heard the urgent voices of the hounds. Their cries rose out of the quiet night, shrill, piercing, somehow triumphant. The barking brought with it an uncanny chill of revulsion. Laura shuddered, her eyes wide with fear, her fingers pressing her lips to stifle a cry of her own . . .

"Let's not waste any time about this, Jeff," Sheriff Qualen said with sudden determination. "Take your car and search along Aspen Road. Crain and I will cover the other side of the main highway. I—somehow, I'm afraid it may be too late already."

He strode from the house, strangely anxious for such a hard man, and Crain hurried after him. I was taking up my hat when Laura said, quickly. "Wait, Jeff!" She ran into her father's study; and she came back carrying her father's rifle, a fine .22 repeater. She pressed it into my hands.

"We may need this, Jeff," she said in a husky tone. "Please don't tell me I can't come with you, because I—I won't stay here alone. "I'll be much—much safer with you, Jeff."

She was so disturbed, I could neither protest nor question her. She hurried out to the car with me. Neither of us spoke—we were both silenced by that strange, unknown dread that was growing within

us. The wild clamor of Ira Clegg's hounds continued as we turned into Aspen Road, a narrow dirt lane that serpentine through the hills and passed the kennels. Their savage voices grew sharper and louder while we went on; and abruptly Laura seized my hand.

"Jeff," she said, tensely quiet. "this isn't the first time that Nilla Lejune has been missing."

"I know," I said. "About a year ago—"

Nilla Lejune had disappeared in the same way. For several days we had searched, without finding her. Then she had come back, strangely *changed*, brooding, silent, fearful. She seemed unwilling to discuss what had happened to her—and she wouldn't tell where she had been.

"Then," Laura whispered, "only a few months ago—do you remember. Jeff?"

Nilla Lejune had quit working for a while. She had stayed at home, strictly secluded, for several weeks. We had thought she was ill, for Dr. Wentworth had been called by her father. But Dr. Wentworth would say nothing about his visit; he had simply stared at anyone making inquiry, and had turned away with a grave wag of his head. At last Nilla had resumed working, even more crushed and hopeless. Her eyes seemed to look out of a wretched mask. And her father had become a recluse, as if overwhelmed by the burden of an unspeakable shame.

"Have you heard, Jeff—" Laura asked it in a whisper. "Have you heard that there is a small grave hidden in the woods behind Jules Lejune's shack?—a grave the size of a baby's. And that there's a headstone on it—but the stone is blank—without a name."

"Come, Laura!" I said. "You're too upset—"

"But I've got to tell you this. Jeff!" Laura insisted. "I've always thought, somehow, that—the first time Nilla Lejune disappeared—something *took* her—took her, body and soul. And that later,

she gave birth to some horribly unnatural child—some sort of monster, so terrible that its very existence has been kept secret from everyone. That would account for— for—"

"Please, Laura," I implored. These strange recollections were feeding fuel to my own burning fear. "We can't be sure—"

"Jeff, you *must* listen. Think of what has happened now. First, Nilla's shoes were stolen. Next Randall Crain saw Ira Clegg and his bloodhounds following a trail through these hills, at night. We haven't seen Nilla since, Jeff! I believe it was Ira Clegg who did that tragic thing to Nilla a year ago, whatever it was—and now he may have done something even worse. Jeff—it's such a ghastly, such an impossibly horrible thought, but—all of Ira Clegg's hounds are males."

"Good God!" I blurted.

"Then—tonight! That piece of underwear missing—a piece I'd worn! Those dogs at the gate—and the way Ira Clegg looked at me. Do you remember what he shouted at them, Jeff? 'Wait!' He told them *to wait!*'"

EVEN as Laura spoke so fearfully of those damnable brutes, their cries ceased. Suddenly they stopped their hoarse questing, and silence closed down—so suddenly, so completely that the hush seemed fraught with portents of an unknown terror.

Startled, I braked the car; for at the same time a light shone across the hills, from behind the high board fence that barricaded Ira Clegg's property against the world. The light was still; it gleamed close to the ground; and it cast moving shadows across the cracks between the boards, as if Ira Clegg and his bloodhounds were bent upon some secret, evil task . . .

I took up the rifle and left the car with Laura at my side. Starting across the slope, we walked cautiously, hopeful that the

sharp ears of the dogs would not detect our presence. If the wind had not been blowing in our faces, those brutes—possessing the keenest sense of smell of all dogs—would have scented our approach at once. We crept closer and closer, until we could peer into the yard through a broken board, and we saw—

What we saw held us transfixed, shocked and chilled with horror.

The hounds of Ira Clegg were standing in the light, their huge heads lowered, their eyes gleaming evilly, their nostrils distended with hot, hungry breath. They stood in a circle, as if in the positions of a secret and obscene ritual; and in their midst Ira Clegg was kneeling. He was crouched and at work, scooping moist, black earth into a small shovel, piling it into a hollow in the ground. His canine face was a cruel mask and his doglike eyes gleamed evilly. And in that dank trench—

The dirt half-covered a white figure—the full-curved, nude body of a young woman! Her waxen face was turned to the dark sky, her staring eyes were glazed in death. One of her hands was lifted and clenched, as if locked with the spasm of her last unbearable agony . . . It was—it *must* be the body of Nilla Lejune. And Ira Clegg was burying it—piling rich, black loam upon it—while his bloodhounds watched with their gloating canine eyes. . . .

Then, suddenly, a savage, hungry howl broke from the throat of one of the beasts. Neither Laura nor I had moved. We could not have made the slightest sound. The quivering, distended nostrils of the hound must have caught our scent. The great dog reared up from the secret grave, barking fiercely; and at once the hoarse voices of the others roared in a terrifying chorus. Before Laura and I could take a single step backward, the big beast bounded wildly toward us.

It hurled itself at the fence where we were standing. There was a sudden, crashing sound. The impact of the hound's body

jarred the whole fence; and one of the weather-rotted boards broke loose. It fell away, leaving an opening. And the savage hound leaped through! With fangs bared, it sprang—upon Laura!

She cried out in terror as the great brute struck her down. She fell to the black ground; she lay stunned as the hound crouched over her. Saliva dripped from its jaws as it nipped and pulled at her clothing. Its fangs tore the cloth, ripped it away! Laura lay helpless, pinioned by the animal fiend, as it growled above her.

CHAPTER TWO

The Beasts Cry for Blood

IRA CLEGG had run to the break in the fence. His voice snarled through the ear-piercing barking of the dogs.

"Moloch! *Moloch!* Come back, you devil! Wait! *Wait!*"

The giant hound had leaped upon Laura so swiftly, so savagely, that I had been stricken with a paralysis of terror; but that one awful word grating from Ira Clegg's throat—"Wait!"—whipped me into a frantic defense of the girl I loved.

I swung the rifle to my shoulder. Aiming with desperate swiftness, I pulled the trigger once. Fire leaped from the muzzle of the weapon and the report echoed off into the night. For a moment, the barking of the hounds became more frenzied. They had crowded to the opening in the fence; and they were peering at the brute named Moloch. Blood was streaming from the bullet-hole in its massive head.

Suddenly the hound slumped down upon Laura; and another terrified cry broke from her lips.

Fearful that the other dogs would leap upon her, I swung around. I aimed my rifle at them. They were crouched at the fence, around Ira Clegg. Their dark ugly eyes were fixed upon Laura, and the scent of the dead dog's blood was pouring into their quivering nostrils, inflaming them

with a primitive thirst; but a command from Ira Clegg was holding them leashed—that same dread word, “*Wait!*”

“Keep those brutes back!” I shouted at him. “Keep those damned dogs away from her! By God, I’ll kill any of them that comes near her!”

Ira Clegg stared at me, silent, his face hard with vindictiveness; and yet, there was a strange sadness in his evil eyes—for one of his hellish hounds was dead . . .

Laura was struggling to free herself from the crushing weight of the lifeless beast. She sprang up, her dress tattered, and stained by its blood. Frantic to escape an overwhelming terror, she whirled and ran down the black-shrouded hillside. Still holding Ira Clegg and his dogs in check with the leveled rifle, I retreated to the spot where we had left the car.

“Quick, Jeff!” Laura gasped. “Take me away—take me away!”

She was huddled in the seat, her hands pressed over her face, sobbing with revulsion and fear. Starting the motor, I sped her away from that spot. While I turned toward the main highway, seeking my way like a man trapped in an inescapable nightmare maze, she struggled to gain control of herself, and by the time we reached the cement road she had conquered her panic.

Behind us, as we rushed, we heard the barking of the hounds—sharp, piercing, vengeful.

“You killed one of Ira Clegg’s dogs!” Laura said suddenly. “Oh, God, Jeff! He’ll never forgive us for that. He’ll—he’ll—”

“Every damned one of those beasts should be wiped out!” I blurted.

And Ira Clegg with them, I thought. I was convinced now that those ugly bloodhounds and their keeper were an unspeakable menace to the peace and goodness of our homes. Whatever ghastly thing they had done to poor Nilla Lejune, I was grimly determined that they would suffer for

it. I was coldly glad, therefore, when I saw Sheriff Qualen’s car swing alongside us.

“WHAT the devil’s the matter with those hounds?” he asked, when we stopped. “Listen to them! They sound wilder than I’ve ever heard them before. What’s happened?”

Gripping Qualen’s arm, I said, “Now we know what’s become of Nilla Lejune. Laura and I saw her—dead—being buried by Ira Clegg.”

Randall Crain was at the sheriff’s side. “Dead!” he exclaimed. “God! Listen to me, Sheriff. I haven’t mentioned this before, but now I must. We’ve all wondered how Ira Clegg trains those hounds to be so savage, so sure on a man’s trail. Well, isn’t it possible that he whets their appetite for blood *with* blood—human blood?”

As Qualen stared at Crain, I rushed on: “You’ve got to come with me. What Crain just said is probably all too true, but this is even worse—far worse than murder. This is something hellish—something so vile, we can’t allow it to exist.”

Qualen said grimly, “I’ll look into it right now.”

Laura huddled beside me as I drove in the wake of the sheriff’s car. She was still too numbed, too fearful to speak—but I knew that her conjectures concerning Nilla Lejune were now a stark, dreadful reality. Remembering the bit of silk that had been stolen from her—the garment scented with the perfume of her body—I was chilled.

The hounds are hungering for her! ran through my revolted mind. *The hounds—and their evil keeper want her—they mean to take her!*

When Qualen’s car stopped at the gate of Ira Clegg’s isolated property, I took Laura’s hand reassuringly.

“Stay here, honey,” I urged her. “With the doors closed and the windows up, you’ll

be safe until we get back from the hunt.”

She nodded uneasily. Leaving her in the closed car, I joined Sheriff Qualen and Randall Crain. This gate was the only entrance to Ira Clegg’s remote property. The board fence formed a stern boundary around it. On it were scores of signs, forbidding trespassing and threatening prosecution. Ira Clegg, we knew, guarded this place with a crazy sort of jealousy; he rarely allowed anyone to enter. To attempt it, we realized, would bring the savage dogs leaping upon us, unless Ira Clegg commanded them to be quiet.

Sheriff Qualen knocked loudly on the gate. Long moments passed before the light of a lantern appeared behind it. A panel opened, and the hard, cruel face of Ira Clegg looked out.

“We want to come in, Clegg,” the sheriff said grimly. “We want to search the place. You can refuse, because I haven’t any warrant—I can get one, and I wouldn’t advise you to make me do that. Are you going to open the gate?”

The panel closed. In another moment the latch clicked. Ira Clegg opened the way. Qualen, Crain and I stepped through. The instant we set foot on Ira Clegg’s property, the hounds began a furious yelping. Clegg shouted up the hill at them; and their fierce voices subsided. Then he peered at me in that same inexorably vengeful way, as if he were grieving over the loss of Moloch and insanely determined to make me suffer for the beast’s death.

Looking at his lean, gleaming face in the light of the lantern, I wondered: What do we know about this man? He had lived here, in this hollow among the hills, all his life—lived here with his hounds. His only means of livelihood was using the dogs to track down convicts who escaped from the prison. Each time he effected a capture, the warden paid him a small reward. But money wasn’t the real reason he had become a man-hunter. We all knew

that he took ghoulish delight in allowing his dogs to track down a fugitive, as if it gratified some cruel, mad hunger in his warped soul.

HE SEEMED to live for the moment when the sirens would begin a shriek, when he could unleash his ugly hounds upon the trail of the quarry. Yes, the capture, the running down of the hunted, sated some thirst for blood that possessed him. This was all we knew about Ira Clegg—no more than if he had crawled up from Hell itself—yet I felt grimly certain, now, that he was consumed with even more terrible appetites. The poor, nude, lifeless body of Nilla Lejune, buried secretly in the dark hillside, was ghastly proof of that.

“I’ll take you to the place, sheriff,” I said, turning in the direction of the hidden grave.

I felt Ira Clegg’s eyes still fixed upon me as we walked through the night. The ground within the fence was rank with weeds except where bare areas looked like diseased scars. Ira Clegg’s miserable home sat in the center of the enclosure, next to the kennels. We could hear the dogs prowling and sniffing inside their house—a better dwelling than Ira Clegg’s own. We crossed the wretched yard; and I paused, pointing to a soft spot on the slope.

“She’s buried there,” I said, as Sheriff Qualen turned his flashlight upon it.

Ira Clegg said nothing. Frowning, the sheriff dropped to his knees and began to dig with his hands. Randall Crain aided him. They scooped away the loose, dark earth quickly. In a moment their fingers touched the body. It became visible in the dirt.

But it was not the soft, white flesh of a young woman. It was covered with dark, matted fur! And as the sheriff’s hands cleared the earth away, I saw that the body in the grave was not human at all. It was actually a huge dog—the remains of Moloch.

Qualen peered at me strangely, closely.

"It was there," I said in a husky tone. "Laura and I both saw it. I tell you, we saw the corpse of Nilla Lejune buried at this very spot."

Still Ira Clegg said nothing; but his eyes burned at me. Qualen and Crain resumed their investigation. They dragged the dead dog from the hole, then dug even deeper. But soon they struck harder, packed earth. It became evident that to open the hollow to any greater extent would be futile. As I rose, I stared stunned into the cavity.

Where is the corpse of Nilla Lejune? I wondered numbly. What has this human dog-devil done with her lifeless body?

"Clegg," I said, turning upon the keeper of the hounds, "you knew that Laura and I had seen it. You've had time to dig it up and hide it somewhere else. Where is it now? Answer me, damn you!"

Ira Clegg answered in his snarling tone: "I don't know what you're talking about."

I stepped closer to him. "How did Nilla Lejune die?" I demanded. "What brought her here, and what took her life? You know the answers to those questions, Clegg, because you're responsible—you and those damned beasts of yours. By God, if you don't tell us—"

Sheriff Qualen caught my wrist as I raised my fist. "Easy there, Jeff," he cautioned. "You'd better leave this to me. This has got to be handled in the regular way that the law prescribes. I'll come back here in the morning, with a warrant, and I'll keep on looking until I find her."

Still staring at the keeper of the hounds, I said hoarsely, "Listen to me, Clegg. This evening you sneaked into Laura's home and stole something belonging to her. I know why you want it. But damn you, you're never going to use it for that horrible purpose. You're going to give it back to me right now, do you understand? Give it back, Clegg!"

But again the master of the bloodhounds said in his grating voice: "I don't know

what you're talking about, and don't care."

"By God, Clegg," I said, "I'll tear this place apart until I find it. *Give it back!*"

Sheriff Qualen took a tighter hold on my arm. "Better leave this to me, Jeff," he said again. To Ira Clegg, he added, "You can expect me back the first thing in the morning."

THE sheriff forced me to walk along with him. I still felt Ira Clegg's gleaming eyes fixed upon me; but then, when I looked back, I saw him tenderly replacing the body of Moloch in the grave. Reaching the gate, Qualen and Crain and I went out. Laura was still in the closed car—safe, I saw with profound relief.

"Better watch yourself, Jeff," the sheriff said quietly. "It isn't wise to challenge Ira Clegg like that."

"I'm not worried about myself," I answered. "I'm anxious for Laura. The same ghastly thing that happened to Nilla Lejune might happen to her, whatever it was. I tell you—"

"Better stick close to her, then, Jeff," Qualen said soberly. "Take her home, and stay with her."

He turned to his car. Randall Crain also climbed into it, suggesting that the sheriff drop him off at his place. They started away. As I turned back toward Laura's home, I explained to her what had happened. She was less distraught now, and puzzled. When we reached the crossing at Aspen Road, she suddenly took my arm.

"Turn back, Jeff," she said urgently. "We know that Ira Clegg didn't have much time—not time enough to take her very far away. But he has another chance now, and by morning he may have hidden her so well, we'll never find her. We must look—try to find her before—"

"Yes," I agreed. "But you're not afraid to go back?"

"Not while I'm with you, Jeff," she said. "And we still have the rifle."

When we neared Ira Clegg's place, I

turned out the headlights. Then, switching off the motor, we rolled along soundlessly and stopped at almost the same spot. I took the rifle and a flashlight, and got out. Laura kept close to me as we worked our way silently toward the break in the fence.

Careful to conceal the glow of the torch as much as possible, I found the wet marks on the ground—the blood of Moloch. There were prints of dogs' feet in the loose earth. Laura's hand clung to my arm as I began to follow them. The tracks led down the slope; they were clearly visible in the dust of the road. The dogs had come down here and had gone into the woods. Our task was more difficult while we groped our way through the trees.

A strange and dreadful reversal, I thought—trailing the bloodhounds whose every instinct was attuned to the trailing of others.

At a damp, dark spot our search ended. We found many prints of dogs' feet there, in the soft, wet earth. It was a clearing, piled with rock that had been pulled out of an old excavation. I gave the light to Laura. Placing the rifle nearby, where I could snatch it up in an instant, I began moving the rocks. I tore away one after another. A little cry came from Laura's dry lips when we caught our first glimpse of the white body entombed under the stones.

Revulsion filled me as I uncovered the corpse of Nilla Lejune. Her dead flesh bore the marks of fangs and claws. Blood was caked on her breasts, her abdomen and her plump flanks.

All the fears that Laura had voiced struck back at us then—the tales concerning Nilla Lejune's previous disappearance and the little grave hidden in the woods behind her home. And we could hear the barking of the hounds as we stood there—a hungry, anxious, crying . . .

Hastily I covered the poor dead body with the stones. I drew Laura away. She

clung to me, as if fearful that the fiendish beasts might leap at her from the shadows. We paused at the car, and her dread-filled eyes looked deep into mine.

"Sheriff Qualen must know about this tonight," I said quietly. "But a few minutes won't make any difference. We've got to learn the rest of it. I want to find out before any action is taken against Ira Clegg, so that we can build up the strongest possible case against him. I'm going to Jules Lejune's shack right now."

"Yes," Laura said in a whisper. "We must know—we must know the truth . . ."

LAMPLIGHT was shining from the windows of Jules Lejune's shack. It was darkly isolated, the only dwelling within miles. As we went to the door, we could hear Jules Lejune moving about, muttering and moaning to himself. In answer to my knock, he hurried to the door and stared out at us.

His eyes were haggard, his face wretched. A small, thin man, he seemed overwhelmed with anguished worry. He said nothing, but stared at us, until I spoke.

"I'm sorry to bring you such sad news, Jules," I said, "but—I think you already know what it is."

"Nilla—" His voice was a miserable whisper. "Nilla is—dead?"

I took his thin shoulders in my hands. "Nilla is dead," I said. "Soon we will bring her back to you, but first you must tell us everything you know about what happened to her."

Suddenly he looked terrified. "No!" he blurted. "I cannot tell you that! I am—afraid—afraid!"

My grip on his shoulders tightened. "You can't keep it a secret any longer, Jules," I insisted. "Think, man! Do you want the same horrible thing to happen to another girl—to Miss Blayne?"

Jules Lejune's eyes turned widened upon Laura. "No, no!" he wailed. "Miss

Blayne is so beautiful. It would be so awful, so awful. But I cannot tell you! I am afraid—afraid of *him*—and the dogs!"

Jules Lejune winced under the pressure of my clenching hands. "You're going to tell me the truth!" I demanded. "I'm going to hear it, if I have to beat it out of you. Don't you realize this ghastly thing will go on and on, unless we take some desperate means of stopping it now—unless you help us to stop it? God, you wouldn't want that on your soul. Speak up!"

Jules Lejune wrung his hands, and tears welled into his eyes. He rocked from side to side with unbearable anguish. "The poor little girl," he muttered. "The poor, foolish little child. She was so trusting, so warm, so young. My poor little Nilla." Then a desperate tightness settled upon his mouth. "Even I do not know of **all** that happened—but I know that she went to him."

As if eager to rid his weary soul of a shameful burden, he hurried on.

"Perhaps because he brought her a few little gifts—I do not know. But a year ago, when she went away, she was—there. With him! In that place with the hounds! When she came back, all the sweetness was wrung out of her. It was like she had come back from the pit of Purgatory. But even then, she told me so little. And then, in nine months' time . . ." he paused and a shudder shook his spare frame.

"Come," he said sadly and took my arm.

Laura and I, filled with wonder and anxiety, followed the wretched little man from the shack. He led us along a mossy trail. In a remote clearing, difficult to reach, he came to a pause. I turned the beam of my flashlight across it. Laura made a frightened sound—for then we knew that the strange rumors we had heard were true.

In the clearing there was a grave—the tiny grave of a child. It was marked with a headstone—a headstone that was blank

and white in the surrounding darkness.

"Little Nilla wanted no one to know," Jules Lejune said in a quavering whisper. "She was so ashamed. When this—this child was born, I alone was with her. Thank the merciful God that it lived only a few hours! A blessing that it died! At night, when no one else could know, I buried it here—this horrible little thing that brought shame upon us. This—horrible little monster that was covered with fur and—and looked like a deformed little dog!"

SHOCKED, Laura and I watched the stricken man turn from the unmarked grave. Sobbing, he stumbled along the trail and we followed him back to the house. He shut the door tightly, once we were inside, and glanced around fearfully.

"I am afraid!" he gasped. "Afraid of *him*. Listen! Do you hear them? Do you hear the beasts?"

The barking of the hounds was carrying out of the dark distance, startlingly sharp and clear. We listened fearfully; and Jules Lejune shrank away.

"They are close—coming closer!" he blurted.

Again I gripped his arms. "Nonsense!" I said, desperate to hear the rest of his **frightful** story. "The wind is blowing this way, carrying the sound, that's all. Go on, Jules. You've got to go on!"

He tried to steady himself, though the shine of abysmal dread remained in his eyes.

"Poor little Nilla, poor little child! Her soul was so sick, I was afraid she would die. But the doctor came, and said she would be well. When she got up, strong again, she was not the same. She was afraid, as I am afraid now—full of fear, day and night. It seemed like Ira Gregg had some evil power over her, a power that was trying to draw her back, and she was fighting it. She listened and watched, every minute, because she thought he

would come for her. Then, the other night, when we found that her shoes were missing, she knew—knew he could take her again!”

Laura scarcely heard Jules Lejune’s husky words. She was listening, instead, to the barking of the hounds. I tried to tell myself that it *was* the drift of the wind that was making their hungry cries seem to come closer and closer. The pack seemed to be prowling nearer through the woods—in search of the scent that they knew was Laura’s

“When she went away,” Jules Lejune was muttering, “I didn’t dare go after her—didn’t dare. Because she was with that devil—that devil and his beasts—”

“Jeff!” Laura cried suddenly. She clutched at me, staring across the room; and again, she cried out in abject terror, “Jeff—Jeff, look!”

His face was at the window! The face of Ira Clegg, its features dark and hard, its doglike eyes gleaming. His rabid gaze was fixed upon Laura—and in his one hand he was holding the bunched silken undergarment that bore the scent of her body! . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Bride’s Blood for the Hounds

I SPRANG to the door, jerked it open and ran out. Snatching the rifle from the car, I bounded to the window at which we had seen Ira Clegg. But he wasn’t there. There was no hint now of his presence.

The night was hushed, except for the sharp baying of the hounds—the hoarse voices that sounded ominously close.

I stepped back into the shack.

“Lock yourself in, Jules,” I ordered the terrified little man. “If you have any weapon to protect yourself with, get it into your hands. I’m going to Sheriff Qualen right now. I hope to God it won’t

be long before Ira Clegg is locked up in that prison and all those ugly beasts of his are dead.”

I hurried out again, with Laura. She clung to me fearfully as we climbed into the car. I heard Jules Lejune bolt his door, and saw him make sure the windows were latched before he pulled down the blinds. Holding the rifle, I peered around, searching for Ira Clegg. And, unmistakably, the savage barking of the hounds was drawing closer.

“We’re safe—we can get away from them easily in this car, Laura,” I said, gripping her cold hand. “God! Now we’re sure. Only one of two things can lie behind all this ghastly business. It’s possible that Ira Clegg seized upon poor Nilla to throw to his dogs. He used her in some way to gratify their beastly appetites. Either that, or Ira Clegg has used his bloodhounds to track down women he craved for himself. He devoured the very soul of little Nilla and then—God!—he must have given her ravished body to the hounds. Her blood for the dogs! Blood that would craze them with a craving for more—to sharpen their senses as man-trailers.”

I stepped on the starter, still gripping the rifle and listening to the cries of the pack.

“This is the finish of that damned fiend we know as Ira Clegg,” I promised grimly. “If the law can’t punish him properly, then, by God, the rest of us will. We’ll drive him out of that miserable hutch of his. We’ll butcher every one of those devilish hounds—be glad to see them dead. The sooner we get rid of them—What’s the matter with this car?”

The starter was grinding laboriously, but the motor had not caught. I tried again, then again—but the engine remained dead. Quickly, I gave Laura the rifle and got out, carrying the flashlight. “Watch!” I warned her, as I opened the hood. I probed into the wiring with the beam, but

I found nothing wrong until I removed the cap of the distributor. Then I saw that the arm was gone. That one small part, absolutely essential to the operation of the motor, had been stolen.

"Jeff!" Laura exclaimed, seeing the sudden whiteness of my face. "We'll have to go afoot—and the dogs—the dogs—!"

The harsh, hungry voices of the hounds were louder now. We could hear bushes being trampled in the woods. The beasts were coming—led by their demonical keeper, they were closing in on us!

I TOOK the rifle from Laura quickly. "Don't be afraid of them, darling," I said, trying to seem confident, though my heart was chilled with dread. "As long as we have this rifle, I can keep them away from us. The instant any one of them comes near you, I'll kill him, as I killed Moloch."

"Ira Clegg knows that we've learned the whole horrible story now!" Laura gasped. "He's trying to keep us from reaching the sheriff with it. Jeff! What can we do?"

"We're going to get to Qualen's office as fast as we can," I declared. "I know a short-cut through the woods. It'll take us to town the quickest way. Stick close to me, darling. I don't know how far away those damned beasts are now, but it's our best chance. Hurry!"

Laura sprang from the car. With her hand closed hard on my arm, she started off at my side. We cut across the road, then began following a trail that wound through the hills. Groping our way, stumbling over roots, struck by low branches, we ran until our breath was gone—then, though at a slower rate, we hurried on.

"Listen!" Laura gasped. "How close they are!"

The damned four-footed devils yelped in the darkness appallingly near us. Their sharp voices lashed us into another spurt. We kept running until we reached a clear-

ing, where it was lighter. I started across, but suddenly Laura gave my arm a pull that stopped me short.

"Look!"

Shadows were moving on the crest of a hill directly in front of us. The dark figures were moving on the bend in the trail that we were approaching. A tall silhouette, surrounded by low, dark shapes. Ira Clegg and his bloodhounds! He had guessed our strategy; he had cut us off, with ruthless cunning. We stood stock still, watching him as he bent over the foremost of the wild hounds.

He was holding in his hand the bit of silk that carried the sweet scent of Laura's body—holding it to the nostrils of the gigantic hound that was leading the pack.

His snarling voice came to us. "There she is, Satan. Drink in the scent of her! Go to her! Now, you devil! *Now!*"

The huge beast stood quivering, its powerful muscles taut, tensed to spring forward.

"Clegg!" I shouted in a sudden frenzy. "Look at me, Clegg! I have the rifle! I'll kill every one of your damned dogs with it. Send them on, and I'll shoot them down!"

Ira Clegg's grating tone carried to us again—a single word fraught with unspeakable horror.

"Now! *Now!*"

Suddenly the great brute bounded. It sprang down the trail toward us, its blood-shot eyes fixed upon Laura. At the same instant I swung the gun to my shoulder. Aiming with desperate swiftness, I aligned the sights squarely upon the huge, ugly head of the beast that was flying toward the girl I loved. I pulled the trigger—

And only a small click resulted! There was no flash of fire this time, no crackling report, no swift bullet to drop the bloodhound in its tracks. In a frenzy, I worked the action, and pulled the trigger again—then a third time. The weapon would not fire.

Then I knew that the bullets had been removed from it. While we had been in Jules Lejune's shack, someone had stolen the cartridges from it—the cartridges that I had counted on to save Laura from the savage lust of the hounds and their bestial keeper!

LAURA screamed with overwhelming terror. The black shadow that was Satan was springing upon us! The vicious beast leaped with its fangs gleaming, its open jaws dripping. It was in midair when, with frantic swiftness, I swung the gun and whipped the barrel down across the great dog's back.

The force of the blow struck it to the earth. Gripping the barrel, I beat it with the stock while it rolled, growling with savage anger. At the same time, Laura ran back along the trail. Through the deafening barking of the pack, I heard her terrified cry.

"The others!"

The trail was black with the leaping beasts! The other brutes were springing after Satan.

Beating at them with the rifle, I retreated toward Laura. Thanking God that the trail passed between two steep banks, which enabled me to hold the beasts back a few seconds, I glanced back to see that Laura was climbing with frantic haste up to a narrow ledge. After a breathless struggle, she managed to throw herself upon this shelf that seemed to offer refuge from the gleaming fangs of the pack.

I whirled and leaped to the spot where Laura had climbed up, and pulled myself off the ground in desperate haste. Sharp fangs ripped me as I heaved myself onto the ledge. I struck out with the rifle to keep the four-footed demons from following.

"Jeff—watch Satan!" Laura screamed at me, over the fierce barking. "Watch Satan!"

The biggest and most savage of the pack

had sprung up from the spot where I had beaten him down. The painful blows had driven him into a state of ferocious frenzy. He sprang up at me, his fangs snapping at my throat. His front paws reached the ledge, and he clawed the stone in an effort to throw himself upon it. But I struck him with terrific force, and he dropped back—only to leap again, with an even greater fury than before!

God! I thought. I've got to keep them down. I've got to keep them away from Laura. If I don't, these obscene beasts and their master will seize her—they'll suck out her blood—and then they'll cast her lifeless flesh aside!

Satan leaped again—and this time, in his crazed savagery, he reached the level of the ledge! His teeth snapped at my throat as his heavy body jarred me back. I staggered; and before I could balance myself, Satan's jaws clamped crushingly upon my arm! He shook me with a fury that wrenched the rifle from my hands. It clattered off the shelf—fell down to the trail—and at the same time, the rest of the pack came rushing up—toward Laura!

She screamed with the terror of the doomed. Snarling at my throat, Satan forced me back. Striking with my one free fist, while the beast's teeth ground on the bone of my other arm, I attempted to fight him off. Wrenching to the edge of the ledge, I scrambled in a desperate attempt to save myself from spilling off. But at that instant, Satan released my arm—with savage cunning he rushed at me—and I dropped.

I fell to the rocks and lay stunned. Hot reeking breath was beating into my face. I saw the fierce eyes of Satan above mine, his open jaws poised at my throat. He was standing over me, pinioning me to the ground. At my first move, a snarl broke from his throat and his teeth began to close upon my neck.

Good God! This beast will not allow me to stir! If I attempt to get up, he'll sink

his fangs into my windpipe! But Laura— on the ledge, where the rest of the pack were crowding upon her—*Laura*—

Then a mad nightmare of impressions swarmed through my spinning brain. While Satan's stinking, fetid breath soughed into my face, I heard Laura's cries, and the howling of the dogs, and Ira Clegg's snarling voice—and two sharp reports. Were they shots? I did not know. These footfalls rushing around me—what did they mean? As from an immeasurable distance, I heard Ira Clegg screeching, "Satan, Satan!" And then, suddenly, I was aware that the hound was no longer pinioning me down—that a hand was helping me up.

Scarcely able to see, my first act was to clamber back to the ledge. Only vaguely aware that the dogs were no longer there, I saw Laura lying there, sobbing. Her clothing was ripped from her. Her lovely nude body was quaking with terrified sobs. I lifted her; and she clung to me, as if to the last vestige of life itself.

Then, recovering, I glanced around. I saw Sheriff Qualen standing on the trail below. He was looking down at a figure which lay at his feet. It was a man whose coat was thrown open, whose shirt was wet with blood. This man was writhing with the agony of the fangs that had torn his flesh. It was not Ira Clegg. Not the keeper of the hounds! It was Randall Crain.

Sheriff Qualen looked up. With a grim, yet sad, light in his eyes, he said, "Ira Clegg is dead."

Then I saw the master of the dogs. A short distance away, at the base of the cliff, Ira Clegg was lying. Blood had streamed from him into a dusty pool. His hard face looked strangely peaceful. And around him, in a circle, the pack was standing. As if according him the last rite of an unearthly service, they were standing in a ring around their dead

master and baying out their sorrow. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Will Out

SHERIFF QUALEN soberly wagged his head. "If only I'd received that information several days sooner!" he said to Laura and me while we sat in his office in the village. "Then we would have known what was up, before all this ghastly business happened. I'll tell you what I mean.

"We'd all heard the rumors that Len Glander, the big shot racketeer, might make an attempt to break out of the prison. Well, in the city, the police had heard that rumor too. They knew that Glander couldn't possibly escape without the help of someone on the outside. They began looking for Glander's lieutenants, who had disappeared, and they soon unearthed evidence that preparations were being made.

"His lieutenants had gone to work cleverly. But they faced a big obstacle—Ira Clegg's dogs. They knew that they would never succeed in getting Glander out of these woods, with those bloodhounds ready to track him down at any hour of the day or night. So their first step was to get rid of the dogs somehow.

"They couldn't approach those brutes directly. It would have been too risky to attempt to shoot the dogs from a distance. They had to have some sure way of getting rid of all the hounds at the same time. They couldn't reach the dogs with poison, either, especially because Ira Clegg was so careful of their food. There was only one way—the way they took—pinning a crime on Ira Clegg. Such a horrible crime, that if the law couldn't punish him for it, then the people of the village would be so aroused that they would drive him and his dogs away."

I asked, "Have you all this in the form of a confession?"

Sheriff Qualen nodded grimly. "I've got it down in black and white. It was the work of Randall Crain—whose real name is Kohler. He was the chief of Len Glander's lieutenants.

"Then he took advantage of the rumors circulating about poor Nilla Lejune?" I asked.

Again Qualen nodded. "Nilla had given herself to Ira Clegg. After her deformed child was born, she tried to keep herself from yielding to him again. But it wasn't Clegg who stole her shoes—it was Crain, or Kohler. It was his first step in his plan to incriminate Clegg. He committed every atrocity that we blamed on Clegg. He hid her body on Clegg's place. The dogs scented it out and Clegg tried to hide it, because he was afraid the crime might get pinned on him. Poor chap—he suspected that someone was trying to get him and his dogs out of the way, and he was only trying to save himself.

"When Clegg learned, from Jeff, that your bit of underwear had been stolen, Miss Laura, he realized that you were marked to be the second victim, and he went about trying to protect you, in order to protect himself. He must have been afraid that the undergarment was planted on his place somewhere, and he must have looked for it. Finding it, he followed you to the Lejune place, and discovered that someone else was also watching you—Crain, or Kohler. He tried to use his dogs to keep Kohler away from you. They obeyed all his commands, and would have done it, except that no one else knew his purpose.

"You see, you didn't know, because Clegg was so close-mouthed, that his command, 'Wait!' was to order the dogs simply to stand. When he commanded 'Now!' he was telling them to obey orders he had already given them to understand. After giving them your scent from

the bit of underwear, Miss Laura, he ordered them to surround you. But of course, the advance of those dogs was a terrifying thing to Jeff, and naturally he attempted to fight them off. And because he did fight them, the dogs believed he was your enemy, and attacked him. Kohler, taking advantage of this deadly confusion, was going to kill you right then and there, in the woods, Miss Laura.

"Well, I'd gone back to my office, and I'd found a telegram describing Crain as Kohler, Glander's right-hand man. I started out after him, then heard the hounds barking. I can't take credit for saving you, Miss Laura. Jeff and Ira Clegg did that. The dogs had disabled Kohler before I arrived, because he had shot their master. A queer sort, that Ira Clegg. I'm almost sorry he's gone."

Laura and I often think of Ira Clegg now, in a queer, warm way. We were married as we had planned, and we have our home not far from the prison. We no longer hear the barking of the hounds in that miserable hollow where Ira Clegg lived. Instead, their voices come from the prison yard.

They're four-footed guards now, those hounds—guards that no convict would dare attempt to escape. Their barking is a continual reminder of that to the two men who are serving their sentences within earshot of the kennels. We feel secure and happy in the thought that neither Len Glander nor "Randall Crain" will ever try to break out and tempt the fury of the hounds of Ira Clegg. . . .

My wife sits now by the open fire. She is knitting on a tiny garment, and her face is happy. Yet, I can't help thinking of that other poor girl, Nilla Lejune, and what she must have thought when she saw her first born—a child of the hounds of hell. . . .

Kiss of the Flame Blossom

By DONALD DALE



Never shall I marry my beloved Margie! Instead I must go once more to the fearful embrace of that dread woman whose breath is a living flame, and whose kiss is the searing brand of immeasurable evil. . . .

MARGIE'S soft lips met mine in a sweet, virginal kiss of greeting. Her gentle, white hand patted an imaginary wrinkle from my coat lapel and stretched upward to push my hair back into place.

She was so tiny. As she tiptoed to reach my head, her round, little breasts thrust upward toward my racing heart, and the flowing blue sleeve fell back to reveal the fragrant hollow under her arm. I found myself wishing that sometime

she would betray a hint of the same madness I felt raging in my blood; but I suspected, even while I wished, that if she did, I should somehow resent it. Yet I could not stifle the wish.

"Darling," I said, clenching my over-eager hands behind me, "let's not wait any longer. Let's chuck the wedding plans and get married this afternoon!"

"Why, Roger"—a tender smile tugged at her red lips—"we can't do that. Besides, I have news."

"News?" I asked vaguely.

"Yes. Lida is coming. I think she will be here in time for the wedding."

"Lida?" Desire was still blurring my mind.

"Yes, Lida. You remember, my step-sister who has spent the last six years in the Orient. She's all the family I have left, you know. Isn't it marvelous for her to be coming at this time!"

"Yes. Yes, of course," I answered, coming out of the fog.

"And now, dear, I know you're tired. Make yourself comfortable and I'll fix something cool to drink.

So I sat in the charming living-room of Margie's ancestral house that hot day in early June and tried to quiet the blood that was pounding in my veins, while somewhere back in the kitchen, Margie set ice clinking in a crystal pitcher of lemonade and arranged homemade cookies on a Dresden plate.

No man ever loved a woman as I loved Margie Clark, the girl I was going to marry in three weeks. I worshipped her. She was so lovely, so unspoiled. There was much about love I could teach her.

A soft movement in the hall stirred me from my exciting anticipation. Abstractedly I looked up. In a flash, I was on my feet, then I started back in sudden surprise. In the hallway stood a strange woman, and her piercing, black eyes were boring straight into me. Neither of us spoke. I just stood there, and my gaze

was held to hers if by some malignant magnetic force.

"Good-afternoon." She finally broke the silence with a charming, faintly foreign accent. "I am Lida. And you—Roger?"

Like a gauche country boy, I stared at her, unable to answer. I had often seen women more beautiful, but never one like this. Hot, violent similes whipped through my mind. A sleek, black serpent, I thought, my eyes following the subtle curves of her tall, unbelievably slender body. The daring cut of the black metallic satin sheath-dress revealed every nuance of her vibrant length. The pointed breasts, like restive, twin volcanoes. The supple waist my two hands could have spanned. The smooth flow of rounded thighs.

Again my eyes sought her burning, gold-flecked eyes, and then the glorious, unhatted crown of red hair. Dull red, like embers ready to burst into flame. And from the black shoulder of her dress, a single rich, red flower leaped upward as if in challenge to the smouldering glory of her hair. Its heavy, insinuating perfume filled the room.

"Are you not going to invite me in?" she asked softly, seeming to taunt me for my stupid daze.

SLEEP did not come easy that night. I thought miserably back over the evening at Margie's. Nothing unusual had happened, really. The three of us had talked, Margie questioning Lida eagerly about the romance of the Orient. Lida giving veiled hints of a mysterious existence. Just a wilful, theatrical girl, I thought, trying to dramatize herself. And yet, I could not throw off the exotic spell the first sight of her had cast upon me.

I reviewed, too, the few things I knew of Lida Suban, who had incongruously been thrust into the same family with Margie by the marriage of Margie's gentle mother to Lida's dark, handsome father, Jhara Suban.

Lida, four or five years older than Margie, had been, even as a child, moody, restless, strange. Year by year, she seemed to become more intense, more secretive, more restive—and more than once had I suspected for Margie she felt only hatred and intense jealousy!

When Lida was eighteen, Jhara Suban died. It was then the arrogant girl found that, in her own right, she had nothing. That all these years she had been accepting the bounty of her step-mother. That night, she had disappeared from the house that had so long been home to her.

And now, Margie's mother was seven months dead, and the roving Lida was "home" again. The pretentious little moocher! I thought savagely. I could not bear the idea of having to try, after Margie and I married, to treat this interloper as a sister. For never had I seen a woman I hated so much—and desired so violently. . . .

Hours later, I awoke with heavy, exciting fumes crowding my nostrils, and the sense of someone in the room. Jerking myself up in bed, I tried to pierce the almost tangible blackness of the room.

At my movement, there sprang up, near the center of the room, small glowing patches as if of fire. To my dazed mind, they had, at first no meaning. Then I saw the pattern!

A helmet of flaming hair. Two blazing eyes, burning holes in the darkness. A faint, glowing outline—as if traced swiftly by a luminous pencil—of a serpentine body. . . . And held like a torch in the phosphorescent suggestion of slender hands, a huge blossom of flame!

In a panic, I seized the cord of the night-lamp, keeping my eyes focussed on the apparition. By the sane glow of electricity, I saw standing before me—Lida Suban, her supple body covered from neck to toes with a long, red-velvet cape!

Once more I saw the tantalizing smile and heard the words which that afternoon

had mocked my gaucherie: "Are you not going to invite me in?"

A tumult of emotions struggled within me. Resentment. Disgust. Passion. An inexplicable terror. "How did you get in here?" I heard my thickened voice ask as I rose to a sitting position.

The contemptuous upquirk of her scarlet lips mocked me, and for answer, she tucked the flame-flower into the red glory of her hair and loosed the gold clasp at her throat. The glowing velvet slipped, caressed the ivory-white length of her, until it sank into a swirl at her feet.

An ivory Aphrodite in a sea of flame! Never was a body more vibrant. I could feel its compelling power, like an electric current as she glided over and sat on the bed beside me. But, though the hot blood pounded in my veins, my heart still spoke of Margie and her clean, pure love. Sharp words of anger rose in my mind for this strange woman who had forced her way into my room, but my tongue could not utter them. She had stretched out her long, glowing hands to stroke my throat, as if exorcising the words of denial that rose there for expression.

I raised my eyes, looked into the queer unfathomable depths of hers, and slowly her gaze wove a net of mad passion around my mind, and thoughts of the worthier love were lost in a hopeless tangle of desire.

THE NEXT morning by the time I had showered and shaved, I tried to persuade myself that no one had been in my rooms the night before. I had had a fantastic nightmare, induced by this strange, alluring woman.

In the first place, it was absurd—in-sulting—to believe that my fiancee's guest would do such a thing. Besides, there was no way she could have got in. Stubbornly, I thrust back the remembrance that she had appeared in Margie's house also, seemingly without being admitted. This

morning, certainly, when I had awakened, there had been no sign of her.

From the bedroom arose the usual, impudent mutterings of Pansy, the young colored maid, who came in to clean each morning. But suddenly something she was saying hit me like a blow: "Hit sho do smell funny in heah. Hit sho do."

With a queer catch in my heart, I stuck my head into the bedroom. The girl was right. There *was* a "funny" smell—the heavy, acrid odor of the flame-flower!

But something else had caught the sharp eyes now, and their plump owner was bending low, seeming to peer at an object that lay on the floor.

She plucked it up between dusky thumb and forefinger, and as she looked at it, her thick lips moved with wonder and foreboding. Becoming aware of my presence, she turned, saying, "Lawtsy, Mistuh Roguh, I never seed anythin' like it!"

Then, hastily, she flipped into the air toward me, the thing that had fallen beside my bed. A musty, glowing petal of the scarlet flower! . . .

The days that followed were torture. I worked frenziedly all day at the office. After that, I called on Margie, sometimes having dinner with her and her guest step-sister, sometimes taking them out to dine and dance.

At those times, there was nothing about Lida Suban to which anyone could object seriously. Exotic, but to all appearances normal in every respect—a quiet visitor whose only peculiarity was the strange, Oriental flower she always wore. . . .

But the nights!

They were a confusion of hate and desire—agony and delirious joy. Every night she came to me—this woman of flame, as if wafted in on the pungent odor of that hellish flower. My new double door-lock was as nothing to her diabolic powers.

Not only was my conscience stricken with my infidelity to Margie, but, not able to shut out her step-sister or to detect the means of her coming, I began to lose control of my nerves. Fear of the supernatural was eating at my mind, at my healthy, scientific sanity. No longer able to bear it, one night I shrieked out my terrified queries to this devil woman. She answered only, "Supernatural? Nothing is supernatural. Nothing *has* to go beyond nature, for nature gave us *all* powers over our bodies and minds. It is only necessary to learn to realize them. I could teach you—"

"My God! All I ask is to be left alone!"

"Is that—all?" And her white fingers touched me there in the dark. Her parted mouth pressed my restless head back upon the pillows. . . .

Eons later, she spoke again. "Roger, I love you." I started at the sudden vibrancy of her voice. Never before had I seen her like this. There was something touching, now, in her simplicity—in her seeming sincerity that lacked all touch of the exotic.

She went on, with grave, appealing dignity. "You have remotivated my whole life. I came back here to get the money of this 'good little sister' of mine, whom my father—everybody—loved better than me. I was to be next in heritage so long as Margie remained single. I determined she should never live to be married. When I found out about you, my first thought was to prevent the marriage until I could have time to carry out my plans. But when I *saw* you, I knew you were meant for me. Let me teach you how to live." For a moment, I felt a sort of pity for her; but in the next breath, all her wistfulness was gone. "Because I love you, it is possible for you to save her. But *if you marry her*. . . ."

As her voice trailed off into silence, the spell her words had cast over me was broken. I pushed her away, sprang from

the bed, and began to pace the floor. "Absurd! Stupid threats!" I raged. "You couldn't—"

My protest died, for suddenly she was no longer there. Only the echo of her parting ultimatum hung in the heavy air of the room:

"The choice is yours!"

I TRIED to pretend it was for my fiancée's safety that I opened my arms to passion each night. I told myself, if I refuse this woman's love, she will harm Margie. Yet I don't know even now how much was truth and how much just a rationalization of a primal urge I could not control.

But I do know when I was away from Lida, or when the three of us were together, I hated her enough to beat her cruel brains out. I tried desperately to think of ways to circumvent her. But this was not the kind of thing you take to the police for help, or to your friends for advice.

I began to show signs of the strain. And Margie dosed me with medicines and with diets. "You'll be better," she whispered shyly, her gentle hand stroking my feverish head, "when I can take care of you properly. And it's only six more days now."

Six more days!

In my mind, I heard the echo of Lida's threat: "*If you marry her—!*" Yet I, too, decided that I should be glad when it was all over. Surely Lida was bluffing. Perhaps after I was married she would go away and leave Margie and me to our happiness. Though I had acceded to Margie's wish that we live in her own beautiful home, I knew one thing: When I became master of the house, I would demand that Lida leave.

With that decision, my mind began to feel easier. And I took that very afternoon off, and Margie and I went to the marriage clerk to get a license. This

definite move would stop Lida's melodramatic, mysterious threats. But how inadequately had I plumbed the depths of her malignity and power!

When we came back from our happy errand, Lida lay languidly on the living-room divan. She wore scarlet satin in the artfully-cut sheath model she always affected. Its sheen highlighted every sinuous curve of her long body. Involuntarily, remembrance sprang up in me of holding her close in my arms, measuring her height against mine. The inescapable red blossom drooped between the pyramids of her upthrust breasts.

"Oh, Lida darling," Margie trilled in her sweet, confiding way; "look, we've got the license. It won't be long now!"

"No!" Lida's burning echo vibrated in the air. "It will not be long now."

Margie said, "I'm going to mix some drinks. We're going to celebrate!" And started for the kitchen.

A strange, premonitory fear held me speechless. Lida curved into a sitting position. Looked around her as if trying to hit upon an object that would suit some predetermined purpose. Just at that moment Margie's huge, white Persian cat, probably having heard his mistress's return, came from the bedroom and started toward the kitchen, edging away, as he invariably did, from Lida and eyeing her with spitting hatred.

The instant Lida saw the animal, she leaped to her feet and stepped swiftly toward it. The beautiful pet forgot his intended visit to his mistress. Great back humped in fear and hatred, and green eyes glued to the strange flower on Lida's bosom, the cat crept toward her, stealthily, as if stalking an enemy, while I looked on, bound to inaction by my own weird thoughts. Suddenly, with an almost human shriek of rage, the big feline catapulted through the air, baring teeth as murderous as those of its jungle ancestors.

Hypnotized by horror, I watched the incredible drama that followed. For a century-long moment, Lida was a flamed statue, moved not a muscle until the cat was in mid-air. Then she whipped her white hands outward. As they swept above the flying white fury, a burst of flame filled the room. In a split second, it was gone—as if it had never been. Only my brain retained the memory of the red blossom flaming like a torch in the white valley between the pointed breasts.

On the floor lay the beautiful, white beast. Not willing to believe my senses, I crept closer, held in the grip of incredulous terror. Gently I touched the limp body with my foot, knowing already the truth.

Margie's pet was dead!

The beautiful animal sprawled like a cast-off rag on the polished floor, its once-silken belly turned upward. I stooped, closer and still closer, staring and sniffing. God! I was not mistaken!

The white fur was a blackened crisp, and the poor beast's belly cratered with gaping, raw holes. The air was filled with the smell of brimstone and burning flesh!

With deadly quietness, Lida Suban spoke: "I can do the same to *her*. *The choice is yours!*"

DURING the days that followed, Margie was so distressed about my increasing bad health that she never probed my lame explanations about the sudden death of her well-loved pet. I will admit that she was justified in her concern about the state of my nerves. I was at the breaking point.

I knew one thing only. I must not marry Margie, for I was convinced now of Lida's malignant power. What it was, where it came from, I did not know. I only knew it was fatal—and hideous.

I tried to use my extreme bad state of health as an excuse to postpone the wedding. But for my fiancée, my illness was

only a more urgent reason for immediate marriage. Thwarted in that argument, I urged, with the purpose of escaping Lida, a long wedding trip. But Margie contended that I was not well enough to undertake it.

I learned the tyranny of gentleness. . . .

My wedding was like a hellish dream. The stately chords of the wedding march were a dirge—a funeral dirge for my bride. I was hardly aware of her, so sweetly virginal, coming down the aisle to meet me, for my feverish eyes were pinned to her demoniac maid-of-honor—long, serpentine body sheathed obscenely in white satin, mysterious eyes shadowed by a drooping, scarlet brim, pale hands clasping the malevolent flame-flower.

The unbearable strain of waiting from moment to moment for her to strike! When would the fatal blow come? What satanic form would it take?

"Wilt thou, Roger, take this woman. . . .?"

"I will." I heard my own voice pronounce Margie's death-sentence.

But nothing happened! . . . The never-ending reception. Nothing. . . . The intolerable wedding-dinner! Still nothing. . . . The evening—and at last, Lida Suban retired to the guest room and my bride and I were alone.

It was not the sort of wedding night a man could have wished. I knew it was not what Margie had dreamed of, during our lovely engagement days. But everything was excused on account of my "health."

"I'm glad all the formalities are over," Margie said, looking tenderly at my drawn face and nervous hands. "My first duty—and pleasure—is to help you get well."

When I lay beside her in the darkness. I clasped her tightly as if mortally afraid of losing her and, laying my head upon her breast, I broke into sobs.

She shielded me in her soft arms, as a mother does a sick child. With little,

tender sounds of love and soft, gentle caresses, she soothed me. As the minutes went by, I felt all hurt, all strain of the awful preceding days go out of me, as if by magic. Memory of that woman sleeping in our guest room faded. The hovering, intangible menace drifted away on a tide of love. . . .

My honeymoon began.
"Margie! Margie!"

A VOICE calling my bride waked me from a deep, sweet sleep. At the same instant, Margie, too, was awake. "It's Lida," she whispered; "I wonder what—"

She sprang out of bed and started for the door, from beyond which the voice seemed to come.

But, suddenly, Lida stood in the room, as if wafted in on the eddy of sweet, poisonous fumes that drugged the air. The evil flower that hung between her breasts lighted her figure like a torch.

Folds of diaphanous, flame-red chiffon billowed about her, revealing her undulant body. She was unearthly—like some heathen goddess of fire. Incandescent, as if alight with an inner flame. She took one swift, gliding step toward Margie.

With a shriek of terror, Margie retreated. The tableau of these two women became an unbreakable fetter, binding me. The tall, menacing woman of flame. My ivory madonna, veiled only by her sheer, white nightgown.

Another tiger-soft stride. Helplessly, I looked on. The red chiffon draperies burst into an aura of living flame. The long, slender arm made a sweeping gesture and Margie's gown hung from her in charred rags.

My wife's agonized scream released me, like a taut spring, and I hurled myself from the bed and toward the living flames. But instantly, her left hand whipped through the air in front of me, and I was thrown back by a blast of

scorching wind, held helpless by a wall of roaring heat.

With ghastly, macabre humor, the Flame Goddess toyed with my loved one. First, the hellish hand swept above my bride's head, and the golden curls fell to the floor. Then, she let the blaze play—gently—upon the softly-rounding breasts and, with a cruel sweep, down the curving length of the ivory body.

Margie's screams were almost inhuman now, and I had got beyond making a sound. I had no reason, but plunged, idiotically, over and over, against the unseen barrier that held me.

Gradually, hopelessness laid its heavy hand on me, and out of the calm of despair came a glimmer of reason. The flower, the blossom that blazed so evilly upon the softly-glowing bosom of this she-devil! Did the secret of her power lie in it?

I abandoned my futile plunging against the singeing wall she had with a gesture thrown up in front of me, and began to make a stealthy circle about the death struggle of these two women. I heard my crazed laughter break out into the room as I pictured myself, a hard-headed, young, American business-man, creeping cautiously around my own bridal chamber trying to outmaneuver an imaginary wall of wind!

But I could not get through! For as I circled, so did the cruel heat-wall. At no point could I penetrate it.

With diabolic cunning, the Flame-demon continued to play her deadly game with my bride. She swept a crisp trail down the lovely curve of back. Left a scorched girdle around the fragile waist.

Fierce anger rose in me. Somehow I must stop this. I looked wildly around me, agony sharpening my wits. Suddenly I had it!

I sprang to the dressing table, seized a huge, cut-glass atomizer. Stepping back to give myself arm-room, I hurled it into

the heavy French mirror. The glass shattered into a thousand pieces.

Wildly I surveyed the wreckage. Snatched a razor-sharp lance of it. The natural, earthly feel of it cut cruelly into my tight-gripping palm reassured me.

I knew I had to be careful, or I would strike Margie. I realized, too, that my interference might cause anything. Would we all go up in a sudden burst of unearthly flame? Would the she-devil, with one last violent manifestation, destroy Margie completely?

The answer had no bearing. I knew only that anything was better than this cat-and-mouse game of fire, so cunningly played. Death, annihilation—anything!—would be welcome.

It was not courage that urged me on—it was wild unreasoning terror. I could see the game was almost over. Lida was tiring of her sport, and Margie was swaying on her feet, on the verge of collapse. Her screams of agony had died away into the soft and unintelligible whimperings of a hurt child and it was only the primitive instincts of a wounded animal that kept her trying to avoid the torturing darts of fire.

I made a last tormented effort to break through the blasting wall of heat . . . but I could not do it. My legs crumpled under me and I fell heavily to the floor. For a moment Lida paused in her torture-game and turned to me with a look that embraced all the evil and malice in this world. It was that glance of concentrated venom that somehow gave me the strength to struggle unsteadily back to my feet. Lida turned away from me contemptuously and slowly raised her arm to loose the withering blast that would mean the end of hope and life for my beloved.

I knew that I could wait no longer—and I must not miss. Lida was taking her time, enjoying to the fullest the pain she was inflicting. As her fingertips were al-

most in a line with Margie's horror-glazed eyes, I suddenly drew back my arm and, before the Flame-thing could realize my intention, I sent my glass cutlass whizzing through the air—straight at the hellish blossom!

It fell to the littered floor.

THE SUDDENNESS of the result was almost too much for me. The conflagration was turned off as if by magic. The wall of wind was gone. Margie slumped to the floor, a pitiful heap of scorched skin and blackened wisps of cloth.

Lida was no longer a flaming goddess, but a violent, dangerous, disheveled woman at bay. She turned toward me, a look of demoniac hate lashing from her queer, golden eyes. Fear contorted her features.

As I lunged toward her, she whirled, and stooped to snatch wildly at the broken flower at her feet. Suddenly, with an unreasoning flash, I knew what I must do.

I hurled my body through the air, stiff-arming her in my plunge. She was thrown against the wall, but like an angry tigress, she was at me again. But not before I had the red-hot flame-blossom in my bleeding hands.

Fiercely I rent its flaming petals, tore out its demoniac heart. With one hell-ridden scream, the woman dropped to the floor.

Like a man aroused from a nightmare, I looked down at her. Stooped, and laid my hand upon her heart.

Lida Suban was dead.

* * *

MMARGIE'S golden hair is growing out again and is now an unruly mop of little-girl curls. The burns on her body, with the excellent medical care they had had, are nearly all gone.

As for me, from my horrible experiences with Lida Suban, I have developed an interesting hobby—the study of pyrotechnics and pyro-chemistry, for I have

determined to preserve my own peace of mind by working out a natural solution for every manifestation of Lida's seemingly supernatural power.

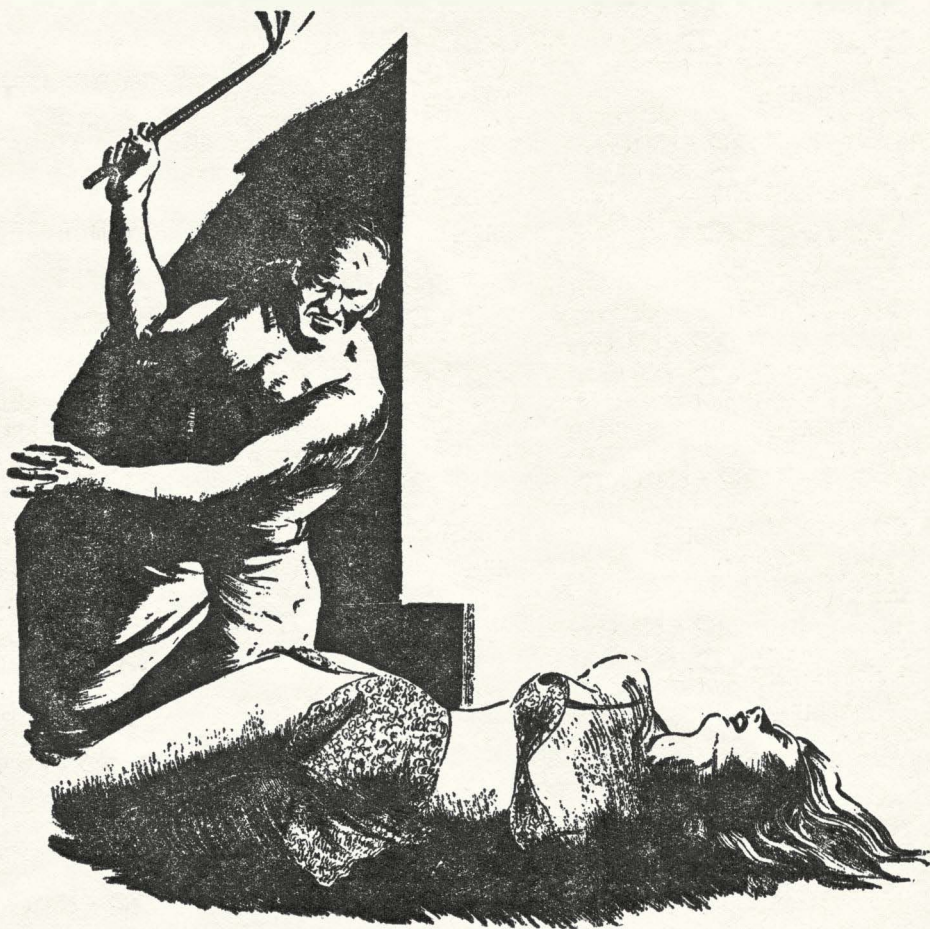
I accept Lida's boast: "Nothing is supernatural. Nature gave us all powers. All we have to do is to realize them." And from it, I have worked my way, honestly, through the maze of horrible memories.

Lida knew much of the so-called sorcery of the Orient. The luminescence of her body when she appeared in my room and the weird, fiery manifestations on my horrible wedding night are not much more remarkable than many pyrochemical tricks used by "magicians" the world

over. As for the flower, a well-known botanist, upon examination of its tattered remnants, pronounced it a giant *dicentra*, native to most of East India. There was nothing unusual about it.

But Lida had appeared in locked rooms, with no reasonable means of ingress; the cat died at a gesture from her evil hands; she herself fell dead when I destroyed her flower. I am determined not to push these inexplicable facts back to fester in some dark corner of my subconscious. So I continue my study.

And in the meantime, I am the happiest man in the world. I have the perfect wife.



Pleasure Cruise--To Hell!



CHAPTER ONE

Pleasure Cruise—to Hell

*There in that awful beauty mart, I
saw my wife a willing prey to lust—
while a dancing corpse clapped
grisley hands in the harbor of Mad-
man's Isle!*

AT FIRST I was conscious only of the lulling sound of lapping water and the gentle swaying of a ship at anchor. It seemed to me that I had been listening to that sound for hours,

by Donald Graham

*Weird Mystery and Chilling Terror Fill
the Pages of This Stirring
Novelette*



vaguely fighting to pull myself out of that semi-comatose condition that borders the conscious and the unconscious state. Then, with a growl, I was bolt upright in the bed, staring blindly into the darkness about me as my heart beat a rapid tattoo in my breast. At the time my befogged mind did not know what caused my fear, but sheer animal terror had me in its hold as I swung my feet to the floor and sat gripping the edge of my bunk, my head pounding painfully. Then, slow-

ly, the darkness, the quiet, and the rocking motion of the yacht helped to still my unstrung nerves. The whole thing was but a bad dream, a vividly realistic nightmare. But where were the other members of the party?

I stepped out of my dark cabin and into the dimly lit corridor which was flanked on each side by two double cabins. I strode to one end of the passageway and threw open the door of the engine room—beneath me, at the foot of a flight of steps, two Diesel engines lay side by side, silent, like giants sleeping. The other cabins

were empty as I went through them.

"Helen! Doris! Tom!" I shouted, terror again surging over me.

I retraced my tracks to the other end of the corridor on the run, hurtling through the galley, dining room and lounge—all were empty and in great disorder. At the end of the lounge, up a short flight of steps, the door of the wheelhouse loomed. I took the steps almost at a bound, flung the door open and froze in my stride, transfixed, my breath coming in gulping fear. It was all true, then! It hadn't been a dream! A sob burst from my constricted throat.

Sagging upon the wheel was the body of a man. His head was hooked over the top of the wheel while his arms, outflung between the spokes at each side, were reaching before him. His once-blond hair was now a clotted mass of violent death. Supported as he was by the brace of the wheel, he remained in a semi-upright posture, his crumpled legs rubber-like in death. To me, in that terrible moment, he seemed the devil's marionette dancing on the strings of horror, dead arms outstretched, groping to embrace his prey. As the clean white yacht rolled softly with the swell, the wheel turned slowly from side to side making the corpse's limp legs execute hell's own macabre dance in the crimson pool at his feet.

I do not know how long I stood there, gruesomely fascinated by this profane spectre, my eyes held by the hypnotic gliding of the dead man's body and legs. But I do remember that the impenetrable darkness that surrounded the yacht seemed to be pressing in as though to crush it. Only the glimmering battery-lights of the ship's interior, combined with the eerie red gleam from the ship's port side and the green starboard light, cast a small halo over the surrounding water. And then the throbbing in my head and the bells in my ears grew louder and louder as the wheelhouse filled with a deep red

mist and I sagged to the floor in a coma.

IT WAS as though my mind and body had retreated from any further shock by going into a state of semi-paralysis. As in a dream I relived the weeks of happiness that came before this horror. I saw again the expression of delight that came over Helen's face when I suggested we spend our vacation in Florida with my brother Tom and his wife Doris. Helen and I had been married only a short while and this was to be our first vacation together. Then, too, I hadn't seen Tom for several years, so the whole thing worked beautifully. Tom lived in Miami, and from the moment of our arrival we were treated as a king and queen. There was boating and swimming in the mornings, gay luncheons and cocktail parties in the afternoons, while in the evenings we went for quiet drives in the moonlight, danced at one of the hotels or tried our luck at the Casino. It was like a second honeymoon for Helen and me. And during this time we met a third couple, Ken and Hilda Ryder, who were great sports and treated us with exceptional kindness. And it was Ken who suggested the biggest thrill of all—a chartered yacht to sail among the key islands and perhaps go as far as the Ten Thousand Islands off the Southern coast. The suggestion was received with enthusiasm, and Tom chartered a small vessel that would accommodate all of us.

The first week was an even greater joy than any of us had expected. Ken, who knew the waters well, mapped our course to take in the most interesting places. But then, on a rainy morning at the end of the first week, the motors began to give us trouble. We were at lunch, I remembered, when the captain went into the wheelhouse to speak to the helmsman, his face grimly set to hide his alarm. Ken, too, acted worried, and when I questioned him later he told me that the barometer

was falling rapidly which meant a bad storm, that we were held away from the mainland by treacherous reefs, and that with motors going bad and no harbor in sight we might expect anything.

All of us tried to keep our alarm from the girls, but that was almost impossible. It was a grim party that rode out that afternoon on a welling, glowering sea, motors wheezing and the yacht rolling drunkenly like a wounded thing. Then, miraculously, off our port bow an island loomed. It was the helmsman who sighted it and called its position. We sailed cautiously in closer, the island slowly rising out of the haze, and I noticed a tall spire jutting into the sky from the top of the island's central hill. I turned to Ken to comment, and I was shocked to see the deathly white pallor of his face and the way his lips kept repeating in a whisper:

"Madman's Island! Madman's Island!"

"Ken!" I cried, shaking his arm. "What is it? What's the matter?"

But he didn't answer me, so I turned toward Tom. Tom, too, seemed strangely abstracted, a worried frown creasing his forehead.

"This is bad, Jim, bad," Tom said, shaking his head. "I wish I could tell you all I know about this place."

We were abruptly interrupted as Ken suddenly rushed for the wheelhouse, slamming the door open.

"Keep away from that island!" he almost screamed. "Keep away, I tell you!" He staggered into the wheelhouse and grabbed the wheel, spinning it crazily, shouting in a voice of hysteria, "That's Madman's Island! *Didn't I tell you to keep away?*"

A member of the crew grappled with him as Tom and I jumped forward to help. He fought with the fury of the demented, but the three of us managed to get him back into the lounge where we forced him into a chair. After that he

gave up struggling, sobs racking his frame. The girls stood at one end of the lounge room, their faces white and strained with fear. Then, slowly, Ken raised his head and looked at us, his face and lips ashen, his eyes unnaturally bright, and when he spoke his voice had the intense sibillance combined with the quiet prediction of a prophet. How I wish we had listened to him!

"I tell you now," he said in a whisper, "that anyone who anchors at Madman's Island braves the horrors of the deepest hell, jeopardizes the very soul he treasures, and enters a place from which *no sane thing has ever returned!*" At that, he lowered his head and spoke no more.

THE group in the cabin was a frozen tableau, white-lipped, motionless, silent, and it burned into my brain a picture that I shall never erase, for it has been seared there with an acid more lasting than any known to man.

Then I noticed the captain's hands clenching and relaxing, the muscles in his jaws tightening spasmodically, as he concealed his dreadful foreboding with a mask of determination. Suddenly he threw his heavy shoulders back and shouted a command in much too loud a voice, as though he would reassure his courage by his own strength. But all of us knew that physical strength can never successfully defy things beyond the ken of man. . . .

The anchor chain rattled out with an eerie clanking that suggested the reluctance of every link to hold the vessel in this cove, and the failing Diesel engines ground to a stop as the tired ship came to rest.

Everyone, including the captain and the three members of the crew, huddled in the lounge as dusk began to settle. Ken was still slumped in his chair as the captain began the history of Madman's Island.

"The story is short and ugly," he said,

"and there are some who believe it; I'm not saying I don't. But anyway, over a hundred years ago a wealthy Southern family found themselves with a child who was mad. At first it was easy to take care of him, but when he grew up the trouble began. So they bought this island and built a large stone house on it for him to live in. You can see the stone spire still standing. They left him here on the island with several husky "servants" and decided to forget all about it. The madman lived here for a number of years, and then one year when the provision boat came the house was empty. Then, one by one, they found the members of the madman's household wandering about the island, all of them horribly tortured and maimed, and every one of them a frothing lunatic. The mad owner never was found—some say he's still here.

"But this much is known: once a party of young people came here to explore the place and only one of them returned—a young girl who returned mad in a way that I can't talk about. Then the Government stepped in and razed the place from one end to the other, but the only thing they found was the body of another young girl, horribly mutilated. She had evidently been tortured for months: her fingers and toes had been cut off, her breasts were amputated, her eyes burned out and her tongue ripped out by sheer force.

"No possible hiding place could be found, nor any signs of a place of torture, so the Government said the body must have been transported to this isolated place. Anyway, they tore down the old stone house on the hill and that closed the matter. But there are people who say that many of the yachting parties claimed missing at sea are really the victims of this madman, who is supposed to have gathered other lunatics about him. Others say that they have seen lights on the island—but nobody ever comes to investigate. Madman's Island is left very much

alone. Seamen avoid it like a plague."

There was silence for a moment after the captain had finished, then Ken raised his head.

"Whether human agents or supernatural," he said, "violence and death are here, and it is best to leave the place strictly alone."

"Oh, come out of it!" I exploded, angry at the chills that were running up and down my spine. "This is all pure coincidence which has been strengthened by legend, gossip and superstition. Maybe there is an old story; maybe some bodies were found here; maybe. . ."

The words I was about to utter withered and died in my constricted throat as a horrible wailing scream mounted into the night air, climbing ever higher to reach the crescendo of torture incarnate, then was stifled like the flame of a candle suddenly extinguished. Following that scream came the chattering, howling laugh of a madman, bubbling with fiendish delight and deranged pleasure. After it had stopped I was conscious that Helen's slim body was pressed close to me, her trembling form hugging mine for protection.

"Oh, Jim; Jim, dear," she whispered sobbingly, over and over.

CHAPTER TWO

Hosts of the Dancing Corpse

THE captain's rumbling oath was the first sound to break the quivering silence that followed. He strode over to the gun locker and jammed his key into the padlock, slamming the doors open.

"Catch!" he commanded, and tossed revolvers to each member of the crew. Then he handed one to each of the male passengers, but Ken waved his aside.

"It wouldn't do any good," Ken almost whined, "against *them*."

"By ——," the captain swore, "if anything comes near this ship, devil, mad-

man or hobgoblin, I'll let so much moonlight through 'em they'll feel like a piece of Irish lace!"

My heart went out to the captain who refused to be beaten by the threat of supernatural evil even though, as was evident, he more than half believed the gruesome legend. As for myself, I was forced to believe the evidence of my senses, and certainly no human being had uttered that nerve-shattering wail that came from an isolated, obviously deserted island. And in that second after the captain had spoken a jittering scream ripped through the ship *from right beneath the porthole! And from the opposite side of the yacht another bubbling howl answered! We were surrounded!*

The captain whirled with the sound and his gun blazed out into the night, only to be answered by a chorus of derisive screeches as the ship began to rock violently as though a hundred chattering apes were rolling it in their hairy arms. But the thunder of the captain's gun seemed to give us all courage—there was force and strength in the reverberating explosion.

"Quick!" I shouted. "To the midship cabins—we'll stand a better chance against them in the narrow passageway."

I never let Helen out of my grasp until we were safe within our small cabin. Ken, who seemed to have taken on new life and thrown off his paralyzing fear, followed us in, pushing his wife, Hilda, before him. Tom and his wife Doris ran into their cabin across from ours, the captain following them, while the three crew members crouched in the doorway of the engine room.

We didn't have long to wait; no sooner had we gained the cabins than the rocking of the ship stopped and heavy bodies could be heard squirming over the sides of the vessel. I can't put into words the way the seconds dragged while we waited silently, nerves snapping, for the on-

slaught of this terrorizing menace. I remember counting the thumps as each additional body heaved itself up on the deck, its wet bare feet making a slapping sound on the canvas as it joined the others waiting. Then, when all were present, the mob of madmen set up an ear-wracking bellow that must have shaken the heavens and rocked the foundations of hell. Suddenly, tearing and smashing everything before them, they burst screaming into the wheelhouse, blasted through the door of the lounge room and swamped into the fore part of the ship like the yowling pack from hell's nethermost regions that they were.

I'll never forget the terror that was in Helen's scream nor the gasp of horror that went up from the rest of the company as those apparitions came upon us. Momentarily we were stunned. Their eyes! They were the eyes of madness personified, of dementia incarnate, glowering hate, lust, cruelty and vicious desire. Great, shaggy, tangled masses of filthy hair covered their entire bodies giving them the appearance of misshapen beasts, while from their heavy-tusked, screaming mouths a soap-like froth spewed over whiskered faces and matted chests. And with this wave of nightmare creatures there came a stomach-turning stench of utter foulness that permeated the ship at once.

A giant among them, hurling the others aside in his insane fury, gained the door of the passageway first, his huge bulk blocking the entire frame and his roaring throat shaking the very walls. He paused there for a moment, and in that moment the paralyzing panic that had come over me passed. I raised my heavy revolver and its blast sent the warm blood of courage flowing through my veins again. The thunder of my gun seemed to awaken the others, and a very holocaust of gunfire blazed down the passage at the madmen. But with the first shot the giant bounded

forward and raced toward us, the others tumbling after in riotous frenzy.

I remember emptying my revolver into the howling pack and then hurling the useless weapon into the face of the nearest one. He whirled and jumped for our doorway, crashing into the room at full tilt. As he crossed the threshold I rocked him back on his heels with a smash to the jaw that I felt straight down to my ankles. There was the strength of ten men in that blow for an unholy fear had suddenly seized me—I had shot point blank at several of the creatures without the slightest effect; I couldn't have missed. *And I knew for a fact that the bullets in my gun were not blanks.* The wood and moulding of the passageway had flown into splinters, but not one of these creatures had fallen from a bullet. My solid jab to the creature's jaw seemed to have some effect, however, and he was momentarily stopped, plucky little Helen smashed a chair across his head. In the next instant, though, he was on me again and we were locked in a bone-crushing embrace, staggering drunkenly about the small cabin. The nauseating reek of filth and decay that came from his body almost made my stomach turn. As we struggled about the cabin I saw Ken holding his own with another of the beasts.

Then, in a flash, the creature hurled me against the side of the cabin with a force that must have split the wood. Then, as I staggered for him again, his heavy fist slashed across my face stunning me, and in the same instant a crushing blow from behind exploded a meteor in my brain that showered into a million sparks and faded to a sinking blackness. As I went down I heard Helen's scream.

IT WAS when I had awakened from this period of unconsciousness that I couldn't believe it all had really happened. The quiet, deserted ship, the frantic search for Helen and my companions, the

disordered rooms and broken furniture, the gruesome corpse who held the wheel—all these things told me that it had been no nightmare, that it really had happened, and that sickening realization stunned me for a time while I lived again in my delirious mind the horror that was upon us.

I don't know what brought me out of that second faint in the wheelhouse, but it must have been the frantic crying of my brain: Helen! Helen! *Helen!* For suddenly the red mist cleared away and I dragged myself shakily to my feet. The yacht was still deserted, its light dully glowing into the darkness, and the dancing corpse still held his watch at the wheel.

When I came to this time my mind was functioning normally again, and with cold deliberation I tried to form a plan of action. It was obvious that the others had been taken ashore, prisoners, to some cunningly hidden den of the beast-creatures—oh, how I fought to keep my mind from wondering what they were doing to Helen! My first objective, of course, must be to find the subterranean dwelling of the madmen—it was obvious that they had no structure above ground. But how? And why had I been left behind? The last question was much easier to answer: I had been overlooked, lying hidden as I was in the lower bunk. But perhaps . . . and then every muscle in my body stiffened as though in response to an electric shock!

I heard the sound of a hairy body dragging itself over the side of the ship, and then the wet slapping of his feet on the deck. In a flash I was back in the deeper shadows, my hand fumbling for the door to the map closet. I knew what the creature had come for—*me!* I heard him thrashing about in the sleeping cabins, searching every corner, and then I heard him blunder through the other rooms, finally to enter the wheelhouse. By

that time I was securely hidden in the closet, and the grunt of fierce disappointment that he gave could only mean that my guess had been right. I heard him step out of the wheelhouse and lower himself over the side. I counted up to ten, and then I was out on deck too. I could see him swimming ahead, making clumsily for the shore, and in a second I was in the water too, silently trailing him. It was my only hope of finding the retreat of the monsters.

He blundered up the trail that led to the top of the hill where the ruins of the old house were, heedless of noise, shambling with great awkward strides. Why he should make for the house I didn't know; it had been dynamited by the Coast Guard and even the rambling old cellars of the place were filled with rock and debris. But when we got to the ruins he skirted them until he came to the massive old chimney that could be seen far out at sea. Then, with the agility of an ape, the creature ran up the side of the chimney as a monkey would run up a stick. At the top he paused for a minute in the moonlight, then lowered himself into the chimney and disappeared from sight. So that was it! I had found the entrance.

CHAPTER THREE

Lair of the Demented Ones

FOR a second I hesitated, my mind a ferment of dread—what awful trap might await me in the labyrinthine burrows of a cult of madmen, half human, half beast? What unimagined horrors might not be found there? But then the thought of Helen and Tom and Doris came to me, and I cursed myself for being a coward.

Walking to the base of the chimney I found a series of steel rungs set into the stone. Whether they had always been there or not I did not know, but I was

up them almost as fast as the creature before me. At the top I found a similar set of rungs on the inside of the chimney, and with a prayer for strength, I started down. I do not know how far I descended into that black well, but it must have been many times the distance of the external portion of the chimney. I had the feeling that I must be reaching the very center of the hill on which the old house had stood when from below I heard a confused sound of rumbling cries and scurrying movements. Proceeding cautiously I found that the chimney suddenly widened into a small room, and as the sounds I had heard before welled increasingly to the tumultuous pitch of hell's confusion, I found my feet suddenly on a cement floor.

It is impossible for me to describe the surge of terror that snapped my nerves and roiled my brain as I stood before that doorway to unimaginable horror. The fetid stench of the beast-men filled the air with a convulsing odor of rotteness, nausea and decay, but worst of all was the unending riot of sound that blasted through the darkness. That chaos was a mind-shattering jumble of gurgling, low-pitched growls, bubbling laughter and chattering screams. And in the background could be heard a chorus of sobs, wails and moans that were feminine in tone but inhuman in expression, as though they formed the minor melody to the ear-splitting major theme of the devil's symphony—a symphony of evil, hate, lust and pain.

As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness I saw a faint glimmer of light at one side of the room in which I stood. I cautiously stepped over to this doorway and saw that a long curving stone hallway ran past it—a hallway made of bricks and cement, dimly lighted at intervals by kerosene lamps. As I stood there hidden in the darkness I heard a storm of noise coming from one end of the corridor, and

then my eyes bulged in my head and my limbs stiffened in horror at the sight that came rushing upon me.

Screaming and waving her arms, a nude young girl came racing down the hall while behind her a hairy beast bounded in pursuit. They were going to pass directly by my doorway, and as they came I saw that the man-beast held a heavy black lash in his hand. He was beating her unmercifully, the vicious whip crashing upon her at every stride, flailing her back, breast and abdomen with cruelly curling strokes. Her slender body was a mass of ugly red welts and bloody cuts where the whip had fallen, and even her neck and face showed frayed and bleeding skin. But as they passed the door and disappeared down the corridor a nauseating knowledge sickened my mind—the girl had not been wailing and screaming in pain but had been *screaming with mad laughter until the tears had run down her face!* I had never seen the girl before, but I knew that even years afterward I would shudder at the memory of her open-mouthed face, wet with the blood of mutilation and streaming with the tears of insane mirth.

And that one scene, when the shock of mind-nausea had passed, snapped my last vestige of mental control. I became a wildman maddened at the thought of Helen being a prisoner in this degraded hell, crazed by the dreadful wonder of what they were doing to her, *or already had done!* With a whining scream of fury and desperation that must have outdone any other wild bellow in this subterranean sink-hole of madness, I leaped into the tunnel and raced down its winding length, no plan in my mind, my only crazed desire to find Helen and save her or die in the attempt.

Suddenly I skidded to a stop as I noticed a series of stout wooden doors along the wall at my right. I threw myself against several of them, but found them

locked; finally I came upon one which was set with iron bars and which swung ponderously inward as I shoved against it. The small stone cell into which I rushed was empty, but opposite the door was a small window through which light shone. I lunged across to the window and gazed through into a great, cavernous room large enough to have contained a whole house, its stone floor a hundred feet below me, its huge expanse brilliantly lighted by hundreds of kerosene lamps. It was a few seconds before my eyes became adjusted to the glare, and when the scene came in focus my jaw relaxed in gaping horror. The utter hellishness of the whole thing made me doubt my faculties, my mind a riot of wonder and revulsion.

AROUND the walls of that enormous dungeon hall were six or eight large cages into which were packed, like animals, between forty and sixty young girls, some of whom were dressed in filmy underwear while the rest were completely nude. But the ultimate horror was not this inhuman spectacle—rather it was in the faces and postures of the girls themselves. I have never seen utter lust and licentiousness expressed in so many ways before—every young girl in those cages was a raving, lust-mad fiend. Their lips drooled with passion and their arms stretched through the bars as they voiced every obscene endearment that came to their inflamed minds. They stretched and curved their lithe young bodies in every imaginable way in an attempt to get the attention of any man in the room. But most soul-wracking of all was to hear their seemingly inhuman sobs and moans of desire. It was then that I understood where the girlish wailing and screaming had come from. With an effort I examined the faces of several of them and saw that they had once been clean young faces, beautiful and pure—but now. . . .

And then my eyes fell on the figures of

my brother Tom and the captain lying apparently unconscious at the other end of the room, their hands and feet roped. I looked about feverishly for a sign of Helen or any of the others in the party but they were not present. Then a scream ripped from my throat as I realized fully the true horror of the whole scene—the shaggy, hair covered beast-men who shambled about the room below, bubbling and chattering and completely indifferent to the hell that surrounded them; the cages of pathetic, naked girls with their crying moans and crazed desires; all my friends prisoners in a giant cave at the center of a mountain on a deserted island; *the awful absence of the only girl I would ever love!* The true horror of Madman's Island came over me then. But my savage yells went unheeded in that madhouse of noise. Then my whole body stiffened and every nerve jumped as I heard a voice behind me.

"So glad you came," it said. "We were expecting you; you will enjoy our entertainment!"

I whirled about and saw a man outside the barred door. *It was Ken Ryder, our cruise companion!*

"Ken!" I gasped. "*In God's name how did you. . . ?*" My question died in my throat as the horrible suspicion I had become a certainty by the look on his face. I hurled myself at the door with a savage growl but it was locked and he stepped out of arm's reach, the key in his hand. I shook the door and hurled myself against it, but it held as though made of iron.

"You fool!" he sneered, his eyes blazing with an unnatural light and his voice ringing with the egotism that comes from a drug-crazed mind. "The whole lot of you are fools; you did whatever I told you." He threw back his head and began to laugh wildly for a few seconds.

"Now that it's all over," he boasted, "you might as well know that it was I

who brought you here. *I suggested the trip; you all accepted. I plotted the course of the ship wherever I wanted; everyone agreed. It was I who put emery powder in the bearings of the engines when we were off the coast of Madman's Island—my island. Of course, when we had no other choice but to land I put up the biggest protest of all; that was to increase the dramatic effect. And don't think the storm had anything to do with it—that was accidental—we would have landed here anyway.*"

I beat on the bars of the door and cursed him in my fury, but he only laughed the louder, glorying in his supremacy.

"Madman's Island," he gloated, "is my greatest achievement. When I needed a hideout for my . . . er, business, I merely revived an old legend, frightened all you fools away with a few murders and atrocities, and then relied on gossip and superstition to do the rest.

"And it worked—no one ever comes here; but if a stray party does show up on occasion they are very easily persuaded to leave immediately by my so-called madmen."

"In the name of sanity," I gasped, "what are they?"

But he paid no attention to my question. "It may interest you to know," he went on in a hard voice, "that my reasons for bringing you here were many. First, I wanted revenge for an old score, as yet unsettled; second, to protect myself I had to prevent a second mistake on the part of your brother; third, the emotion which you fools call 'love' had something to do with it."

At those words a sudden fury came over him and he almost screamed in his unnatural rage. "Do you realize that your brother is a member of the State Department of Florida; that he traced down and wrecked Hilda's illegal business in Florida, sending her to prison for five years;

that he was investigating my traffic in girls between the United States and South America and would have advised the Federal Bureau of Investigation if he got any evidence; that his suspicions were centered about this very island, my perfect hideaway!"

Ryder paused for a few minutes, breathing heavily. Then he went on in a more quiet voice, "Don't you suppose Hilda wanted revenge? Do you think I would let him wreck my business and send me to a Federal penitentiary? We both planned to 'get' him. It wasn't hard; he knew neither of us by sight so we set out to meet him with this cruise the final part of the plan—no one from that cruise would ever be seen again, the ship would be destroyed. That you happened to be with them was an accident: we had to take you along. But on the trip down I became fond of your little Helen. She added pleasure to the plan."

The evil lust in his tone made my blood run cold and I attacked the door again, swearing wildly. Then I tried to beg off, to offer him all the money I had and all the money I could get if he would let us go, but his cold, snake-like eyes merely blazed back at me, emotionless and dead. "You may expect only these favors," he grated. "For yourself, death; for your brother, the agony of watching his wife go slowly mad with lust, and then his own death after seeing her sold to the South American trade; for your Helen, the priceless gift of my love—for a few weeks. These are the last words you will hear from me." Then he spun on his heel and was gone.

With a groan I sagged to the floor, sobbing, my heart suddenly dead within me. *And then I heard Helen's scream!*

CHAPTER FOUR

Passion by the Ounce

I JUMPED for the window, unable to keep from watching, no matter how the sight might torture me. Helen and

Doris were being dragged into the cavernous room by two of the beast-men while the dope-crazed Ryder and his evil assistant, Hilda, stood grinning at the girls' wild struggles and pitiful screams. My heart stopped beating for a second when I saw one of the monsters smash a heavy hand across Helen's mouth and then hurl her on the floor at the feet of Ryder, who roared with laughter. Doris was then thrown beside Helen, and the two monsters went to help their fellows who were busy hauling the huge cages from the room and down a long passageway at one side of the room. More of the beast-men were passing to and from the room. The air was heavy with their foul pungent odor. It stung my nostrils like fire.

"Meet my merchandise," Ryder sneered, bowing to Helen and Doris and pointing to the disappearing cages.

But his words made no difference to the poor things in the cages, for the enticing words and gestures continued with an almost added abandon. Helen and Doris refused to look, keeping their eyes averted from the degrading sight, and this seemed to infuriate the demented man.

"String up these modest fools!" he roared to two of his henchmen, who dragged the girls across the floor to one side of the room.

Paralyzed by the sight, a prayer and a curse came to my lips at the same time, and I saw lovely Doris and beautiful Helen bound to some iron rings that were embedded in the wall. Then, after they were helplessly bound, Ryder strode forward and wildly started to rip their clothes off with a savage, lustful fury, and at length they were naked but for some shreds of underclothing that hung in silken ribbons, cowering before the avid eyes that ran over them.

Ryder stood insolently in front of Helen's nude figure, his cruel eyes suddenly alight with lecherous desire as he gazed at her rose-pink skin and slender

beauty. The firm up-thrust of her breasts and the slim, well-rounded hips that curved down to slender, shapely legs seemed to inflame him. He went over to Helen and caressed her in a lingering, vile way, his hands running slowly over her abdomen, back and thighs, her screams and attempts to avoid him only seeming to delight him the more. I felt the blood pounding in my temples.

"I told your darling husband that you are to be my lover," he sneered, "and so you shall be—for a while. After that, Rio for both of you. Or would you prefer Buenos Aires?"

Helen and Doris both screamed and began to plead with him when he said this, but he only went into convulsions of laughter again. By this time all the cages had been removed from the room and it was easy to hear what was said below, all the creatures having gone with them, Hilda following.

"You won't mind that life," he taunted the girls, "after you've had my special treatment. You saw those girls in the cages. They've been here only two months and look at them now. Do you suppose they'll complain? They'll be the last ones to want to leave that life; it's the only thing they can think of now. And you will be like them soon. Each day you will receive an injection of cantharides in slowly increasing amounts. At the end of two months your minds will be so permanently affected that the use of cantharides will no longer be necessary. Part of your brains will be permanently destroyed. You'll be wild, raving, lust-crazed merchandise for the South American markets, and each one of you will net me between five hundred and a thousand dollars!"

He turned to Helen. "My dear, you shall both receive your first injection from me. Observe first how it works on Doris, and then you shall learn the same wild abandon!"

As he picked up a small sterile syringe from a cabinet on the wall I could hear Helen's trembling, pleading voice whispering my name over and over, "Jim, where are you? Oh, Jim!" At the thought of my utter helplessness, though so close to her, a wave of dizziness swept over me and I was unable to observe the horror in the other room.

Doris' scream seemed to clear my blurred vision. She was struggling in the grasp of Ryder, and for the moment he was caressing her in the vilest manner, his hands running over her body, his lips slavering on her face, the syringe in his hand forgotten. But he soon tired of this, and he grasped her arm, jabbed the hypodermic into it and sent the poison into her system.

Doris' scream ripped through the room as she felt the pain, and at the same time he loosened the cords that bound her arms and she slumped to the floor, sobbing.

But after a minute her sobs stopped and she crouched, naked, at his feet. Then, as curses growled in my throat, her arms slowly went about his legs as he stood leering triumphantly above her. She began to pull herself upward, her nostrils wide with passion and her lips parted in lustful anticipation as she slowly rose to her feet. Finally she stood upright and her naked body curled against his in a shameless way as her lips murmured in his ear. Suddenly anger came over him again and he flung Doris aside with a curse. She fell in a pitiful nude heap on the slimy floor, convulsions and tremors shaking her slim body.

In the same instant he turned his drug-maddened eyes toward the beautiful form of Helen and I knew that her turn had come. At the thought of such a horror coming to her something snapped in my brain. I knew only that I couldn't witness a similar degradation to the one I loved and I determined in that second to

cast myself out of the window and onto the rocky floor. I prayed fervently for the inevitable death that would come from a fall from such a height as I squirmed my body through the small aperture.

AT length I had dragged my body entirely through the window and was precariously perched on the edge of the sill, steeling my nerves for that dizzying drop to death. But in that second of hesitation something at my left caught the corner of my eye—a second window adjacent to mine! *If I could only reach it and swing myself into another room!* I glanced into the room below and saw that I was unobserved by any but my friends, Tom's tear-stained face looking hopefully in my direction.

By squirming cautiously I was able to balance myself on one knee and one arm-hold while reaching out with my other foot and arm for the sill of the next window. Then, with my back to the wall between the two windows and a leg and an arm firmly established on both sills, I gave a quick heave and swung myself in a semi-circle through the intervening space, crashing through the window and onto the floor of the second room. •

In a bound I was to the door—*it was unlocked! I was free!* Like a flash I was into the hallway and racing to find the stairway leading to the chamber of horrors below. I had to get there before the other ape-creatures returned. *I had to rescue Helen!* But in that moment of fierce determination I slammed to a sudden stop and crouched against the wall. *Approaching from the opposite direction was the sound of ponderous, slapping footsteps! A giant beast-man blocked my way!*

Just ahead of me I spied a large steel drum of kerosene used for refilling the lamps which lighted the place, and before the creature saw me I had crouched behind it. Tense, I waited until he should

pass, almost close enough to touch me.

As his shambling, growling figure went by my hiding place my body arrowed forward in a low, vicious tackle, whipped his shaggy legs from under him and crashed his head and body against the floor with a sickening hollow sound. But even after that killing fall his arms flailed at me in a groggy, animal way. Sitting on top of his chest, my hands about his neck, I smashed his head against the stone floor time and again until his struggles stopped and he lay still.

Then, as I was about to leave him, my eyes opened in sudden wonder. During the fight the creature's head had become strangely twisted. I reached down and gripped the hairy, gargoyle head on each side and gave a savage pull—*the entire head came off, and beneath was the head of a man!* The revolting, hairy head was nothing but a shell which was worn over the human head! Quickly my hands fumbled for the fasteners which secured the rest of his hairy pelt to his body, and soon I had him completely stripped of his shaggy hide-covering. As I put the suit on myself, I noticed that the hair of the pelt had been sprayed with some chemical of a revolting odor, but the most amazing discovery of all was the skull-like head-piece—it fitted over the skull exactly, the wearer's eyes looking out through magnifying lenses which made their appearance horrible to any observer, while the nose-valve through which the wearer breathed was fitted with some mechanism that made every breath a weird, bubbling snarl of terrifying noise.

As soon as the suit was adjusted, I started again down the hall, my own gait shambling and awkward because of the weight of the heavy hide. In a moment I came upon a winding stone staircase, chipped from natural rock, and I bounded down it careless of noise, my breath coming in trumpet-like bellows. I hurtled into the large cavernous room where Helen

was, and her scream at my appearance told me how awful I must have looked. The slaver whirled to face me as I charged across the room for him, then caused my heart to sink within me as his hand flashed to his pocket and came up with an ugly automatic. But in my fury and desperation I never halted, even when the roar of the gun thundered through the room, and in that instant a mad feeling of triumph came over me. I stood before him and chattered with an unholy laughing sound. *The bullet from the gun hadn't pierced my hide! The thing was bullet-proof!* And I knew then why our guns on shipboard had been of no use against the charge of the "madmen."

Panic came over to his face as he realized he was caught in his own trap, but before he could move a step I smashed a savage blow into his face that dropped him unconscious six feet away, a crumpled heap on the stone floor. But I knew that the sound of the gun would bring the other horde upon us, so I hastily ripped my headpiece off to reveal my identity to my friends, then jumped to release Helen, Tom and the captain. Tom picked up the unconscious form of his wife and the five of us raced for the winding stairway to the hall above, but even as we made the stairs and panted up we heard the pounding footsteps and the chattering snarls of the beast-men as they swarmed into the chamber in furious pursuit.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pandemonium in Hell

EVEN before we had reached the top of the stairway I knew that the race would be lost. I could make but slow progress in the heavy, unaccustomed hide I was wearing, while Helen was weak from her experiences and Tom was burdened with the weight of Doris. My breath was coming in panting gulps, while the strained white face of Tom

showed the low ebb of his energy, and at every stride the sound of the oncoming horde grew louder and louder. We could only race until they came upon us and then go down fighting to the death for the girls.

But in that moment of absolute despair a sudden hope burst in my mind giving me a new wild courage.

"Helen! Tom!" I screamed. "Hold it! Stop!"

They came to a wondering halt, their faces blank with amazement. We had just passed the kerosene drum in the hall that I had hidden behind before my fight with the beast-man. I was back to it in a few strides, cursing the loss of every precious second, and I crashed it on its side with a back-wrenching heave. It spewed forth a gurgling river of kerosene that flooded the corridor behind us and swashed around the turn we had just passed.

Then, urging the others ahead, I raced another twenty yards to one of the kerosene lamps hanging in the corridor, wrenching it from its socket. At that moment the oncoming pursuers were splashing into the river I had sent upon them. I held the lamp as a bomb for a few seconds until they should be well into the trap, then heaved it directly at the feet of the foremost shaggy forms. Even as the lamp left my hand I saw the form of Hilda among the rout, but there was no other choice for me.

The lamp burst as a bomb might, and immediately afterward a roaring blaze of flame filled the passageway with an explosive detonation. It was a very holocaust of destruction, and the screams of the trapped pursuers ripped the ear drums. Their hairy suits burned like tinder so that they were cremated alive on the spot.

But we didn't remain in the terrific heat which burst down the tunnel; we knew that some may have escaped, and

that there was a second exit from the dungeon kingdom.

How we got to the chimney, up the steel ladder and out into God's air again, I do not remember. But I do remember the clean smell of the breeze and the soft glow of sunrise as we raced down the winding trail to the shore. We spied the yacht when we were half way from the hill, and when we came upon the shore we found a small dory from the yacht waiting for us. It was only a matter of seconds to row to the ship.

Once aboard I shouted to Tom to search for rifles, hoping that they would be effective against the revolver-proof suits that the mob wore, while I sent an SOS for help. The little sending apparatus was forward in the wheelhouse and I frantically sparked the forlorn appeal—dot-dot-dot, dash-dash-dash, dot-dot-dot—and spelled out the only information the captain could give me: "Yacht *Mere-maedchen*, out of Miami, off Madman's Island on Florida coast, hurry."

As I finished, Tom stumbled into the wheelhouse, his face ashen.

"Jim," he gasped, "someone's been aboard and broken open the gun locker. There isn't so much as a single revolver left! Everything's been dumped into the sea."

Tom and I gazed at each other silently, not needing to speak our thoughts—the ship defenceless, motors disabled, a murderous crew with weapons descending upon us. And during that silent moment a bullet crashed into the wheelhouse and splintered through the wall. The mad rout was rowing out to the ship!

TOM and I ducked and crawled back into the interior cabin to join the captain and the girls. It was needless to tell them what was happening for as we came in another shot ripped through the superstructure. It seemed a needless tragedy to lose everything now, after what we

had been through. At the thought of the girls again being lost to us, this time for good, I felt my nails draw blood from the palms of my hands. Then, suddenly, a wild, almost hopeless scheme occurred to me. It was worth a try.

I crept into the wheelhouse and then suddenly threw myself through the companionway and flat on the deck outside. A rifle bullet screamed against the steel side of the vessel and ricocheted away with a whining cry. The height of the scupper wall was enough to protect my body, prostrate on the deck.

I wriggled forward to the prow of the vessel and found what I had hoped would be there—a harpoon gun used in deep sea fishing! It was a wicked looking thing, built like a small cannon, that could throw a harpoon faster than the eye could follow and with the force of a high-powered rifle.

Peering over the side I saw the drug-crazed Ryder and one of his fur-clad henchmen rowing out to the ship, and they were not more than thirty feet away when I swung the gun on them. At that moment Ken, who sat in the back of the dory while his fur-clad ally rowed, came forward on his knees to take another shot with the rifle. As he did so, I let the gun go and the steel shaft streaked at them like a bolt of lightning, ripped through the pistol-proof hide like a meat skewer through a sardine, and tore on through Ken's chest and back, dragging the heavy harpoon line after it so that both of them were pierced as by a gigantic needle and thread.

The head of the beast-men was the first to find his voice and the scream that blasted the morning silence will remain in my ears forever. He slowly stood erect, his screech of agony wrenching higher and higher as he did so, while his arms flailed the air in a helpless dance of agony. Then he flung himself over the side of the boat, dragging the apparently paralyzed

henchman after him. Neither returned to the surface. The water was calm and clear.

Shortly afterward a dirty tramp steamer appeared and anchored off the island; evidently she was the ship to transport the slavers' girls to South America. But she had been at anchor no more than a minute or so when a sturdy Coast Guard cutter bolted over the horizon in answer to our SOS.

And that was the end of the horror for us, except what we relive in memory. We found that most of the foul creatures who had chased us in the dungeons had been burned to death by our trap, and those few who weren't had been taken prisoner by the Government men. As for the members of our crew, one had been killed during the attack on our ship, the second I had found dead at the wheel, murdered by the beast-men, while the third was found a prisoner in the caverns and set

free, thanking God for his timely rescue.

The girls from the house of horror on the island were taken to Government hospitals for treatment, while Doris recovered as soon as her period of coma was at an end.

As we were towed into port by the Coast Guard—and how good Miami looked to us then!—Helen came up to me and took my hand.


"Jim, dear," she said softly, "when we started on this vacation we said it would be a second honeymoon. But, my dear, I . . . I much preferred the first one."

I took her in my arms then; I didn't care about the others who were present and smiling at us.

"We'll return to the first one, darling," I told her. "And we'll continue that one for the rest of our lives. That's a promise!"

And up to the present my promise has been kept with ease.

THE END



DEATH TRAP FOR THE PAROLE KILLER!
By Wyatt Blasingame

Never before had John Smith known such black despair. If he refused the killer's demands, Marion Dark—whose lips had been pressed to his only a few short hours before—would surely die. And if he accepted: he would be walking into a trap from which there could be no escape! But the Parole Killer had never refused a challenge. . . . That's the beginning of this thrilling new full length adventure of the Parole Killer. Don't miss it!

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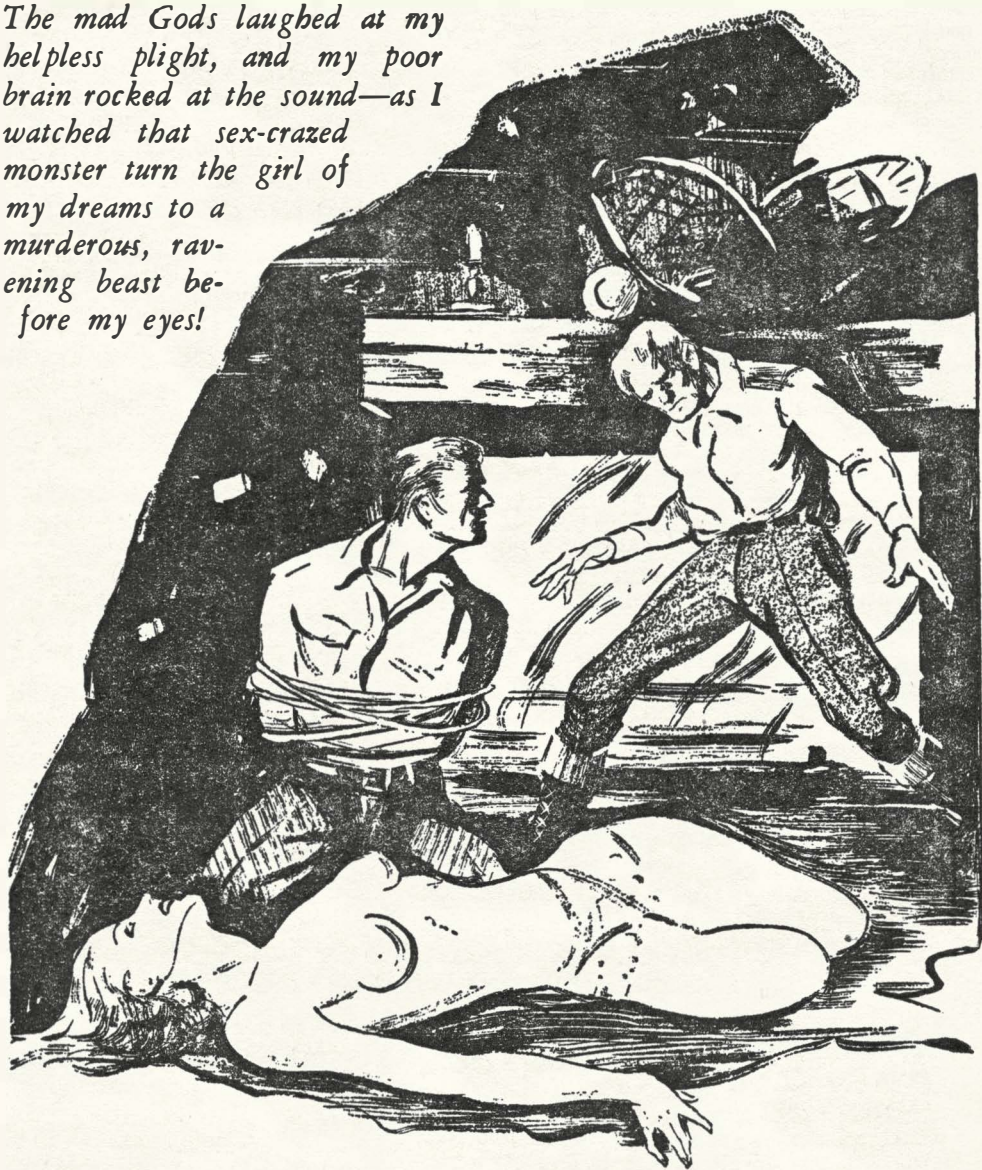


Fighting back the nausea that overwhelmed me, I blinked my eyes until the mist cleared from in front of them—until I could see clearly those gleaming-eyed, bloody-lipped demons drawing the skin down from the shapley thigh, the knee, the lower leg of a woman! *That was my Peggy*—there on that table! That appalling horror that could only twitch and scream and flinch away from the sting of fresh air on tortured flesh and muscle! Read the rest of this feature-length novel by Wayne Rogers. You'll find your flesh crawling and your hair standing on end. Don't miss the next grand issue of TERROR TALES.

TERROR TALES
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CAT-WOMAN by Ray Cummings

The mad Gods laughed at my helpless plight, and my poor brain rocked at the sound—as I watched that sex-crazed monster turn the girl of my dreams to a murderous, ravaging beast before my eyes!



THE setting sun gleamed a yellow-red on the frozen snow-fields. I was awkward with snow-shoes, and the little road over which I trudged was almost obliterated by the snow. The distant mountains, here in the northern reaches of Quebec, were purpling, with night settling like a shroud upon their white mantles.

I had come some two miles from the sprawling mountain town which was the northern railway terminus of the line up from Trois Rivieres, and already I was beginning to wonder if I had been too adventurous trudging out here alone. The purpling night seemed suddenly sinister. The houses and fences had long since petered out, and a turned ankle would leave

mè helpless and alone in this waste.

Then ahead, nestled against a naked frozen crag, I saw a little cabin, with light winking in its windows. As I came to its almost buried fence, the figure of a man showed suddenly standing there—a young fellow, tall, straight, bare-headed with longish black hair and swarthy face, his graceful figure clad in high leather boots, woolen trousers tucked into them, and a short, vivid plaid mackinaw of traditional *habitant* fashion.

He gazed at me curiously as I ploughed toward him.

"I'm looking for Jeanne La Rue," I said. "She lives up this way with her guardian — a Mr. Franklin — Arthur Franklin?"

He gestured. "Down in Frozen Canyon—it is not far." He suddenly gripped my arm. "Why you come up to see Miss La Rue?"

I stared. But there seemed no reason for offense. "My name is Bob Blake," I said. "What's yours?"

"Paul Beaumont. Why you come to see Jeanne?"

Suspicion suddenly was in his voice. In the gloom of the gathering night, I saw that he was about my own age.

"Well," I said smilingly, "I mean her no harm, if that's what's worrying you." Certainly there was nothing particularly secret about my mission. "I'm a lawyer," I added. "Maybe I have good news for her."

"What?" he demanded.

My smile was supposed to be quizzical, but suddenly I was aware of his tenseness. His hand slowly shifted toward his pocket.

"The news," I said, "is her business. She and Mr. Franklin—they may want to go to New York. I'm going back on the midnight train."

He sucked in his breath. "You take Jeanne away from here?"

"Maybe," I said. "But don't worry, she'll doubtless come back."

His face, with the smouldering look of his undoubted Indian ancestry, was a somber mask. Again he gestured. "The entrance to Frozen Canyon is there—you be careful—the night comes—"

"Thanks. You said it isn't far?"

"There is a—thing that roams this snow by night—the moon, she will come up almost soon—"

I could feel my smile fading as I stared at him and he added somberly into the silence.

"This snow by moonlight—it is no place for a stranger like you—"

He suddenly turned, waded through the snow of his little yard and banged his cabin door upon me.

Things roaming in snowy moonlight. . . I own that there was a shiver within me not caused by the frosty air as again I trudged forward. The entrance to Frozen Canyon was obvious—a wild, broken defile that led in a sweeping curve downward.

Frozen Canyon! The origin of its name too, was obvious, for it seemed as though here at the bottom of this narrow cleft all the frozen air of the uplands had settled. I could feel the temperature lowering with my descent. And suddenly down here it was night. Somberly purple, its shadows closing about me, filling me with quick unreasoning terror.

Presently in the gloom I saw the lights of a house—a big, two-story log-cabin affair, set into a hollow of the frozen canyon-wall. At the front door I knocked.

There was silence; then a murmur of voices; then footsteps. The big front door was piled with snow at its threshold. It swung inward; lamplight flooded me, and I crossed the threshold . . .

IF ONLY I had known then what a flood of horror was pent up here within these walls!

My unheralded visit startled Arthur J. Franklin, and his young ward Jeanne La

Rue. But my mission to them was interesting—possibly good news; and they made me welcome. The girl, after I had introduced myself, went into the adjacent kitchen to prepare supper. In the big, central living room, with all the atmosphere of a wealthy sportsman's hunting lodge, I sat before a huge hearth where a log fire was burning, and told my errand to Franklin.

"I'm connected with Barrett, Barrett and James, a law firm in New York," I said. "We had a cable from London—a commission to locate Miss La Rue and her guardian."

"We are the ones you seek," he smiled. He was a tall, thin, grave-faced man of perhaps forty, with longish grey-black hair. He was dressed roughly, but there was about him the aspect of a man of culture, wealth perhaps, who in his northern retreat did not care how he looked. He ran a lean hand over his unshaven face. "A London law firm," he echoed. "Have we done something wrong, that they are after us?"

"Quite the contrary," I assured him. "An Aunt of Miss La Rue's has died—"

I had no details myself—merely brief cabled information from the London firm. The girl herself appeared in the doorway.

"An Aunt of mine died?" She looked puzzled. And so did Franklin. Then he said,

"Why, you did tell me once you had an Aunt Agatha somewhere over there, Jean. I hope she died wealthy," he added to me.

I had no information as to that. I knew only that Jeanne La Rue, of half French heritage, had been born up here in this region; educated in Montreal; and, left an orphan and penniless. Two years ago, when she was sixteen, this dilettante Arthur Franklin, an English-Canadian friend of her father's, had undertaken to care for her. The London law-firm wanted to locate her now. Her signature was needed to settle an estate. The papers were on

their way by steamship from London.

"You will be paid," I assured them. "Will you come to New York? You will need proof of identity which my employers will help you secure. My firm cannot send the papers up here—they want to interview Miss La Rue."

"We will come," he said.

"And I am instructed to ask—Miss La Rue is still unmarried?"

He nodded. "Of course."

At the kitchen doorway the girl appeared again, standing in the yellow light gazing at me with beautiful, heavy-lidded eyes. And she echoed,

"Unmarried? Oh yes—unmarried—"

It came upon an expiration of her breath—an intonation, her whole look oddly weird, as though here were some strange frustration—

And she added cynically, "There is no man good enough for me—who knows?"

Under my gaze she turned away. I saw Franklin staring at us.

"She never tries to make herself charming," he said. "That comes from being the only woman in a desolation like this. But if another woman were here—" He grinned. "Then you would see her claws come out like a cat—"

"Like a cat!" From the kitchen doorway the girl echoed it—murmured it involuntarily as though a dam of horror within her had burst.

Franklin was staring, suddenly tensed. And upon me fear rushed with vague flooding thoughts, with the half-breed's words echoing in my mind . . . "A thing that roams this snow by night." What Thing did he mean, that roamed the snow?

"Oh I say now," Franklin was protesting. But the girl, with a queer quivering look upon her, had turned back into the kitchen. And Franklin added, "She's angry, Blake." Was he trying to cover up the girl's strange reaction to his chance words? Was he trying to hide from me

his own horror? He laughed. "Every woman is a feline at heart, eh Blake?"

"Why—why maybe so," I stammered.

I HAVE not pictured this Jeanne La Rue, but all the while that I had been sitting chatting with Franklin, certainly all my interest went to the girl. She was clad in laced high boots, a longish woolen skirt, a woolen blouse, high at the throat with a colorful neck-scarf. But it seemed as though the clothes belied her. Undeniably she was the most strangely beautiful girl I had ever seen. Her face was oval, with classic Latin features; luscious red lips, with a natural color—a fullness and moistness amazingly sensuous. Her eyes were a somber midnight blue. Her hair was a great braided pile upon her head—black hair already shot through with a premature grey.

But beyond all that it was her body that was amazing. She was small, slim, yet rounded with a full maturity. And it seemed as though the rough, picturesque clothes were a mere mask—as though under them, this girl's body were bursting to be free. The curves of her hips—the heavy coarse skirt could not mask them. The swelling of her youthful breasts seemed incongruous to the rough, tight blouse. Breasts palpitating to be freed, as though here were a young woman's body—like an animal chained—straining at a leash—a giant feline . . .

The thing stirred me against all reason, so that even thinking of her made my heart pound . . .

"Supper is about ready, Jeanne?"

Her somber contralto voice floated in from the kitchen. "Yes—it is ready."

The tall, thin, long-haired Franklin stood at a mirror tying his necktie. He smiled at me. "We get careless up here. . . You must change from those clothes, Jeanne—we have a visitor—"

He went to the kitchen, spoke to her; and came back. "I'll set the table," he

said. "Won't you help me, Mr. Blake."

He drew a table before the huge hearth; tossed a cloth over it, and began setting it with silver and napery. Then Jeanne came from the kitchen, starting toward a rustic inner stairway up the side of the living room, to where overhead there was a balcony, with bedrooms opening from it. And as she passed close to where I was standing, again horror struck me. She was so close that her blouse brushed me; an exotic, redolence of perfume from her—so incongruous to those rough outdoor garments—drifted to my nostrils.

"Don't go—tonight," she murmured. "I want you—need you—tonight."

It would have struck at me with a wholly normal, answering rush of youthful passion, save for that second as she lingered and our gazes crossed. In her eyes there was something horrible. Passion? Lust? Terror? All of those perhaps, blended into something so unnamably weird that it set me shuddering.

And then she murmured, "He—he called me a cat. That is a lie. I am—just a normal woman. And I—want you to a normal woman. And I—want you to

I did not answer; and she glided past me, up the stairs, soundlessly with a lithe and youthful tread . . . lithe as an animal . . . soundless as a cat . . .

Franklin seemed to have noticed nothing. I helped him set the table. And presently Jeanne came down from her bedroom upstairs.

"Ah, that's better, Jeanne," he said. "We shall at least feel that we are civilized up here."

One may become accustomed to anything. I wondered if it was that the older Franklin, friend of this girl's dead father, had long since ceased to be amazed at the singular beauty of his ward. She was clad now in a long, filmy pale-grey evening dress. It swept the floor. It clung to the voluptuous lines of her thighs; it billowed over the high fullness of her bosom. In

the back it was low, exposing an expanse of flesh, smooth as pink-white marble, under which little muscles at her shoulders rippled as she raised her arms.

A WHOLLY conventional dinner dress. Any debutante could have worn it—and some would not have drawn a man's second glance. But upon this girl—devoid of cosmetics, with her black-grey hair piled high on her head, the dress still seemed something that had no right to be there. Less confining than her woolen blouse and skirt—more revealing, so that under it one might discern more of that quivering body—like an animal straining at its leash—trying to burst into freedom . . .

"Oh—" I murmured. For that second I must have stood staring like a country lout. Franklin had gone into the kitchen, informally to serve the food. The girl's slumbrous eyes were upon me. Her moist, lusciously red lips were parted in a half-smile.

"We are—still civilized, Mr. Blake," she murmured. "You will—stay tonight and go to New York with us tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said impulsively. "Why not?"

Was it only woman's passion in her eyes as she scanned my six foot, youthful figure? A girl, penned up here in the wilds, with a thin, almost delicate-looking older man, friend of her father? . . . And suddenly I thought of that Pierre Beaumont—handsome, youthful, half-breed Indian who lived so close here. Resentment of me had come upon him the moment he saw me. His fear, that I would take Jeanne La Rue away from here . . . And then his warning of something that roamed the snow in the moonlight . . .

What grewsome mystery was here? The horror of it was mingling now with the lust in the girl's dark eyes; it trembled upon her moist red lips, where suddenly her pink tongue licked out like a cat's . . . And it mingled with my own stirrings of

passion so that I could not tell whether this girl attracted me—or was a thing that I should loathe and fear . . .

There may have been an atmosphere of joviality at the supper. Certainly Franklin strove to create it. But for me, there was only the consciousness of the silent Jeanne—her silence seeming, like her body, to palpitate—

What trivial subjects Franklin and I talked of I cannot remember. Then I mentioned having met Beaumont, their young neighbor.

"Oh," Franklin said. "He's all right—he thinks he's in love with Jeanne. That's a joke."

Fatuous guardian indeed. Jeanne's eyes lifted, with her gaze upon my face.

"He is a very nice boy," she said.

It had been arranged with Franklin now that I was to stay the night—my bedroom—between his and Jeanne's, at the top of the staircase. My suitcase was in the village—but he would lend me things of his own.

We were presently finished the meal, and with an apron over her dress, Jeanne had gone to the kitchen. Franklin had produced wine and he and I were drinking it as we sat by the hearth.

"That fellow Beaumont said something queer," I remarked casually. "Something—roams this snow by moonlight. Now what the devil—"

Vaguely I had thought that Franklin would smile; but his thin face, with its four day growth of iron-grey whiskers went suddenly grim.

"A wildcat," he said. "As it happens I saw the damn thing night before last. Couldn't get near enough to shoot at it. A thing like a big dog. Maybe it's a freak animal—grey fur, shot with black—a cat, or a dog—or giant silver fox—could you cross them and get something new?"

Fur black and grey. A giant animal, prowling in the moonlight. Several people

had seen it . . . No one had been able to shoot it. . . .

"Last night," Franklin was saying, "we're at the full of the moon now—the damned thing prowled nearer here—a neighbor a quarter of a mile north beyond the canyon—and it killed his infant daughter. Little girl two years old—"

I sucked in my breath. "Somebody saw it do that?"

"Yes, the father. That is, he thinks what he saw was an animal. God knows, it must have been the same wildcat that I saw. The time was just after sundown. The little girl had wandered near the woods back of the house. The man saw something pounce—all in a second it had killed the child, ripped and tore it—and dashed away with the body. It was snowing then. The trail filled up, you couldn't follow it."

I heard myself murmuring, "And today there's been no trail?"

"No. But if it comes out tonight there are plenty of men from the village ready to track it. A clear moonlight night—"

A full moon had risen now above the little canyon walls and was shining down through the windows of the cabin. They were drenched with frosted silver. . . .

And suddenly as I was staring, a dark blob showed out there. A man, outside, peering in at us.

I gripped Franklin. "Look—" I muttered.

"Well, by God—" He jumped to his feet, stood gazing. The blob vanished. Together we rushed to the window, flung it up . . . The pallid, congealed canyon disclosed a darting figure, vanishing down a curve of the trail. Pierre Beaumont, the Indian.

"Well, I'm damned," Franklin ejaculated. "What's the idea? He never did anything like that before."

We said nothing to Jeanne. For the rest of that brief evening Franklin and I sat by the fire smoking and sipping his

light Canadian wine. Jeanne, for the most part, seemed busy in other parts of the house. To me it was an effort, conversing with this middle-aged, matter of fact Franklin. The silences, when we sat smoking, pausing in our talk, screamed with things unnamable. Every shadow masked unmentionable things. The frozen moonlight outside our windows was frightening.

And I found too, that a tense expectancy was upon me. The girl's murmured words that I stay the night—her throaty, purring contralto dinning in my head as though still I were hearing her words: "I want you—need you tonight—"

ON THE broad mantle over the fire-side, with a stuffed moosehead above it, there stood a small bronze statue. It was wholly familiar; all my life, in common little casts of bronze or clay, I had seen it. And seen photographs of its original. It was the replica of a huge, wolf-like animal, suckling two little infants—the lost Roman babes, who were nurtured by the female wolf.

I chanced to be staring at it; and Franklin followed my gaze. And abruptly he murmured.

"You're no fool, Blake. Are you thinking anything about that bauble?"

I gazed at him in startled surprise. "What do you mean?"

He took the little statue down and toyed with it in his lap. "Romulus and Remus," he said. "Suckled by an animal. You know I've often wondered—nobody ever told us what sort of children Romulus and Remus grew up to be."

His laugh had a queer nervous quiver in it; he uncoiled his lean length from his easy chair and replaced the statue.

Blankly I stared at him. "You mean—"

"Not a damned thing," he said. "You can't imbibe the qualities of an animal from its milk." Again he laughed. "That wouldn't be very scientific, would it?"

We'd all end up by being like cows."

I tried to smile.

Why had he introduced so weird a topic? He stared at me with a queer grimace. "But there is something else, Blake—" His voice lowered; he flashed a look toward the kitchen. "God knows," he said. "I can't imagine why I should talk to you like this—except that one gets pent-up, being here alone . . . I found, about a week ago, a supposedly scientific article in an old magazine—up in Jeanne's room—"

I could only nod with a silent expectancy to prompt him when he paused. His laugh again had a queer quaver in it.

"Supposed to be a new discovery of science," he said. "Some Austrian physician—a theory—"

"A theory?"

"Of course—God knows it must be only a theory. A claim that by some simple distillation of the glands of animals—a medicine can be made to carry into the human system qualities of the animal from which the glands were taken. A permanent change. A human—with an animal's emotional freedom. An animal's unrestrained lust."

Still I could only stare. "And—and then?" I murmured.

"Then—but it's all rot, Blake. I guess I want you to tell me it's all rot. But there were formulae—instances of experimentation. I am no scientist. The damned thing spoke of *hormones* of the blood—little things that in our brain direct what we call *personality*. Little things that make us what we inherently are—that influence our instincts, impulses and thus direct our human behavior. It said that the *hormone* is a physical particle—nourished by our blood—capable of being nourished by the *gland-hormones* of an animal."

His soft voice trailed with a monotone as though submerged by his own horror.

"It was in a French magazine, Blake,"

he repeated. "God knows how it got into this house. I—I burned the damned thing. It said the distillation—the making of the medicine would not be difficult, even for a layman. It gave the process—detailed by that accursed Austrian physician—"

His voice died into silence. He was staring, not at me, but into the fire . . . And suddenly my horror burst loose. "You mean," I murmured, "Jeanne—"

God knows I had not meant to say it; and as though I had struck him, Franklin whirled in his chair.

"Jeanne? Good God, no! Why, how dare—" Then he suddenly relaxed. "I'm sorry," he said. His puff of anger was gone. "I was—thinking of that damned roaming thing that mangled the body last night." He smiled weakly. "And this fellow Beaumont—there is a queerness about him when you get to know him—"

Through the opening doorway of the kitchen came the sound of a crash—a gong-like clatter, with tinkling of breaking glass. We sprang to our feet. Jeanne was standing across the kitchen; at her feet was a brass tray and two broken glasses.

"Oh," she said. "How clumsy of me—did I startle you?"

Franklin drew me back to the living room hearth. "We've been talking rot," he said. "Forget it."

"Of course—of course," I murmured.

Then presently the evening was finished. The wine, the fire, and my long trip up from New York, seemed suddenly to make me drowsy. But in my bedroom, at the head of the stairs, abruptly it seemed that momentarily all my senses were alert. Franklin and Jeanne had accompanied me.

"You'll be comfortable," Franklin said.

"Oh—quite," I agreed.

He turned, passed Jeanne's room along the little balcony and went into his own room. And left her standing with me.

Her gaze crossed with mine lingeringly.

"Goodnight," she murmured, and abruptly swung away.

I CLOSED my door. It was a big, heavy panelled affair. At its top, level with my face, there was a foot-square grating to admit heat from the room below. I drew the curtain over the grating, but I did not undress. The room had a single window, ten or fifteen feet above ground . . . The moonlight drenched the little empty frozen canyon; everything out there was motionless and silent—congealed and pallid, like death.

I blew out my small oil lamp. From the canyon, it seemed that the death-like palor sprang into my silent bedroom. On the bed I lay down, pulled the blankets over me. With what expectancy was I lying here? I recall that within me was a slow seething passion. But the sudden, unnatural drowsiness came again, so that I closed my eyes and almost in that instant, I must have been wafted into insensibility. . . .

I awakened with the knowledge that I was struggling—fighting with myself to awaken. It was a long fight, but I was frightened and desperately I fought to force myself into consciousness.

Then at last I found myself sitting up in bed, bathed in cold sweat, with my head roaring. What had happened to me? Had I been normally asleep? Or was this a drug from which now I had forced myself into consciousness?

The house was silent. In my bedroom, the pattern of moonlight on the floor had shifted. I looked at my watch. Quarter past twelve . . .

My room was warm; and now, with my full senses returned I heard, in the silence, the brisk crackle of the log fire in the living room. The little curtain at the grillwork of my bedroom door quivered with the rising heat.

Then it seemed that I heard a footstep

downstairs. I went to my door, turned the knob. The door was locked on the outside. I was locked in!

I drew the curtain; and through the grill I could see a portion of the room downstairs—the huge fireplace, the broad hearth and a segment beyond it to the opposite wall, and the outer door to the right. But the nearer half of the scene was cut off by the balcony which was close before me.

No one seemed to be down there, but there had been a change. The fire had been built up; its flames leaped merrily—the only light in the room, so that the scene danced and swayed with shadows and yellow-red glow. Before the hearth now a huge fur rug of grey-white animal skin lay stretched. Beside it there was a little pile of silver fox furs—neck-pieces of the type one might buy in any fashionable shop. They were long-tailed, and with the little fox-heads realistically mounted. The fire-light gleamed on the artificial animal eyes.

And in the pile there were other skins—a huge cat—its round face had an open mouth, with needle teeth showing—

For that instant, breathlessly I stared. And I saw that back from the hearth, diagonally facing the fire, a full-length mirror had been set upright . . . The footstep abruptly sounded again. There seemed a rustle under the balcony beyond my vision—a whispering chattering voice . . . Then from beneath me, Jeanne appeared, moving toward the hearth, where in the center of the rug she stopped and faced the mirror.

She was fully dressed, in the filmy evening gown which she had worn at supper. And in the dimness of the room now, with the firelight partly behind her, abruptly she was almost in silhouette. Her dress, those hampering garments so incongruous to her vibrant young body, suddenly now were shadowy, with her undergarments outlined, and like a wraith

beneath. There were the curving lines of the woman herself—the body that seemed so fettered—so unnaturally leashed—

For a moment she stood gazing at herself in the mirror, with uplifted arms that raised the mounds of her youthful breasts to make them press against the hampering dress . . . And I caught a glimpse of her red-lipped face, painted by the firelight. Upon it there was a contortion indescribable—parted lips as her breath panted between them—and eyes that regarded her palpitating body almost with terror. . . .

Then as though mechanically, with her gaze in the mirror watching her every movement, her raised hands were twitching at the shoulder straps of her dress. It fell to her waist, with her young breasts at last set free and the glory of her slim arms and shoulders and back like shimmering satin with the firelight dancing upon it.

FOR just an instant she postured, swaying, so that across the background of my tumultuous mind I had the sudden thought that she would crumple and fall. But she steadied herself. Her hips swayed as though to a soundless rhythm. The dress fell into a little heap at her feet. Her fingers, trembling with haste now, stripped off the satin lingerie—her satin mules—the long silk stockings. . . .

And wholly nude, with the great masses of her strangely grey-black hair tumbling down over her glorious young body, she fell to the fur rug—fell twitching, with the pile of fox-furs and the cat-skin pulled in a tangled mass upon her.

Dimly I was aware that I was pulling frantically at the door-knob. But it was futile. And then again I stood transfixed, for I saw that she had not fallen, but had thrown herself down—rolling, palpitating in the furs . . . Staring at herself in the mirror as she postured with raised limbs. . . .

A sudden sweep of grisly horror was

upon me. What ghastly thing was this, that now suddenly, all in these few seconds it had passed all bounds even of human lust and was a thing gruesomely animal. No longer like a woman, she rolled and grovelled in the furs; stretched and twisted, and rubbed the catskin upon her limbs and thighs; hugged it to her quivering breasts . . . God—I saw then where she had drawn the teeth of the cat across her side and a little red line of welling blood showed crimson. . . .

Madness . . . A thing of horror unnamable . . . And the horror was upon her beautiful face—her eyes bursting with it, even while she gloried in the heat of the fire and the softness of the skins against her flesh . . . Her red mouth, with her breath panting, seemed almost bursting with a scream. . . .

Did I hear a jibbering murmur and a rustle under the balcony? In all the chaos that was upon me, I hardly noticed it. But the girl twisted and turned her face toward the balcony with a weird agonized gaze. Then, prone, face down she hitched herself to the mirror—raised her head, stared at her contorted face that was mirrored so close to her eyes—

Perhaps I pounded on the oaken panels of my door. I may have cried out. Then I had turned, rushed to the window, raised its sash. There was a frozen trellis. I was down it in a moment, tumbling the last eight feet into the deep drifted snow. Then I ran to the front door. Would it be locked? It yielded to my frantic shove and swung inward . . .

To this day I cannot gauge with what sweep of emotion I burst into that gruesome, firelit room. With horror? With a wild desire to rescue this girl from whatever grisly spell was upon her? Or was I dominated only by my own overpowering desire?

Her palpitating nude body, enveloped by the masses of her grey-black hair, still lay in the pile of furs. Frantically I rushed

to her, threw myself down beside her. . .

"Jeanne—Good God, what's the matter with you?"

Fiercely her arms went around me. "You! You—came!" With all her strength she clung, pressing herself against me. "I love you. I—want you—No! Good God—what did I say? Be careful—you—you—"

In that chaotic second she seemed hysterical—shoving at me—stammering with panting breath and with words of warning that choked in her throat.

Just one priceless second. Then I was aware of a shadow over us—a scream bursting from Jeanne. There was a roaring crash in my head as something struck it; the world burst into a catalysmic flash of light as I fell unconscious. . . .

Blankness. . . . Then slowly, with my senses one by one recovering, I became aware that I was lashed with ropes—my ankles and wrists bound. I was lying on the living room floor, over by the door, which I had left open as I burst in and which now was still open behind me.

Upon the hearth, in the pile of furs, the nude form of Jeanne still lay. And there was another figure there now. Franklin—crouching before her—his hands pawing her with obscene caresses. And his gloating, lustful voice sounded:

"Why—you were marvellous, Jeanne—I had no need to send a bullet into you, did I? Not that I would actually have done it. Oh no! I would have come and prompted you—"

SO IT was he who had been under the balcony, crouching in a corner of the room, with a gun upon Jeanne so that in terror, she had stripped herself and postured for his lustful gaze! But was that all that had urged her? Surely I had seen upon her far more than mere terror of death, that had made her grovel nude in those furs! Surely more than terror had made her glorious young body struggle

with the freedom of a lusting animal.

But she was only terrorized now—a dominating sweep of terror so that under his lascivious touch she shrank away with a hand pressed against her mouth.

"You—must rest for a minute, Jeanne—then we will let it sweep us gain. Oh I have waited so long for this! You never suspected it of me, did you, little Jeanne? Well, I had to wait. But tonight, everything got just right and set me loose. Money that I've waited for—"

He dashed back his longish black hair with a gesture. "We won't talk of that. We'll talk of us. This thrill—this thing for which anyone would give his life. You felt it, Jeanne. I could see it in your eyes—on all your wonderful little body I could see it. All the human bonds of restraint—all gone. The animal in us, Jeanne—set free. Rest now—you'll feel it again in a moment. Both of us—"

His caressing hand touched her, so that her scream came: "Bob—Bob Blake—help me—"

I was bathed in the cold sweat of weakness, straining with futile strength at the rope that tied my ankles and lashed my wrists behind me. Then despite my dry thickened tongue, a cry burst from me.

"You—damned fiend—let her alone—"

He hitched back from her, jumped to his feet and stood over me. His hair fell partly over his thin, pointed face as he bent down. His thin bloodless lips parted in a grinning snarl as he regarded me.

"So? You can talk? You can see what Jeanne and I are doing? Well, that's all right—that might even give us a greater thrill—"

God, that I was so helpless!

"And I fooled you too, didn't I, Blake?" he was saying. "You thought I was so fatuous—a fellow who knew nothing of the glory of this girl. Why, for two years I've been waiting. That rich maiden aunt of hers in England I've known all about her. I've had an agent over there. Half

of her million dollar fortune is left to Jeanne. Provided Jeanne was unmarried! Well, she is still unmarried. That's why I have kept her up here isolated—while I waited for that old woman to die. And Jeanne didn't know the real meaning of the papers she signed for me, three months ago when she came of age! All her fortune to come to me. She doesn't have to sign your papers in New York. That's a technicality. I can prove her identity, and mine, at my leisure. My agent made that clear to me—Jeanne's death—after the death of her aunt—and all the money is mine."

Gloating, loathsome fiend. But he was a clever scheming criminal for all that—playing for half a million dollars.

"I did see a giant wildcat around here," he was saying. "And others have seen it. It did kill and mangle that baby. What luck for me! Don't you see how easy it will be to explain Jeanne's death? When she and I—have our thrill—I will leave her down the canyon where they will think the wildcat mangled her. I drugged you tonight, Blake. You seemed like a nice fellow. I made you think there was something queer about Jeanne—so you wouldn't think there was anything queer about me. I would have let you escape—but I didn't give you enough of the sleeping drug. So now you will lie mangled with Jeanne. Like that fellow Beaumont who came snooping around here to spy upon me. He lies out there now—crimsoned—dead—"

"You—you" But I could only mumble with thickened tongue, and twist my body as pantingly I strained at the ropes. And he snarled,

"Lie and watch. You have so little time to live you might as well let yourself be thrilled."

Jeanne had come toward us, hitching her white body on the floor with a vague terrorized desire to help me. She screamed as Franklin pounced upon her, and flung

her brutally back to the soft fur rugs.

"Now—you are rested, little Jeanne. Don't be frightened. I feel it now—the wild freedom—"

Had his hand gone to his mouth as he talked to me? Vaguely I seemed to remember it. And now suddenly he was groveling on the rug, reaching for the cowering numbed girl . . . What ghastly transformation was this? The firelight gleamed upon his head and face—his pointed, long-nosed face with its grey stubble of hair—his thin bluish lips snarling, baring his teeth—his grey-black hair long to the ears was flung back as he tossed his head—

And suddenly he seemed no longer human—the head and face of an animal—

And his voice had changed, with a throaty snarl in it, mingling with his triumphant lust. "I have studied the animals, Jeanne. Like this—the wildcat mating—"

His gibbering eerie catcall rang gruesome . . . "Doesn't that thrill you, Jeanne? Don't draw away from me—hold me—you—your fingernails could scratch me, Jeanne—like a wildcat scratching—"

In terror, as he pawed at her, I could see her hand gouging at his face.

Then suddenly behind me there was a sound. A snarling purr. I rolled to face the open doorway . . .

AT THE threshold, the pallid moonlight gleamed on a huge grey-white shape. The giant wildcat. It stood in the snow with humped back, lashing its furry sides with its tail. And in its mouth was a grisly frozen, crimson thing—the mangled body of a little girl, the ragged torn flesh hanging in stiffened ribbons of bloody plup . . .

I must have gasped some horrified cry. For a second or two the huge grey cat stood peering, with its tail lashing. Then it dropped the horrible frozen infant, and with a bound leaped over me and into the room.

My cry mingled with Jeanne's scream. Then Franklin turned and saw the giant cat, which his gibbering call doubtless had attracted.

"Why—" he gasped, "why—good God—"

He tried to scramble to his feet. With fatal error, in a panic he seized a chair, flung it. Nimbly the huge snarling cat avoided the missile. And then it pounced, its teeth and great claws with lightning speed ripping and tearing at Franklin as its weight bore him backward.

The firelit room for those brief moments was a chaos of horror. The snarling, spitting, hissing cries of the giant cat—Franklin's oaths—then his screams of terror and pain . . . The thuds of the two bodies as they threshed about the room . . . Now they were near the door. I had rolled and gotten past them. On the rug, Jeanne was gripping me. And she moaned,

"Oh—dear God—"

"Jeanne! Untie me, quickly!"

Franklin's screams were agonized now, choked with the blood in his throat. His clothes were ribbons; his flesh was crimsoned—the room was a shambles.

And as at last the ropes under Jeanne's shaking fingers fell from me, I sprang to my feet. The cat, with lashing tail, was struggling to drag Franklin's body over the threshold. He was only twitching now—but his spasms rolled him out to the snow, with the cat still upon him.

I leaped and closed and barred the door. And back on the rug I crouched, holding Jeanne's nude shuddering body against me.

"You're all right now, Jeanne dear—"

"Yes—all right now—"

Outside the door there was only the retreating sound of the spitting, snarling cat as it dragged at the crimsoned, mangled thing that had been Franklin—dragging it away through the snow of Frozen Canyon.

Then here in the sudden silence of the

lamplit living room as I crouched, holding Jeanne against me, suddenly she gave a cry.

"Bob! He—that fiend—he forced me to take some medicine tonight! Forced it on me two or three times. Oh Bob, is that what I'm feeling now as you hold me? It—it won't leave that horrible taint in me, will it, Bob?"

THAT night of horror in Frozen Canyon was nearly a year ago. Jeanne and I are married now. My wife has that glorious, vibrant young body that nature gave her. But certainly she is normal. We never talk of Franklin and those ghastly things of Frozen Canyon. I try to tell myself that Franklin was a scheming criminal, and a vicious fiend half mad with his lust. We found no strange drugs in the house that night. Jeanne had never seen the French magazine he mentioned. God knows I have never tried to verify if such an article was ever published.

I tell myself that there was no such magazine. That all Franklin's talk was the product of his deranged mind. He did nothing to my glorious vibrant young wife, I try to tell myself, that could leave a taint in her. And yet—sometimes when at night in our bedroom she disrobes, gazing at her beauty in our bedroom mirror, the look on her face fills me with a vague unreasoning dread. My very reason is caught and gripped in the grinding maw of an awful fear. For you see, sometimes a strange lethargy comes over her, and she takes little naps during the day—*cat-naps*, she calls them. And at night, when I awake, I see her *eyes*—gleaming green and yellow in the dark—unwinking, steady—*luminous!* Or is it that my mind is tottering under its staggering burden I think that I shall know the answer soon—for I *feel* her watchful eyes upon me—following me—waiting, like . . . Merciful God! Like a cat watches a mouse!

When the Banshee Calls--

Would Kathleen O'Doul hear the sound of the Banshee's wail to summon her back to life—or was she doomed to remain in that grewsome crypt with the dead who would not die!



by Wayne Rogers

Do You Want to Know how a Corpse Feels, Mouldering in the Grave? Read This Daring Novelette of Weird, Bizarre Menace!

CHAPTER ONE

Wail of Death

THE bright sunshine of an early summer morning bathed Forty-second Street as Kathleen O'Doul hurried toward the Grand Central Station—and yet she shivered and a queer electric



tingle crept over her body. For her the sun had no warmth, no penetrating power. Something had shut her away from it, isolated her; something that grotesquely changed everything around her and made the commonplace appear strange and distorted—something that clutched at her with cold, chilling fingers.

Desperately she strove to deny it—but she knew that that something was the fear of death, the lowering threat of doom. Death that, yesterday, had seemed so remote, so far from her world. Now it was at her elbow; had taken possession of her every thought

As she took her seat in the train that would speed her home to Scarsborough she felt as if she were riding straight into the embrace of its icy, lethal arms.

Strive as she would, she could not shake that depressing chill from her; could not drive out of her mind the memory of her Uncle Danton's terrifying words as they had come to her quaveringly over the telephone.

"I want you back home before I go, Kathleen," he had pleaded. "I want to see you again before I die. 'Twon't be long now, I know that; my hours are numbered. The banshee has come for me—and I didn't see nor hear her. That means my time has come—"

The banshees—well Kathleen knew the old Irish legend that had been a terrifying family tradition all through her childhood. Often she had listened, wide-eyed, to tales of those fearsome messengers from the other world who supposedly appear to herald the approach of death for members of Ireland's noble families. Others, ran the belief, could see the weird creatures and hear their terrible cries—only to the victim was their presence unknown, neither seen nor heard.

Family tradition had it that all of the O'Douls for countless generations had been summoned in that manner. In prosaic, matter-of-fact New York, far away from her ancestral home and its associations, it had been easy to laugh at the story which once had filled her with such alarm—and yet, now that the dread summons actually had come, now that her uncle was convinced he was doomed, all of the old terror crept back into her brain; all of the instilled belief and fear that had been bred into the very marrow of her bones.

The banshee had come for Uncle Danton, and with it came a chilling reminder of the other half of the O'Doul tradition; when a male member of the family died, a female soon must follow him!

That was nonsense, too, Kathleen had

scoffed. Coincidence, perhaps; but nothing more. Yet in her own lifetime she had seen the tradition fulfilled twice. When her Uncle Gerald had died, his wife, an invalid, had followed him within a week but Margaret O'Doul had been on the verge of death anyway, and the shock of her husband's passing had been too much for her. Again, when Kathleen's own father had died, he had been followed less than a month later by her older sister, Evelyn, who had been thrown by a horse. But, again, Evelyn always had been a reckless rider and many had predicted such an end to her horsemanship.

Coincidence; nothing more—and yet, as she stared unseeingly out of the train window, Kathleen could not help remembering that she and her Uncle Danton were the last of the O'Douls. If Danton O'Doul died, she would be the only female member of the family left to follow him to the grave

Kathleen felt a clammy chill shuddering through her—felt it clutching at her heart, stealing into her brain. Frantically she tried to shake off the ghastly feeling of calamity, of unholy evil, that obsessed her. Determinedly she struggled to change her thoughts, to force them into other channels—but death seemed to be all around her; seemed to be whispering to her from every side.

And then resolutely she closed her consciousness to the voices; buried herself in her own depressing thoughts until the train pulled into her station.

FOR a moment the familiar scene cheered her, flooded her with pleasant memories—but they soon vanished as she looked around for old Michael Flaherty, the family chauffeur, and didn't find him. That was strange. Old Michael should have been on hand waiting for her with the limousine. Certainly someone should be there to meet her and drive her the nine miles to Scarsborough.

Uneasily she paced the length of the platform—and suddenly froze in mid-stride. Instead of Michael's familiar, wrinkled old countenance she had caught a glimpse of a face that stabbed into her heart and brought back all the persistent premonitions of disaster that had been weighing down upon her; a glimpse of eyes that stared into hers searchingly—and then were gone as another man approached her, smiling and with both hands extended.

"Sorry I didn't get here quite in time, Kathleen," he apologized as he took her bags. "That old bus of mine isn't what it used to be."

Kathleen looked up into the handsome, dark-eyed face of Paul Gillespie, her uncle's secretary—but she hardly saw him as the startling vision of that other briefly glimpsed face filled her mind's eye. That face—the face of George Leland, the man who had been Danton O'Doul's secretary before Gillespie. That was nearly five years ago.

The last time she had seen George Leland she had been held close in his arms, had heard his voice huskily whispering words of love into her ear, had felt his lips crushing eagerly against her own—and two days after that her uncle had discovered the amazing inroads his secretary had made on the O'Doul estate. Had discovered that George Leland's speculations amounted to thousands of dollars!

Leland had gone to the penitentiary for that; had been sent away swearing vengeance against Danton O'Doul for having him arrested and prosecuted. And now he was back—unless her eyes had deceived her in that brief glimpse. But she knew that they hadn't; the terrifying thrill that had coursed all through her body, down to the very tips of her fingers, was no mistake. It was the instinctive reaction which nobody but George Leland, the thief who had betrayed his trust, ever had been able to arouse in her

"But," she heard herself saying to Gillespie, "where is Michael? Why did you have to come for me, Paul?"

Gillespie's face clouded as he held open the door of his coupe.

"Michael is—er—dead," he told her as gently as possible.

"Dead!" The word dropped from her lips almost soundlessly as she stared at him—and again she felt the icy fingers at the back of her neck.

"He was killed a week ago driving back from the Junction," Gillespie nodded. "Must have dozed at the wheel, as well as we've been able to figure. He missed the turn at the top of Slater's Hill—went right through the railing and over the edge—"

Old Michael was dead! Kathleen's stunned brain tried to grasp that; and the chill mantle of doom seemed to fold more closely around her. Michael, the old man who had been like one of the family all her life, was gone—and now her uncle. . . .

"What is this nonsense about Uncle Danton?" she burst out impetuously as Gillespie started the car. "What happened, Paul?"

Gillespie's eyes were fixed on the road. He kept them glued to the windshield as he answered, and his voice was troubled and uncertain.

"I wish I could be sure it is just nonsense," he said, almost to himself, "but the trouble is, I was there—I saw it myself; *and he didn't*. Two days ago—we had been down in the village all afternoon at a session of court. It was dusk when we started back to the house, and your uncle invited four or five friends to come up for a drink. We were almost to the house—just turning into the grounds—when a weird looking woman stepped out of the shrubbery and stood at the edge of the path. At least I thought it was a woman—and so did the others.

"She was almost naked—and her body shone with a queer translucent light.

Something about her gave me the creeps—something about the eerie way her limbs gleamed through the cloth. I remember I stopped and gaped at her—and then she let out a scream that made my hair stand on end. The most frightful wail I ever heard—and then she was gone, just as if she had been a motion picture projection that suddenly was switched off.

"I was still standing there and gaping dumbly when I caught your uncle's eyes upon me. He had walked right ahead as if nothing had happened—didn't turn around until he realized that he was alone; that the rest of us were all standing there like graven images. But the minute he saw our faces he seemed to know.

"Before I could stop him, Jim Armstrong began to babble something about spooks, and then the others were all talking, all comparing what they had seen. Your uncle just stood there and looked at them, listening to every word—and I could see his face getting paler and paler.

"It was the banshee,' he said quietly. 'I was looking right ahead of me, and I saw and heard nothing. That means my time has come. Like my ancestors, the banshee has come for me.'

"I tried to argue him out of that; tried to tell him that we must have imagined we saw the thing—that perhaps it was some little trick of lighting that deceived us. But he knew better. He just smiled and said that he was content—and since then he has been making preparations for his death. It's uncanny, Kathleen—watching a man who seems to be in perfectly sound health getting ready to die—"

"It is nonsense!" Kathleen insisted desperately. "Nothing but superstitious nonsense that went out of fashion a hundred years ago. There are no banshees—"

But at that moment she caught Paul Gillespie's eyes upon her; warm, admiring eyes that were filled with concern—and the uneasy doubt that was mirrored in them wormed its way into her brain and

filled her with nameless apprehension . . .

DANTON O'DOUL was there in the doorway of the big house when she stepped out of the car and sprang up the front steps. His arms were open for her and held her close while he patted her shoulder and kissed her hair. Great God! He was trying to comfort her—that was it; he was treating her as if it were her doom that had been pronounced by the banshee apparition!

And in that moment she knew why! Danton O'Doul was an old man; he was no longer afraid of death—but he did not want her to die; and he knew that she was doomed with him!

The fear of death was more inescapable than ever; seemed to be pressing in upon her from all sides of the gloomy old mansion—and there was no denying the change in her uncle. A thin but sturdy old man, he had aged alarmingly. All the color was gone from his cheeks; even the flesh had fallen away so that there were sunken, cavernous hollows beneath the deep sockets of his eyes. All the virility seemed to have left him. His hands trembled, and even his touch was cold and lifeless—the touch of a corpse!

Later, at dinner, Kathleen thought the ghastly meal would never end, but at last it was over and she was sitting in the great, old-fashioned living room that she had known since childhood. That old, familiar room—and yet even it was indefinitely changed; as if the touch of death already was upon it, transforming it, estranging it.

"You *mustn't* give way to such thoughts, Uncle Dan," she pleaded, as she sat in a chair next to his and patted his hand. "You are making yourself ill—making yourself believe impossible things that can't be true—"

Danton O'Doul's slow, patient smile stopped her.

"You are young, Kathleen lass," he

shook his head gently. "There are things you do not know—things you have not seen. When you are older you will understand about the banshee, even though you may never see them yourself. I saw them twice. When they came for your father—a dozen of us witnessed that manifestation, but Denis would not believe us; he had not seen and he had not heard—"

Suddenly his words were drowned out by an eerie, blood-curdling scream from outdoors—a terrible, haunting wail that seemed to come through the window panes as if they were not there!

Kathleen felt her blood run cold, felt her cheeks draining, an invisible hand clutching at her throat. Numb with terror, her gaze flashed to where Paul Gillespie sat, his face taut, his eyes wide with horror, staring fixedly out of the window. Her eyes followed his—and she could feel them widening, could feel them fairly popping out of her head!

There, in the deeper shadow of a clump of tall bushes near the house, stood the figure of a woman—of a well matured girl. A girl with a supernaturally pallid face that was framed in a halo of bright red hair; a girl whose luminescent limbs gleamed weirdly through the transparent, veil-like garments that were her only clothing. Her arms were outstretched, luscious pointed breasts, quivering and taut, and from her open lips came a repetition of that wailing scream that was like the last despairing moan of a lost soul.

The banshee—come to sound the doom of the O'Doul!

"And then there was your grandfather, my father," Danton O'Doul went on softly, in that reminiscent, far-off tone. "He was standing out there on the porch with his family gathered around him when the banshee stepped out of the bushes—"

He was staring right at that glowing creature—and *he did not see her!* His

voice had not faltered, had not raised—*because he did not hear that frightful scream!*

Danton O'Doul was entirely oblivious to his unearthly visitant — until he glimpsed their set faces, read the terror in their eyes. Without a word he arose and walked to the window, stood there looking out into the deepening darkness. Then he turned back to them and shook his head resignedly—and Kathleen knew that he had seen and heard nothing!

"He is doomed!" something screamed madly in her brain. "And you are doomed with him!"

CHAPTER TWO

Ghoul's Visit

"I AM an old man," Danton O'Doul said quietly as he sank back into his seat. "My time has come, and I am satisfied, but—" a flash of concern lit up the depths of his dark blue eyes "you are the last of the O'Douls, Kathleen—and I do not want our line to die. I want it to go on—after I am gone.

"You know the tradition. You know that you will be in great danger after I have passed on. But there is hope for you—hope until the banshee comes for you. There is hope—but you will need constant watching and protection. You will need a man at your side, Kathleen—someone to look after you. That is why I want to see you married before I go. I want to see you married to Paul. He is a good man and he loves you—and when I know that you are his wife I can die in peace."

His voice had sunk to little more than a whisper; was almost drowned by the sound of Kathleen's sobs as she knelt beside him and buried her face in his lap. She had been afraid that he might make that request; had feared it the moment she heard his plea over the telephone.

Not that she disliked Paul Gillespie. She did not; on the other hand, she was fond of him and believed that in time she might learn to love him—but at that moment she did not hold for him the feeling a bride should have for her husband. And yet—to refuse a dying man's request . . .

Gillespie was standing at the window and Kathleen felt his eyes upon her, caught their signal and knew that he wanted to speak to her. Excusing herself for a moment, she followed him into the hallway.

"I know, Kathleen," he said simply, understandingly, as he took her hand in his and looked deep into her eyes. "I know just how you feel—about me. But I'm afraid he may be right; I'm afraid he may not be with us much longer—and we can make him happy by humoring him. I love you, Kathleen," he drew her close, and she could feel his heart pounding with the stress of his emotion. "I hope I am going to be able to make you love me—but, until that time comes, our marriage need be only a formality—"

This was so different from the romance and culminating marriage she had dreamed of; so different from the way it should be. Involuntarily her lips opened and words hesitated on them—words of gentle refusal; but at that moment Danton O'Doul stood framed in the living room doorway, silhouetted against the light so that he looked like a specter—a specter with great, pleading eyes.

Hardly knowing that she did so, Kathleen heard herself murmuring a hesitant acceptance; felt herself in Paul's arms as his lips pressed against her forehead; saw the beaming delight that lit up her uncle's face.

After that the thing was out of her hands. Danton O'Doul and Paul made all the preparations, and within an hour the wedding party was gathered before a justice of the peace in the center of the living room. A travesty of a wedding ceremony,

Kathleen shuddered, as she stood beside the man who was to be her husband. A ceremony witnessed only by her uncle, who was convinced that he was on the brink of the grave; by old Theresa Flaherty, Michael's widow, whose white face and unrelieved black dress made her look like one of death's hand-maidens; and by Cecelia, the Flahertys' adopted daughter, garbed like Theresa in funeral black.

Kathleen surprised a look of deep pity in the girl's eyes. Cecelia knew the O'Doul traditions, and nothing could dispel her belief in them. She knew that Danton O'Doul was doomed—and that this unwilling bride would soon follow him to the grave!

Somehow Kathleen went through that ceremony. Somehow it was over and her husband was kissing her, the others were congratulating her, and then, as she stood at the foot of the stairs, her Uncle Danton gave her his blessing—a blessing that sounded oddly like a farewell.

With his curious words still ringing in her ears, she went up to her room—to throw herself on the bed, and to think, think, think. To wonder about that unearthly banshee apparition; to recall that momentary glimpse of George Leland's face; to puzzle over old Michael's death.

The death of the old retainer had depressed Danton O'Doul far more than his own approaching demise. For years the Flahertys had served the O'Douls; for generations they had taken care of the O'Douls from birth until death—and now, old Danton had mourned, there would be nobody to "do the last service" for him.

Kathleen knew what that "last service" was—and she buried her face in the pillow as she shivered away from the ghastly thought. . . .

PAUL GILLESPIE was tapping on her door when she awoke in the morning—and one glance at his pale, stricken face was sufficient to tell her his message. Sor-

rowfully he nodded his head in confirmation as she sprang out of bed and tried to voice the question that was on her lips.

"He died during the night," he said softly. "Peacefully. Nobody heard him. Nobody knew until Cecelia found him a little while ago."

Like an automaton she dressed and went downstairs to gaze at the ashen-white face; to listen while the local physician gave his verdict.

"Heart failure," he decreed—but the tone of his voice betrayed that he had reached that diagnosis for want of a better. "Strange," he shook his head puzzledly; "there was nothing the matter with him. He just gave up living—just died because he knew that he would—"

And again the weird old family tradition clutched Kathleen in its terrifying grip and confronted her with this demonstration of its supernatural potency. Danton O'Doul had died because he knew that he would die—under that dismaying declaration her skepticism wavered; but she *would not* let herself believe that there was anything supernatural about it!

Psychology, she assured herself feverishly, that was the answer. Her uncle had been an old man, and he simply had hurried his death by his psychological reaction to this thing he believed so firmly. . . .

A hundred times that day she was thankful for Paul Gillespie. He took care of everything; summoned the local undertaker and supervised the funeral preparations and was a source of comfort and strength to her. At last the slow-dragging daylight hours were past and she went to bed for the night—only to toss fitfully and wake up half a dozen times.

One of those times she sat bolt upright in bed, certain that she had heard a noise downstairs—a queer noise that seemed to stand her hair on end and bead her limbs with chilling perspiration. There it was again—the hardly distinguishable sound of slithering footsteps!

Kathleen listened tensely—and grisly horror clutched at her throat. Her uncle's corpse was down there alone in the living room—unembalmed, as he had directed and as was traditional with her family.

The O'Douls for countless generations had insisted on going to their Maker just as they died; but the fear of awakening after burial had been strong in them ever since one of their ancestors was disinterred and discovered to have died horribly in his grave after coming back to life in his coffin. So strong was that fear that it had become traditional that, before being buried, a dagger must be thrust through the heart of every O'Doul corpse.

That was to have been old Michael's "last service"—but Michael was dead; and now there was somebody downstairs there in the room with the corpse!

Quaking with terror, and yet unable to hold herself back, Kathleen got out of bed and started down the stairs on noiselessly padding bare feet. Fearfully, up from the darkness below, came those horror-fraught sounds—and then, midway down the broad flight, she froze where she stood as the still night was ripped by a shrill shriek and a rasping gurgle; by an appalling commotion down there in the room of death!

Some inner power over which she had no control tore her free of the coma which gripped her; sent her racing downstairs on legs that threatened to buckle beneath her; sent her bursting into the candle-lighted death room—to find old Theresa stretched out on the floor beside the open casket with a sharp kitchen knife plunged deep into her bosom!

Beside her knelt Cecelia, moaning helplessly and trying futilely to staunch the stream of blood that was dyeing the old woman's dress and pooling on the floor. That much Kathleen glimpsed in a startled split-second—and in the same instant her eyes flashed to the partly open French window; flashed in time to catch sight of

a face that was barely distinguishable in the dim light penetrating the panes, and then was gone. The tight-lipped, cold-eyed face of George Leland!

"He did it—George Leland—he killed her!" Cecelia moaned as she rocked back and forth above the corpse of her foster-mother. "We heard a noise in here, so we came to see what it was—and we caught him just as he was going to stick a knife into Mr. O'Doul's body. Mother tried to stop him—and he plunged the knife into her instead. Before I could grab him he ran across the room and jumped out of the window."

Reeling with horror, Kathleen turned to the corpse of her uncle—and saw that the coat and vest had been opened, the shirt unbuttoned and drawn aside to bare the still breast for the ghoul's knife!

CHAPTER THREE

The Grave Awaits

THE next day the body of Danton O'Doul was carried to the big, crumbling old family burial vault and placed on a stone shelf with the moldering bones of his ancestors—while Sheriff Ott scoured the countryside for George Leland. The last glimmer of hope that she and Cecilia might have been wrong died in Kathleen's breast when the officer verified Leland's presence in the county.

"He's out on parole," Ott growled. "Feller saw him over in the Junction day before yesterday—headin' this way. So there's not much doubt about who killed Mrs. Flaherty. He's hidin' out somewhere in the hills, but we'll corner him pretty quick."

In vain Kathleen tried to understand the ghastly scene she had interrupted; tried to understand why George Leland should want to vent his spite on an insensate corpse. She shuddered away from the picture in horror—though, at the same

time, she admitted to herself that she did not want to see Leland captured and brought back to face a murder trial. . . .

Ten days passed without news of the fugitive; ten days during which she was kept busy with legal formalities in connection with taking over the wealthy O'Doul estate. There was no will to be probated; the estate automatically reverted to her on her uncle's death, under the terms of her father's will, which had given Danton the use of the property during his lifetime, to be held intact in trust for Kathleen.

Again Paul Gillespie proved an invaluable aid and companion, an understanding and thoughtful wooer rather than a husband. He did his utmost to take her mind off the tragedies that had descended upon the house, but Kathleen had little opportunity to forget them.

Pitying eyes surrounded her, pity that sent tentacles of horror worming into her brain; reminding her again that Danton O'Doul was dead and that it was the way of her family that when a male died a female must shortly follow him into the Great Beyond. . . .

Although they tried to veil it from her, Kathleen read that thought in the eyes of Paul and Cecelia; sensed it in the watchful care they lavished upon her. It was as if death hovered all around her and could be averted only by their eternal vigilance. Death—it became a mania with her; a devastating fear that she sensed but only half-understood.

And then one night that fear became concrete.

She and Paul were alone in the living room; were going through a sheaf of papers that were piled up on the desk that had been her uncle's.

"This," Paul explained as he unfolded a crisply crackling document, "is an option Danton took on the Four Corners property near Waring Junction. If, as he thought, the new state road comes through

there the property should more than—”

In mid-sentence his words died, withered away in a catch of breath that was a half-strangled gasp. Quickly Kathleen's glance darted at him, and she saw that he was staring, petrified, out of the window.

Instantly her glance followed his—but through the broad pane she could see nothing but the blackness of the night. Cold terror stole into her heart as she realized what that must mean—and then her hair stood on end and she leaped from her chair as a shrill scream pealed through the room to the accompaniment of smashing china!

Standing in the doorway, shaking with terror, was Cecelia, the tea tray she had been carrying tumbled on the floor in front of her, while she too stared, goggle-eyed, out into that empty darkness!

“It's nothing, Kathleen,” Paul was the first to recover himself. “I'm getting jumpy as a cat. Cecelia almost popped me out of my skin with that crash.” He tried desperately to pretend that he had seen nothing.

“I'm sorry,” Cecelia took her cue, as she evaded Kathleen's eyes and started to pick up the broken shards of china with trembling fingers. “I must have slipped—must have tripped in the doorway—”

But Kathleen knew that they were lying. She knew beyond question that Paul had been startled into silence before Cecelia dropped her tray; knew that the maid's frightened scream had come before the crash. They were deliberately trying to deceive her—but when, half an hour later, Paul kissed her good night his arms betrayed him. They enfolded her with a new tenderness, with a half-frantic clutch that whispered stark terror into her brain!

They had seen something out there in the night. Either they had seen George Leland prowling in the darkness—or they had seen the banshee! No matter how indistinct Leland might have been, she should have been able to distinguish him

if he was visible to both Paul and Cecelia—but if it was the banshee, and she had neither seen nor heard. . . .

THAT eerie terror gnawed at Kathleen continually during the next few days. The banshee had come for her—she knew that, even though Paul would not admit it; even though he laughed at her fears. The banshee had come for her—just as the unearthly summons had come to all of the O'Douls; just as it had come to her Uncle Danton. The banshee had come—and the cold breath of death was already on her cheek. . . .

Kathleen knew that—and then she found proof indisputable!

“A walk in the hills will do you good,” Paul had suggested that morning. “Suppose we go on a camera hunt?”

His prescription had proved excellent, and Kathleen had all but forgotten her omnipresent fear as they clambered up and down hillsides, in and out of glades, seeking exceptional views and lovely groupings. By noon they had stumbled onto an idyllic little glen with a romantic looking cave mouth at its farther end.

“There's a made-to-order setting!” Paul exulted, as he started down the hillside, one hand helping Kathleen, the other holding the camera ready. “A photographer's dream!”

But suddenly she felt his fingers close spasmodically on her arm; glanced up and saw that he was staring, wide-eyed, at the cave mouth—staring at nothing that she could see!

“What is it, Paul?” Terror stabbed into her brain and spewed the startled words from her paling lips. “What is it?”

She did not need his answer; she knew already what he had seen—knew despite his valiant attempts at denial. Instantly he realized that she had caught him, and did his best to cover up his slip—but Kathleen wasn't listening to his protestations. She was staring down at the camera in

his hand; was staring at the snapshot lever. She was sure that it had been up, and now it was down. In his startled surprise he had snapped a picture—snapped a picture with the lens pointed straight at that cave mouth where he had seen something that had been invisible to her!

Before he suspected her purpose she took the camera from him and wound the rest of the film until it was all past the lens, all on the spool ready to be developed.

"I know, Paul," she said quietly. "I know what you saw—and I want to be with you this evening when you develop this film."

Gillespie tried to protest, tried to talk her out of the idea, but she was determined, and she was at his side when he stepped into the little darkroom he had equipped next to the living room.

In the dimly red-lighted cubbyhole they bent over the tanks in which he washed the film; watched the milk-white of the gelatin fading as the negative came through—and then stared at the unmistakable outline of a luminous female figure in front of the cave! An almost naked girl with her mouth wide open to send forth an ululating cry!

The banshee, standing there in the cave entrance!

Shaking with fear, Kathleen groped for the door and stumbled out into the lighted living room—the room that soon would be her death chamber when her lifeless body was stretched out there in its coffin!

Paul did his best to comfort her. His arms were around her, holding her close; his lips were caressing her hair, were pressed against her cheek—but it seemed that nothing could bring the warmth of life back into her trembling body.

Even when she had gone to bed, she lay there shivering; lay tossing endlessly, staring with sleepless eyes into the fearsome darkness—staring at something in-

credible; staring unblinkingly, until her burning eyeballs seemed ready to pop out of their sockets!

The dim rectangle of the bedroom's French window held her eyes like a magnet. Across the balcony in front of that window a slow-moving figure was making its way, clearly revealed in the light of the rising moon. God, it couldn't be true—but that figure—that figure was her dead Uncle Danton, whose disintegrating body lay on a stone shelf in the family burial vault!

Kathleen could not move a muscle, and yet she felt her knees drawing up; felt her feet drawing back, pushing her, frantically pushing her away from that ungodly sight! She felt her mouth open, felt her lips stretch wide. Endlessly they seemed to remain that way, distended but soundless—and then a piercing scream blasted from them, and she knew that her nerves were snapping; that she was giving way to wild hysteria!

In the midst of that mad outburst the door of her room flew open and Paul rushed in. For a moment he stood staring at her; then he whirled and was gone—to return immediately with a pitcher of water.

Waves of blackness—the blackness of death?—were sweeping over her as she fought frantically to cling to consciousness. But she was slipping, was going down—and Paul was there at her side, was propping her in his arms as she went under.

He was still there, was holding a glass to her lips when she blinked her eyes open again and gasped for air. Feverishly she gulped the liquid he gave her, but the relief it brought her was only temporary; the chill of death was upon her, was overcoming her. She could feel it stealing through her limbs, numbing her extremities, freezing her.

She was dying—and as her heavy lidded eyes closed she had the horrible

impression that Paul was gloating down at her; that hellish satisfaction was unmistakable on his triumphant face!

CHAPTER FOUR

Sleep of Death

WHEN Kathleen knew anything again, she was lying there in bed—was lying there strangely still. The darkness had faded, and in its place had come a great quietness; a hushed quiet that faintly resounded in her ears. An awful quiet that was appalling in its intensity; that she *must* break—even if only by the sound of her own voice.

But when she tried to speak her lips would not move. Her tongue was a dead thing. Her arms, her legs, her fingers, her toes, even her eyes—frantically she tried one after the other, but not a muscle would move. She was paralyzed, helpless from head to foot. *She was dead!* But, no—she could not be, for she was conscious of what was going on around her. She could hear—could hear footsteps coming into the room; could hear voices. And she could feel—could feel hands moving over her body; could feel a cold instrument pressed to her chest over her heart.

“She is dead,” a voice pronounced beside her bed—the doctor’s voice, she recognized. “Heart failure,” he said slowly, thoughtfully. “Her heart must have been weak—unable to stand the shock and the ordeal of the past two weeks.”

But she *wasn't* dead! She should be dead, she knew, but she *wasn't!* Couldn't they see that? Couldn't they see that she was alive; was striving to speak to them and tell them so?

Helplessly she had to lie there and hear them leave; had to lie there in the terrible stillness for what seemed an endless time—until another man entered the room and closed the door behind him.

The elderly Scarsborough undertaker—she recognized him as he turned her head so that she could catch a glimpse of his face from beneath her almost closed eyelids—and shuddering terror coursed through her; filled her agonized mind with horrors of every description. She was alive, but he thought that she was dead—and God only knew what terrible things he would do to her, thinking her nothing more than a corpse!

Surely he must feel how her muscles were quivering, how her nerves were tingling with dread!

But he felt nothing. He stripped her nightgown from her body—and was totally unconscious of the blushes she thought must be crimsoning her flesh as she lay nude before him. Quite as oblivious to her shame as to her terror, he went about the task of dressing her, of lifting her and placing her in the casket which he and his assistant brought into the room.

They were carrying her downstairs, were setting up her casket in the living room—and tomorrow they would take her out for burial. Tomorrow they would entomb her alive—would seal her up in the burial vault with her uncle's decomposing body! Would leave her there, to die horribly—to suffocate or to starve to death when she came out of this coma; to waste away after days and days of frightful, hopeless agony!

The way her head was tilted back on the silken pillow in the casket she could see through a narrow opening between the lids of both eyes. Could see Paul, her husband, come into the room and stand beside the coffin; could see him looking down into her face as his hand molded her breast and felt for a heart-beat beneath it.

There was no heart-beat—but surely he must feel something! Surely he must see that she was alive!

But he didn't. He turned away and left her alone—left her to count the long hours of the day, the endless hours of the

night, until the sun came up again to usher in her burial day!

That morning was a ghastly nightmare; so incredibly horrible that she felt she must go insane—must leap out of the casket a ranting, raving maniac. To lie there and watch the villagers come in and file past her bier, to hear a prayer being offered over her before the top of the casket was closed to shut her into eternal darkness, to feel the coffin being lifted and carried out, carried up the hill to the O'Doul burial vault—to lie there and be able to do nothing; that was mental agony unendurable!

NOW they were at the door of the vault. She could hear the heavy metal hasp grating as the door was unlocked. The grave was open to receive her—this was her last chance! She *must* find her voice; *must* speak before it was too late—but her frenzied efforts were useless. She felt the jar and the grating as the casket was set down on one of the shelves and then wedged into place. She heard the departing footsteps of the mourners and pallbearers—and then the heavy door clanged shut with awful finality.

The world had turned away from her; had left her there to die horribly in her imprisoning casket. . . .

Time meant nothing to her after that—an eternity of deathly stillness that was unbroken by the tiniest fragment of sound. An eternity of pitch blackness and hushed quiet that stabbed at her eyeballs and rang soundlessly against her eardrums—an endless aeon of time that was broken at last by a faint scraping and crunching; by the slither of what must be footsteps!

Kathleen strained to hear until it seemed her head must burst with effort. The slithering sound was coming nearer and nearer; seemed to be right beside her. It was! Now she could hear the tread of footsteps; footsteps that came closer and

seemed to stop right beside her casket. She could hear fingers fumbling with the screws that secured the top of the casket; heard it opening and saw the yellow light of a lantern that stood in a flower niche beside her.

Light that outlined the face of her deliverer. The face of Paul, her husband—but in that moment of overwhelming relief a new terror suddenly convulsed her. Paul held something long and shiny in his hand. A dagger! He did not know that she was alive. He thought that she was dead—and he had come to the tomb to do the "last service" for her—to plunge that gleaming dagger through her heart!

Merciful God! Was there no way to stop him—no way to reach his consciousness before that deadly point sheathed itself in her breast?

Frantically she strained to move a muscle, to twitch an eyelid, to do anything that might give him a hint that she was alive, as he opened the front of her dress and bared her breasts. With maddening deliberation his fingers felt over her skin—but he did not understand! He was seeking a spot for the fatal thrust—and then he had found it, just under the white hillock of her left breast!

The sharp point stabbed into her flesh, hesitated a moment—and then the dagger drove home!

But instead of the death she expected, it brought her life! Life that ran through her veins and filled them with a myriad of sharpstinging needles; life that made her limbs tingle and that gradually restored control of her paralysis-shackled muscles!

PAUL'S arms were around her as she stirred, as she moved a hand, raised an arm. He helped her as she struggled to sit up in the casket. Naked to the waist, she cowered there in his embrace as he pressed her close to him and covered her lips with avid kisses.

Only then did she see that the “dagger” with which he had stabbed her was a hypodermic needle, a needle loaded with some drug that had freed her from the trance that had held her immobile.

“Darling—Kathleen darling,” Paul was whispering into her ear. “You have been denying me too long, but now you *are* my darling. Now you are mine—all mine—”

His breath was hot on her cheek as his lips again sought hers; his eyes were flaming with wild desire. His hands were stealing over her body, beneath her breasts, down her naked sides, as he started to lift her out of the casket—but at that moment a wild-eyed man leaped out of the darkness of the doorway and sprang at him!

Like a raging demon the attacker whipped his arms around Paul and flung him away from the casket; flung him to the opposite side of the tomb—and then, before he could recover, the stranger came charging in again with his head down and flailing fists that battered Paul back mercilessly.

Kathleen heard her husband curse, heard him cry out in terror as those brutal fists pummeled his face. She saw him rally desperately and fling himself forward—but a wicked blow that seemed to snap his spine caught him under the jaw and crashed him off his feet; lifted him clear of the floor and slammed him, senseless, against the opposite row of shelves.

Panting and glaring at his fallen victim, the conqueror stood beside the casket—where Kathleen, too stupefied to move, sat staring at his grimy face. George Leland! Amazement and terror rioted through her as she recognized him—but he was gripping her arm, was panting something that didn’t make sense. Something about a plot to kill her and grab her estate—something about her uncle and Paul. . . .

The words penetrated her *dazed* mind, but she could not understand them. Mean-

ingless words from a savage killer—from the man who had murdered old Theresa—and now had added Paul to his list of victims!

Kathleen shrank away from him; tried to tear loose from his grip and get out of the casket—but he held her tightly, and his face was close to hers, his eyes burning into hers with terrible intensity.

“I know—you don’t understand,” he snapped as he shook her like a child, “but there’s no time now for explanations. We must get out of here immediately or it will be too late. At any moment—”

His arms were around her, forcing her out of the casket, lifting her down to the floor—but before he could turn and lead the way to the door a pair of baleful eyes gleamed at him out of the darkness and a club came down with sickening force on the top of his head. With a low moan of pain he crumpled to the floor—and behind him Kathleen saw the grinning face of her Uncle Danton!

CHAPTER FIVE

Doom’s Fulfillment

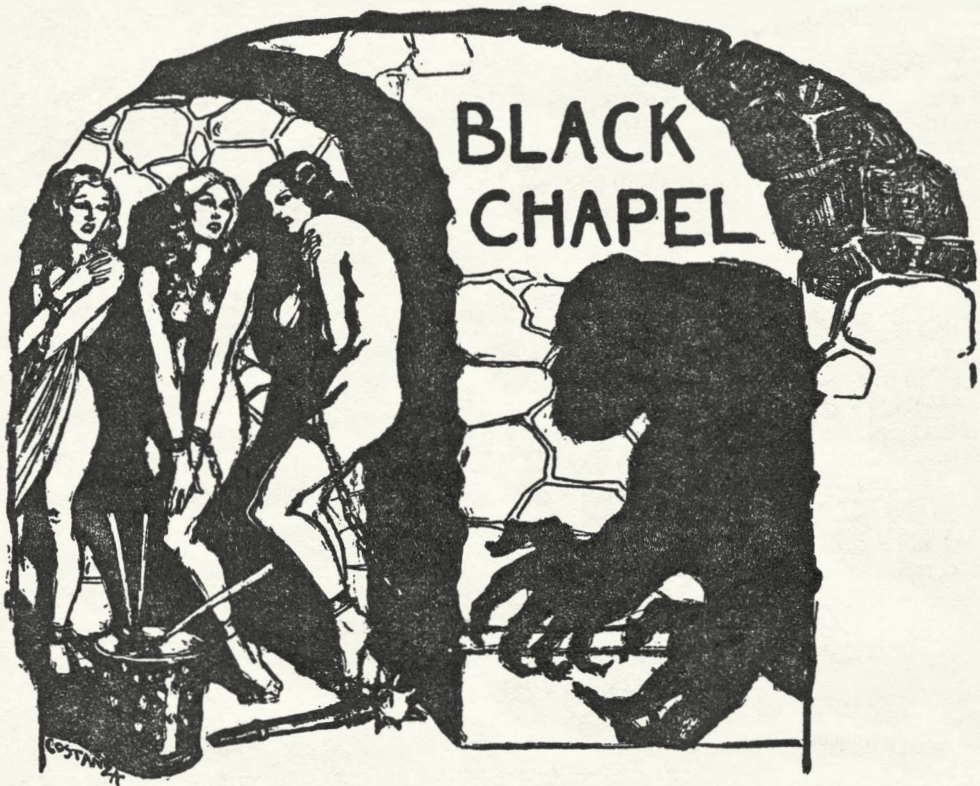
DANTON O’DOUL—that was impossible! Kathleen stared at him in incredulous amazement. But there he was, very much alive, and smirking at her with a face that was transformed—transformed by the Devil! For a moment he stood over George Leland, glanced down at him, and then tossed the heavy club aside—to exchange it for a revolver that came out of his back pocket and was trained on her stomach.

“Stay right where you are, my dear,” he warned. “I don’t want to hurt you—not unless you make me do it.”

Keeping a wary eye on her, he edged into the darkness at one side of the vault and quickly returned with a coil of rope.

“But—but, Uncle Dan—” the words came with difficulty from Kathleen’s dry mouth—“I don’t—I don’t understand—”

(Continued on page 122)



It is not vainly that we have always called women 'the weaker sex', 'the gentle sex'. From time immemorial, women have had a softening and restraining effect on man's innate savagery. It is woman's molding hand that has dulled the jagged outcroppings of man's uneven nature. Because she needs peace and security to rear her family, she has been responsible for most of what the world calls 'civilization'. It is not her fault that the bloody plague of war is still present to torment us—women will fight, but only when the sanctity of her home and loved ones is threatened with destruction.

But, as every now and then, we see a man whose natural gentleness rivals that of women, so too there are, and always have been, a few women whose instincts are cruel and warlike.

Many women have felt the urge to shed blood, but their courage has fallen short of their desires. They have had to be content to lure men on to their own destruction and to revel in the carnage from a distance. Like the sirens of mythology their wiles have been purely feminine and their seductive songs and inviting glances have been but the prelude to death. Cleopatra, who was perhaps responsible for the dying agonies of more men than any

other woman in history, was one of these. Catherine de Medici, more bold and less subtle than the Egyptian queen, personally sponsored the infamous Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre when thousands of helpless Huguenots were brutally murdered in their homes and even in the public market places. Not yet content, though the gutters of France ran deep with the blood of her innocent victims, the evil Catherine with her own hands signed the death warrants of her two sons.

Truly we might say that the pinnacle of bestiality had been reached by these two women—but there are others whose foul desires were even more horrible;

BLACK CHAPEL

whose fiendishness, though not so wholesale, was none the less spawned in the deepest pits of hell. Lucrezia Borgia, who entertained largely and nearly all of whose guests died in agony shortly afterward; Marina, the Black Witch of England, who is credited with having slaughtered and dismembered more than one hundred small children—

Then, let us consider the case of Arakota. . . .

"You love me a little now, Neil," the soft voice was speaking again. "But you will love me more—you will love me completely; it is so ordained. You are the mate for Arakota, the deathless one. I knew that the moment I saw you excavating in the ruins of Tajiquilla. Even when I found you had a wife.

"She will mean nothing to us, Neil—" And now the soft voice seemed to be penetrating my brain; seemed to be taking hold of me, swaying me, molding me—and I fought desperately against its hypnotism.

"Yes," the dark, centuries-wicked eyes smiled at me, "when her spirit is incorporated with mine, when her heart and brain are a part of my body, when her flesh is Arakota's flesh—then you will love only one woman. Then you will be entirely Arakota's!"

As she spoke her hand whipped a razor-thin knife from a sheath at her waist, and then she turned to where Peggy was watching her.

"Neil—you do love her?" fell from her white lips as she must have read the lust in my eyes. The shocked horror in her voice told me that fearful revelation had stabbed her more deeply than even the frightful death in store for her.

The story of Arakota is told in detail by Wayne Rogers in "DEATH IS A WOMAN," an unusual novelette which features the July-August issue of TERROR TALES. It is one of many novelettes and shorts by your favorite authors of mystery-terror fiction.

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 119)

Danton O'Doul paid no more attention than if she had not spoken. Bending over Paul, he lashed the fallen man's wrists together, then his ankles; and then he went to where George Leland lay and trussed him up in similar fashion. That finished, he changed the position of the lantern, moved it farther toward the rear of the tomb, and bent to scrape away a carpet of dead leaves and dust from the floor.

Under that accumulation he uncovered a big stone slab, fumbled at its edge for a few moments, and then lifted it on one end with remarkable ease. Beneath it yawned a black hole that gave forth a dank, fetid odor—a deep hole from which came the scampering of rats and the slithering of snakes.

Cold with terror, Kathleen watched those ominous preparations, and her eyes swerved fearfully from the black hole to Paul. He had recovered consciousness and was propping himself up in a sitting position.

"Paul!" her lips framed his name soundlessly as her eyes met his.

Even though she knew that he was unable to help her, there was wordless appeal and trust in the look she gave him—but the cold, calculating expression on his face startled her. He ignored her; scarcely seemed to see her. Instead, he turned narrowed eyes upon her uncle; smiled grimly as Danton looked down at him.

"Well, it seems you win—so far, Danton," he admitted. But before coming up here I took several little precautions which may interest you. I'm ready to bargain. If you will kindly remove these ropes—"

But Danton sneered at him, spat at him in disgust.

"You're ready to bargain!" the old man sneered. "I'm through bargaining with you, you dirty double-crosser! You thought you could get rid of me and have

WHEN THE BANSHEE CALLS—

the whole estate to yourself, didn't you? But you see I got out of the cellar where you penned me up—and now you're going someplace where I know you *won't* break loose."

Paul threatened, tried to bargain, pleaded—and gradually, to Kathleen's amazed ears, came the truth; the revelation that this whole death-drama had been her uncle's handiwork—that Paul, the man she had married, had been his willing tool, doing his bidding and at the same time planning to double-cross him and grab the whole stake for himself!

A sordid, incredibly fiendish scheme from which she recoiled in horror and loathing. Uncle Danton, the old man she had loved—and Paul, the man she had married and had thought she was beginning to care for . . .

"A pretty sorry tale, isn't it, Kathleen?" George Leland's voice sounded from the other side of the tomb; and she saw that he had rolled over so that he faced them. "Two thieves trying to outwit each other in their scheming to rob and murder a helpless girl! I discovered old Danton's crookedness five years ago. That was why he had me arrested and sent away—because I uncovered the thieving manipulations by which he was robbing the estate he was supposed to administer for you. To protect himself, he planted the thefts on me and had me convicted.

"But I promised him I'd come back, and I did. I came back to clear myself, and because—because I still love you as genuinely as I did that night you gave me your promise, Kathleen. I couldn't leave you at the mercy of that old crook. As soon as I was free I came back to Scarsborough and started watching him—and it didn't take me long to find out about this devilish plot he was hatching."

Danton O'Doul chuckled delightedly. Arms folded in front of him and the revolver held ready, he leaned back against

(Continued on page 124)

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 123)

the stone shelves and nodded his head in mocking confirmation.

"YOU looted the estate of all the ready money you could milk from it," Leland whirled on him, "and then you wanted to sell out the rest of it but couldn't because it was entailed for Kathleen. To get around that you tricked her into marrying Gillespie and then faked your own death so that she would come into possession of the estate. After that, all you had to do was have her buried alive so that Gillespie, her husband, who would inherit the property, could sell it out and then split the proceeds with you.

"A sweet little program of thievery and murder! Old Michael was the first to be killed, because you knew that he would take part in nothing that was crooked—and that he would faithfully go through with what he considered his duty and drive a knife through the heart of your supposed corpse. When Theresa tried to carry out the obligation her dead husband could not perform, she had to be killed, too—killed with the knife she tried to stab into your black heart!"

"Very good, very good, indeed," Danton applauded derisively. "You really are quite a detective, George. It's too bad all your clever discoveries must be wasted—but you will have plenty of time to talk them over with Paul—" as he glanced toward the yawning black pit.

"You can't get away with it, Danton!" Paul Gillespie screamed desperately. "You're dead, and the estate belongs to me. You need me alive or you can't get your hands on a penny of it—don't forget that!"

"After death comes the resurrection," Danton O'Doul jeered. "You forget that trait of resurrection that runs in my family. I shall come back from the dead just as my ancestor did—except that, unlike him, I shall escape from the tomb.

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WHEN THE BANSHEE CALLS—

That smashed coffin on the floor will tell its own story of my desperate struggle to free myself."

Danton nodding his head with evil satisfaction, "Don't worry about Kathleen,"—she will not embarrass me in the least. Kathleen will remain dead—with a knife through her heart to prevent the possibility of another miraculous resurrection, after I am finished with her. But first she and I—"

His hungry eyes, straying over her half-unclad body, told Kathleen all too eloquently what was in store for her "first"—and the desperation of overwhelming horror prodded her, sent her running wildly toward the door. But Danton was too quick for her. His hand reached out and grabbed her by the shoulder; held her there in a cruel vise while he seized her burial shroud and ripped it from her body, while he plucked at her undergarments and tore them from her.

For a moment his blazing eyes devoured her bestially; then he hurled her brutally to one side of the tomb, where she slumped, dazed and trembling, against the cold rock wall.

Deliberately Danton walked up to Paul and fastened strong fingers in his collar; callously began dragging him toward the open pit.

"No—no!" the doomed man screamed wildly. "You'll never see Cecelia again if you throw me in there! You think she's waiting to go off with you, but I—"

The rest of that sentence was fused into a frenzied shriek as the poor wretch teetered on the edge of the abyss. A heave—and he pitched over into the darkness,

(Continued on page 126)

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 125)

howling like a lost soul tossed into the depths of hell—until his body thumped against the stone many feet below!

Then silence—ghastly, appalling silence, broken only by the scrape of Danton O'Doul's footsteps as he started toward George Leland.

Kathleen saw that the bound man was struggling frantically to free himself—but she saw, too, that he was making little headway against the ropes that held him securely. Danton reached him, bent over and grabbed him by the collar, started to drag him toward the pit—but Leland put up a terrific battle. His bound body jackknifed, flailed, pitched and squirmed like a powerful fish being hauled over the side of a boat.

One of these desperate lunges flung his right shoulder sidewise into the back of Danton's knees, knocked the older man off balance, sent him staggering to one side. Danton let out a startled yell and went down—and in an instant Leland was on top of him, was pinioning him with bound arms.

"The door, Kathleen!" he shouted frantically as he fought to hold Danton under him. "Now's your chance! For God's sake—run!"

ON THE very rim of the pit, he was deliberately sacrificing himself for her, struggling only to hold Danton until she could escape—and in that soul-searching moment she knew that there was only one man in her heart; that she had been his ever since that night when he held her in his arms—his no matter what they had said about him, no matter what he had seemed to do. Her man—and her place was with him. . . .

Sobbing wildly, she threw herself into the struggle; grabbed her uncle's arm and tried to pull him away. But he shook off her grip, threw her aside roughly—and he had George almost over the edge!

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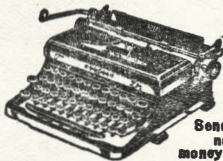
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WHEN THE BANSHEE CALLS—

Her horrified eyes stared, fascinated, at that fearful struggle; stared past the locked bodies—and saw the revolver her uncle had dropped. Hardly knowing what she did, she sprang toward it, grabbed it up, and fired point-blank at him—fired blindly while hysterical tears streamed down her cheeks and her hand trembled so that she could barely hold the gun.

The shot thundered in the rock-walled vault—and Danton O'Doul staggered back from the pit brink. Staggered back with one hand pawing his blinded eyes.

Doggedly he got to his knees, to his feet, and staggered blindly toward the crypt doorway and out into the main vault—and suddenly Kathleen remembered the heavy metal door. If he closed that on them they would be trapped there helplessly, buried alive as surely as if they were six feet under the ground!

Frantically she rushed into the outer tomb and grabbed the heavy door just as it was swinging shut. But Danton's strength was too great for her. The door was closing—and then George was there beside her!

Inching his way across the floor like a snake, he reached the doorway—and thrust his bound body into the aperture; wedged it there so that the door could not be closed.

(Continued on page 128)

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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 127)

Danton O'Doul started to do just that—but he stopped short, stood like a man spellbound, when a wild scream of agony keened through the still night! Only then did Kathleen see that the barn behind the O'Doul mansion was in flames; that the roof was caving in amid a great shower of sparks—and that a fantastic figure was running out of the inferno. A figure almost naked, wrapped in flames as she tore her burning clothing from her body.

For a moment, as she staggered into view, there was a halo of red flames around her head—around the head of Cecelia Flaherty!

That was what Paul Gillespie had meant about Cecelia! It was she who had been Danton's accomplice; she who had been the "banshee"; she with whom he expected to go away when he had pocketed the proceeds of the estate which he could not sell while Kathleen was alive! Paul had known all that—and locking Cecelia up in the barn and setting fire to it was one of the "little precautions" he had taken to double-cross Danton!

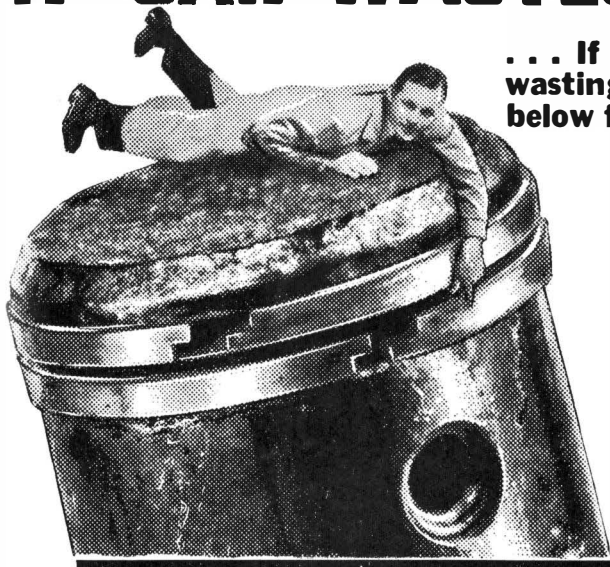
Cecelia's body was wrapped in flames, her arms were outstretched gropingly in front of her, and a wail of utter torment came from her open mouth as she staggered up the hill.

In that terrible moment she was an awesome incarnation of the banshee—a banshee sounding the doom of the O'Doul! For as Danton O'Doul went floundering toward her, like his ancestors, he neither saw nor heard the fearsome apparition—the last spark of life had left his body even before it crashed to the ground!

The moments it took to release George Leland seemed endless to Kathleen. Then, at last she found surcease as his lips met hers in a promise of everlasting peace.

THE END

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