

EXCITING STORIES OF HORROR AND TERROR

# MYSTERY TALES

15¢  
MARCH



**MISTRESS OF  
DEATH  
AND DESIRE**

by  
**ARTHUR J. BURKS**

**SCOURGE  
OF THE  
CORPSE  
CLAN**

by  
**DON  
GRAHAM**

**HORROR'S  
HANDMAIDENS**  
by  
**BRENT NORTH**



EXCITING STORIES OF HORROR AND TERROR

# MYSTERY TALES



March, 1940

Vol. 3  
No. 4

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW—WRITTEN ESPECIALLY FOR THIS MAGAZINE!

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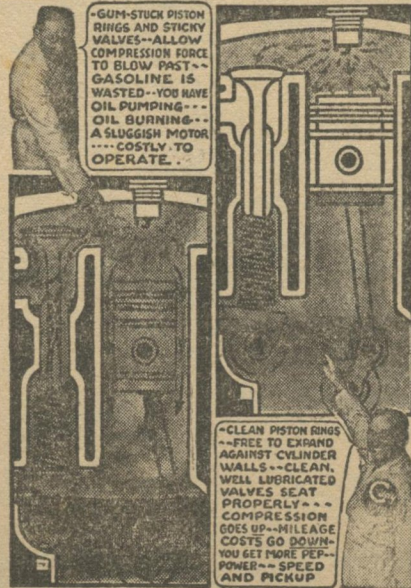
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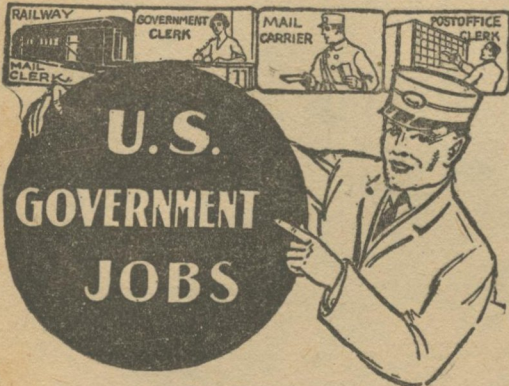
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# NEW GIRLS FOR SATAN'S



*As Nancy's feet began to drop toward the boiling oil, the hunch-back,*

**W**HEN I discovered that the price of the tickets was one hundred dollars each, I balked. One hundred dollars to see a moving picture! I told Lucian Jarrett that I thought he was crazy.

As a matter of fact, he did resemble a madman at that moment. The expression in his eyes was that of a man who had gazed into the depths of hell. He had burst into my apartment a few minutes before, and in wild, hardly coherent tones had started to babble about a movie he had seen the night before.

I couldn't quite make out what the moving picture was about; only that it

was of the utmost importance that I return with him that very night to see it. I would have gone readily enough—Nancy Ingram was not in the city and I hadn't much to do with myself—but the price of admission brought me up short. I'm not poor, but neither am I made of money. And in addition I would have to pay for Lucian's ticket as well as for my own. He could not afford to pay for himself, of course. The considerable fame he had achieved as a poet didn't produce any income worth mentioning. A wealthy friend, he told me, had paid for his ticket last night.

"Why can't you tell me what it's all

# BLOOD-BALLET

by Russell Gray

Author of "Lovely Bodies for the Butcher," etc.



*drooling with pleasure, advanced on one of the other girls*

---

*Death by torture!—Such was Satan's desire, and the hellish madness that was upon me sanctified the dread Inquisition to live again, and my own Nancy to be chattel-goddess of this last bloody charnal!*

---

about?" I argued. "And if it had such a frightening effect on you, why do you want to go back?"

"I've got to go back and you have to go with me," he pleaded. "There is a reason why I can't tell you more at this time. Believe me, Phil, it's a matter of life or death—or worse."

His fine, sensitive face was even paler than usual. It was as if he was pleading with me to save a life.

And so I went with him. I would gladly have lent him the money for a ticket so that he could go alone. After all, he was engaged to marry my sister Vera, and besides I was rather fond of him. But he insisted that it was important that I accompany him. On that point he was urgent with a kind of deadly intensity. I couldn't persuade him to tell me why.

But I was to find out soon enough—

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**DEZVOUS, AND THE HANDMAIDEN HE BECKONED TO BE HIS BRIDE!**

---



and I was to find myself catapulted into the midst of an experience, the awful horror of which was to sear itself like a livid scar on my brain and haunt my waking as well as sleeping hours for the rest of my life.

We drove out to Long Island in my car. It was a particularly dark night—starless, misty. Lucian guided me. Presently we were driving along a bleak, windswept part of the Atlantic coast.

"This is a hell of a place for a movie theatre," I commented.

Lucian said nothing; peered intently to the right of the road. Finally he directed me up a narrow, sandy sideroad running at a right angle toward the ocean. Closed iron gates barred our way. Lucian jumped out of the car and my headlights revealed him talking to a man with an enormous hump. They appeared to be arguing; then Lucian returned to the car, the gates swung open, and I drove through.

"They are very careful whom they let in," Lucian explained. "I had to convince him that we are all right."

THE shadowy outlines of a house loomed up before us—a sprawling wooden structure. My headlights picked out a clearing at the side of the house where several score cars were parked. All the cars were dark and empty. I slid in between two cars—and suddenly jammed on my brakes.

I'd almost run into a man who had his back turned toward us. He whirled, momentarily blinded by my headlights, and I glimpsed a lean face with a nose like a corkscrew covered with skin and a scar running from his cheekbone to his collar.

And I saw something else—the flash of metal disappearing into his coat. Then he melted into the darkness.

I shut off the motor, doused the lights, and Lucian and myself got out of the car. The parked cars indicated that

there were many people in the house, yet oddly enough light shone from only one window, and that light was dim, flickering. In front of us the breakers growled against the shore and the wind whined eerily across the sand.

I shuddered. I confess that I was becoming nervous as a cat. A bit scared too. What was Lucian getting me into? It was obvious from the way he kept close to me as we picked our way through the darkness to the house that he was afraid. Of what? And what was the meaning of the gun in the hand of the repulsive looking individual I had nearly run down in my car?

No sound came from the house, no sign of motion. I found myself looking apprehensively about, casting worried glances over my shoulder.

We entered the house through a side door which led into the one lighted room. The light was a single dim electric bulb suspended from the ceiling and hanging over a desk. The stocky, bull-necked man who sat behind the desk looked up as we entered. His little pig's eyes bored into us.

"You were here before?" he demanded. His voice was like thick, pouring oil.

"Last night," Lucian replied.

The man nodded. "Two hundred dollars, please," he said.

I dropped the bills on the desk. He counted them twice, stuck them into a drawer, pressed a buzzer.

We waited. My muscles tensed as I saw Lucian's face work convulsively in obvious fear of whatever awaited us. What in the name of heaven did this mean? Why had Lucian insisted on returning to this place which filled him with such dread?

A woman stood suddenly in the room. I hadn't heard her enter. A single black garment reached from her throat to the floor. It was plainly the only thing she had on and it was made of some diaphanous stuff through which,

even in that half-light, every contour of her sensuous body could be seen. She held a small flashlight in her hand.

She beckoned to us to follow. I hesitated, tense, on guard. Then Lucian stepped forward and I followed. We walked down narrow stone steps through a narrow musty corridor. Save for the thin beam the woman flashed before our feet, there was no light.

The corridor opened into what appeared to be either a very large room or a small hall. Dimly I could make out a white screen at the other end. Dimly, too, I could see rows of seats and the dark blobs which were people's heads. Even here there were no lights. The woman's flash at our feet guided us to our seats.

I relaxed in the soft seat. I was pretty sure now that I knew what this was all about. Nothing frightening about it. Only sordid. Sex movies were nothing new, though the price was pretty steep for even those whose jaded appetites reveled in such debauchery.

**T**HE reason for the darkness was clear: naturally none of these people wanted to be recognized. Many of them were doubtless well-known and respected citizens.

But why had Lucian brought me here? Could it be that he, the famed author of ethereal love poems, was like these others a degenerate seeker after vicarious thrills?

Impossible. Still, one couldn't be sure. If it were true of Lucian Jarrett, I had reason to be glad that he had brought me here. Such a man must not be allowed to marry my sister.

Light flickered on the screen. The audience stirred; there was an undercurrent of voices. This picture, letters on the screen announced, was one of a series depicting man's inhumanity to man.

I looked around. The beam of the projector dimly illuminated a brief cir-

cle around me, and for the first time since I entered I was able to get an idea of the kind of people that made up the audience. Shadowy faces of people no longer young; faces lined with dissipation and boredom and too rich living.

Lucian gripped the side of his seat, nervously biting his lower lip, his eyes glued with half-mad intensity on the screen. I wondered at that. Surely there was nothing terrifying about the scene which was being projected on the screen.

It was an ordinary enough love scene. A man entered a rude shack, kissed his pretty young wife, pulled her down on his lap and whispered sweet sentiments in her ear. The time was apparently the Middle Ages and the locale, I gathered from the dialogue, was Spain. The dialogue was of surprisingly high calibre, but the acting was amateurish. The actors delivered their lines in a wooden and uninspired manner, as if they were automatons.

But the audience did not seem to care. Every head I could make out was bent attentively forward.

Suddenly soldiers dressed in breast plates and glistening helmets burst in upon the idyl of the two lovers on the screen and bore them away.

The scene shifted to a bare room, at one end of which three judges in gray cowls which completely covered their faces sat behind a raised bench. This, it became clear, was the dreaded Spanish Inquisition, and the two lovers, who were dragged in by the soldiers, were charged with having sold themselves to the devil. The lovers hysterically protested their innocence, but the judge in the middle solemnly delivered the verdict: death by torture!

Another room now appeared on the screen. It was a torture chamber of the Inquisition, filled with all the hellish devices human ingenuity could contrive to inflict pain on human flesh and bones.

Here was the arrangement of ropes

and chains and pulleys which made up the rack. There on one side of the room was the Medieval wheel over which bodies were broken. In a corner stood the terrifying Iron Maiden with its two halves open, exposing its cruel spikes. On long tables were varieties of pincers, thumb screws, scalpels and similar instruments employed by the Inquisition to exorcise the devil.

Into this room the two lovers were dragged. Two brutish men stripped to the waist tied the girl to a post and chained the man to the wall.

A moan, low, hardly audible, came from the seat on my left. It was Lucian, and he must have been unconscious of that involuntary moan. It was caused by anticipatory lust or horror, I did not yet know which. He had seen once what was to come.

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## CHAPTER II

### MAN'S INHUMANITY TO MAN

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ONE of the half-naked men on the screen stripped the clothes from the girl's body. The other selected a pair of large pincers from a table. He approached the girl who was lashed to a post.

She watched him with eyes enormous with terror, and there was now no deficiency in her ability as an actress. Every line in her face and body expressed fear as real as if that were actually a torture chamber instead of merely a moving picture prop.

The jaws of the pincers clamped the rotundity of her buxom right breast. The scream uttered by the girl on the screen and propelled into that small theatre through the sound mechanism thundered against my eardrums, rasped its way into the very core of my being. And scream followed scream as her torturer strained with the pincers, twisting the round white breast, twisted and at

the same time pulled.

This was more than witnessing the horrible torture of a human being. No sadist's gloating eyes in the Middle Ages had ever seen anything like this. The human eye is comparatively feeble, unable to concentrate on more than one detail at a time, incapable of picking up minute details and magnifying them until the contortions of not a single muscle, the suffering of no square inch of flesh, is lost.

This was torture whose every sound, every gesture was retained and probed and magnified by the camera until those of us who saw it became almost as one with the tortured person, felt almost with equal acuteness the exquisite agony.

The straining, sweating muscles of the torturer flashed in a close-up; then there was a close-up of the breast covering the entire screen, being torn from its body, ringed already with a circle of blood. And there were camera shots from above, from below, from the side—suffering displayed from tricky and unusual angles. Every now and then the camera would switch to the girl's husband, writhing and pulling against the chains, suffering mentally fully as much as his wife suffered physically.

We saw agony as no human eye had ever seen it. The camera flashed down on the girl's thighs writhing and squirming against the bonds; concentrated on the belly which seemed to be trying to jump from the rest of the body; showed a mouth contorted with inhuman pain and eyes in which madness was beginning to appear.

But this was not really torture, I had to remind myself. This was acting. Magnificent acting by a woman who a few minutes before had botched ordinary lines.

"My dear, isn't she marvelous?" a voice from the seat on my right said.

The speaker was a richly-clad, heavily-painted woman. She had ad-

dressed her companion, a bald, stout individual. His left hand, with which he was intimately stroking her right arm, displayed an enormous diamond on one finger. The woman sat forward in her seat, her mouth half-open, her lusting eyes drinking in every detail of the girl's torture.

A shriek, more nerve-wracking than the others, rasped from the girl's throat—and the jaws of the pincers held a bleeding chunk of flesh. Gushing blood flowed over her belly, ran down her thighs. Where her breast had been was hideous raw, bloody flesh.

I retched with nausea. I turned my eyes away from the screen. Lucian, I saw, was also no longer able to endure the sight. His face was buried in his hands.

"Let's get out of here," I whispered.

He looked up and I saw that his face was deadly white.

"No," he said. "We must see it through. You'll see why shortly."

The pincers were gripping the girl's other breast. I preferred not to look.

I haven't a particularly weak stomach, but this was too much. Too realistic. The effects were obtained through trick photography, of course—remarkable what they can do with a movie camera these days—and I knew that the girl's breast wasn't really torn out; but so realistic was the scene that the effect on me was the same as if it actually happened.

**T**HAT'S why these people were here; that's why they were willing to pay one hundred dollars for a ticket. This was a new kind of debauchery for them; and they could go through this sadistic orgy with all the display and effect of reality but with the comforting knowledge that it wasn't quite real.

Now both of the girl's breasts had been torn off, and she hung limply from the post, dead or fainted, with her chest a horror of raw, red flesh.

Then the men on the screen turned to her husband. They stripped him, secured his wrists and ankles to the rack. One man turned the crank that operated the pulleys.

Once again the details of a human being in agony were spread on the screen for the delectation of that degenerate audience. We saw a body torn apart; concentrated, through the medium of the camera, on sections of skin which broke apart and permitted the blood to flow through; heard—or seemed to hear through sound effects—bones snapping and saw the jagged ends of bones breaking through skin.

And that, too, was presently over; and hanging on the rack, like a fly in a spider's web, was a chaos of splintered bones and torn flesh, an elongated something that once had been a man.

Trick photography if it were, it was a marvel of human ingenuity. If it were! The germ of suspicion had become implanted in my mind. Suppose there was no trick photography. . . .

But I banished the thought as being absurd.

The picture had dropped further back into history—to the days of Nero and the early Christians.

Nero, gross and pompous, walked in his garden at night and lamented his boredom. An advisor suggested having some sport with Christians who had been arrested recently. A young man and a young woman were dragged in.

I noticed that the characters in this scene were acted by the same as in the previous scene—Nero, for instance, had played the part of one of the two torturers—but the two who had been tortured did not appear in this scene at all.

The clothing of the two struggling Christians was removed and their bodies were covered with pitch. Then they were tied to posts. Fire was applied to them, and at once they leaped into flame, their pitch-covered bodies forming human torches which lit up

the garden. Their cries mingled with the cackling of the flames and died when the flames died.

Nero rubbed his hands with glee, and fiendish gloating was in his eyes. Just such fiendish gloating, I knew, as was in the eyes of many in this audience.

Finally, where two pulsating human bodies had been, there were now only blackened stumps.

Once again I urged Lucian to leave that devil's theatre and once again he restrained me. Yet I could see that it was even harder for him to sit through the hideous spectacles displayed on the screen than it was for me. He was more sensitive than I, his nerves weaker; but stoically he endured it.

For what reason? I was soon to find out.

The third "educational" feature of the film was now being projected on the screen. The time now was the last years of the World War when the Turks were ravaging Armenia.

Several young Turks were driving four beautiful Armenian girls before them along a sandy road. The girls' clothes hung in shreds; they stumbled forward in utter exhaustion. Cruel long whips in the hands of the horsemen goaded them on.

MY eyes focused on one of the girls. I could not get a good view of her face as she staggered along with her head bent and shoulders slumped, but something about her was decidedly familiar. Where had I seen her before?

The girl on whom my attention was concentrated stumbled and fell. A horseman leaned over and lashed her shoulders, but she either could not or refused to go on. The Turks dismounted. Two of them lifted her, each grasping an arm, and held her thus to her feet while a third stripped her.

Then we got the first close-up of her face.

A low gasp broke from my lips. Lu-

cian had been watching my face intently, obviously waiting for this moment.

"Vera!" I gasped.

"It is, isn't it?" Lucian said. "I didn't believe my eyes last night. I thought I was too drunk."

Vera, my sister! Vera, allowing her voluptuous nudity to be recorded on film for the lusting gazes of thousands!

As the two Turks held her upright, a third handled the whip. Lucian, sitting next to me, winced every time the lash bit into Vera's flesh.

Poor Lucian! No wonder he had refused to believe what he saw last night and brought me to this place to verify that the image on the screen was that of the girl he was to marry.

Yet could it be Vera? My eyes saw, but my brain refused to believe.

Why, Vera was staying at the summer home in the White Mountains of our Aunt Belinda. Less than a week ago Nancy Ingram, the girl to whom I was engaged and who was Vera's best friend, had received a letter from Vera inviting her to spend a few weeks at Aunt Belinda's. Five days ago Nancy had left the city for the White Mountains. They were there now, Nancy and Vera.

Yet that didn't mean anything. Vera could have made that picture weeks ago. But why? She certainly didn't need money. She was inclined to be wild, more than a trifle daring; but not even Vera would have gone into anything like this.

Was she forced into it? Blackmailed somehow? I wished I knew.

Lucian was moaning with what sounded like physical anguish as the whip criss-crossed the white body of the girl he loved.

"Have you ever seen such superb acting?" a male voice behind me whispered to his companion.

Acting? Icy fingers clamped my heart. Vera had often taken part in amateur theatricals and fancied herself

as quite an actress. But this!

No human eye, without the aid of close-ups and the trick shots of a motion picture camera, could take in such minutiae of physical torture. Was this acting? Could this conceivably be acting?

With each biting stroke of the whip the image of Vera on the screen jerked toward us. Every part of her body jumped as the whip cut into her—her torso, her breasts, her head, her thighs, leaped forward against the hands gripping her arms in a crazied attempt to get away from the unbearable torture. We saw the skin on her belly crawl in protest against the outrage committed on the skin and flesh on her back.

And her inhuman screams were a hideous accompaniment to the snap of the whip as it whistled through the air and the thud as it buried itself into her flesh.

A hand dropped on my arm, opened and closed convulsively.

It belonged to the woman sitting on my right. Perhaps in her lustful exultation she was unconscious of what she was doing. She wasn't looking at me but at the screen; with devilish rapture her eyes were drinking in every aspect of my sister's simulated torture.

I struck her hand from me as I would a loathsome snake. Sick horror choked me. The woman turned to glare at me, but only for a moment. She could not spare time from the scene on the screen even for her hatred.

The lashing of Vera was drawn out to the utmost. No detail was spared our eyes. We saw the skin break, the blood appear in the gashes made by the whip. Then, when the back of her body was a mass of bloody welts, the man with the whip walked around her and worked on the front of her—her breasts, her belly, her thighs, her legs.

WHEN at last they were finished, the camera lingered over the hor-

ror her body had become, sparing our eyes nothing.

"A masterpiece of make-up," a voice behind me whispered.

I found my horror-dazed mind repeating that word: "make-up." If it were really true that her scarred body was only made up to appear so, if the lashing and agony had only been simulated, then what quirk of degeneracy had made her act this scene?

But suppose it were not make-up; suppose through some hellish chain of events she was an unwilling actress in a scene that was real. . . .

The picture was not yet over. One of the other girls was also to be punished.

With Vera's scarred and bleeding body, which twitched and pulsated with pain in a manner horribly realistic, lying in the sand, the second girl was dragged by the Turks to a large cross by the roadside. To this cross they nailed her; and the projector displayed for the audience all the details of the spikes being driven through her wrists and ankles, and then the agony which endured until at long last her life blood ebbed away.

Lucian and I hardly looked at this last scene. Lucian sat hunched over in his seat with his head in his hands, while I was trying to force my numbed brain into reasoning out my sister's appearance in the film. There was no good reason why we should have stayed on until the end, but neither of us had the energy or the volition to depart.

Then it was over. Words on the screen informed the audience, with grim irony, that there would be similar pictures in this series of "educational films about man's inhumanity to man."

The audience began to depart. We groped our way out through the dark corridor, through the dimly lit room. Lights were still kept out or dim. Small wonder that these people did not want to be recognized.

As in a daze Lucian and I got into my car and started toward the city.

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### CHAPTER III

#### SATAN'S TENTACLES

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FOR a while we said nothing to each other, too numb with horror at what we had just witnessed. Then Lucian spoke.

"I was at a party last night and drank more than I should have," he explained. "Some people who knew about this picture got the idea of coming out. I didn't know what it was, so I went along. One of the men paid for all of us. When I saw Vera on the screen, I didn't believe it. I thought my senses were befuddled by drink. That's why I insisted that you come along with me tonight. And now—Good God! Do you understand it, Phil?"

"I'm afraid I don't," I replied. "But if I find out that she went into this as her idea of a lark—well, I'll spank her just the way I did when she was a kid always getting into mischief."

Lucian shook his head. "It's nothing like that. Vera's a little wild, I'll admit, but—" He turned suddenly in his seat. "Phil, do you think those people were really acting? Isn't it possible that—that it was more real than we imagine?"

"That's what I mean to find out. We can't get the police to help us. They'd be interested—pictures like these are against the law—but it would involve Vera and our whole family in a terrific scandal. We must get to the bottom of it ourselves. Tomorrow morning I'll go up to Aunt Belinda's. I'll make Vera talk."

"If she's there," Lucian said grimly.

I took my eyes off the road for a moment to glance at him. "What do you mean?" I snapped.

"I wish I knew." His voice was pit-

eous, half sobbing. "I feel that something terrible has happened to her."

With sudden resolution I pulled my car to a grinding halt in front of a lunch wagon at the side of the road.

"Wait here," I told Lucian. "I'm going to call up Aunt Belinda. I'll speak to Vera right now."

It took a long time before anybody answered at the other end of the wire. Standing at the open pay telephone in the lunch wagon, I fumed at the operator and urged her to keep ringing.

At last Aunt Belinda's sleepy voice answered. The servants had gone out for the evening and my call had pulled her out of bed. She hoped nothing was wrong. How was I? How was Nancy?

"Nancy!" I cried. "Isn't Nancy there?"

"Why, no," Aunt Belinda said. "Is she coming?"

"She left the city five days ago. Do you mean to say she never got there?"

"Why, no," she repeated. She sounded worried. "I didn't know she was supposed to come."

"Let me speak to Vera," I urged frantically.

"Vera isn't here either," Aunt Belinda said. "She left about two weeks ago, maybe three weeks ago. She didn't say where she was going. You know how she is; just packed her things and drove away in her roadster. What is it, Philip? Is anything wrong?"

I had cried out into the mouthpiece. I felt my blood congealing, my brain spinning.

No use frightening Aunt Belinda, though. She couldn't do anything.

So I said: "No, nothing. I wondered why I didn't hear from her, that's all. Nancy told me she was visiting Vera, so I assumed she was at your place because I thought Vera was there. Guess I'll hear from Nancy by tomorrow."

I hung up the receiver in a trance. Seeing my face, the man behind the counter asked, "Hear bad news, bud-

dy?" I hardly heard him.

"Well?" Lucian demanded anxiously when I got into the car. "Did you speak to Vera?"

"Huh? Oh, Vera? Yes, she's all right. I didn't want to talk to her about the picture over the phone. I'll drive up there tomorrow."

I didn't want to frighten Lucian either. I placed the poet in the same category as my aunt; neither of them could help me. Lucian would only be in the way if an emergency requiring physical action or quick thinking should arise. He was physically weak, mentally over-sensitive. And in desperation he might run to the police. I didn't want a scandal in my family.

That Vera had sent Nancy a letter from Aunt Belinda's inviting her up and that it was mailed no more than a week ago I was certain. Nancy had happened to show it to me, and further, I remembered the post mark.

What was the explanation? Could Vera be in with some nefarious commercial scheme to make torture pictures, and would she, on top of that, attempt to involve Nancy through trickery, if not through methods that were worse?

What crazy and disloyal thoughts I was having! To even think that Vera, my sister, would willingly take part in such pictures! She was wild and reckless, yes, but she was essentially as decent as any woman living.

Willingly! That word might be the crux of the whole matter. Obviously she would not willingly have acted in that picture.

Unwillingly, then? She might have been forced into it. No doubt was. And it followed, then, that she had been forced to write the letter as bait for Nancy. Why would they want Nancy? To compel her also to act in those pictures.

Good God!

And the worse of it was my helplessness.

If there were only somewhere I could turn; some throat around which to compress my fingers!

These thoughts went racing through my brain as I drove back to the city. Lucian was too crushed by what he had seen in the theatre to be talkative. He sat huddled in the corner of the seat like a broken thing. I was right in thinking that he couldn't be much help.

It occurred to me that I was doing nothing while the girl I loved and my sister might be in danger. The least I could do was to return to the only contact I had with the picture—the "theatre" by the ocean.

The road paralleled railroad tracks. When we came to a station I stopped.

"You'll have to take a train to the city from here," I told Lucian. "I can't explain why now, but I can't go any further with you."

He didn't argue or ask for a further explanation. Like one in a dream he got out and walked toward the station. He must have guessed that I would return to the theatre, yet he made no attempt to accompany me. Although I did not want him with me, I was disgusted with his spinelessness. After all, he should have been anxious to take some risk for the woman he was to marry.

**B**UT I dismissed him from my mind as I raced back to the house. I was too busy trying to evolve a plan, think of the best strategy by which to gain the confidence of the people in charge of the "theatre."

As I expected, the gates were barred when I got there. I parked the car, got out, shook the gates, called for somebody to come to open them. There was no answer. I thought that odd; a caretaker, at least, must remain there over night.

A ten-foot fence ran around the house. I was about to try to climb it when a better idea came to me. I fol-



lowed the fence. After about a hundred feet it turned right to the ocean and I turned with it. At the point where the water reached at high tide the fence stopped and a breakwater began. It was low tide now and an easy thing to climb over the breakwater to the sand on the other side.

The night was so dark that I couldn't see the house, but I knew the general direction. Too late I thought of the flashlight in my car. I stumbled forward, and all at once the house loomed before me. I walked around it and came to the side where the room with the single light was. The light was still on, which meant that somebody must be there.

A shapeless shadow against the wall near the lighted window brought me up short in my tracks. My muscles flexed, ready for instant action.

The shadow moved forward, and I saw a lean face with a nose like a corkscrew and a scar on the side of his face.

The man I had nearly run over several hours before! And again, as the last time, he held a gun in his hand.

Then he was gone as suddenly as he had appeared. The night seemed to move forward and swallow him up.

"You are looking for someone?"

I jumped. It was the darkness behind me that had spoken. I peered in the direction of the voice, oppressed by a feeling of utter helplessness in the darkness.

"May I be of assistance?" the voice said.

This time the voice came from my side and nearer. I made out a pale blotch which was doubtless a face moving toward me, made out the features when the face was within a foot from me. It was the woman who had ushered us to our seats.

"I'm looking for the manager or owner or whoever is in charge," I told her.

There was a silence. Then she said:

"Come."

I followed her into the room with the single dim light. There, sitting behind his desk as if he had not moved since I'd seen him several hours before, was the bull-necked man.

"Yes?" his thick voice inquired.

"I saw your picture this evening," I said. "You've got a gold mine there, all right. I figured out that for a single performance—about one hundred and fifty people paying one hundred dollars each—the take is fifteen thousand dollars. That's the kind of money in which I'm interested. I've got a summer hotel in the mountains—swanky clientele—and they'll pay the price for such pictures. I can get everybody in the mountains who has the price to come to see it. I'm willing to give you any percentage you want for that picture—up to eighty per cent. And I'll be taking all the risk. Can we do business?"

He didn't answer at once. His pig's eyes bored into me.

Fear jerked at me. I began to see that my story was foolish. I had thought that if I could establish some kind of business relations with him it would provide an opening for discovering Vera's part in the picture and what had become of Nancy. But my story, I now saw, was too thin, too easy to shoot full of holes.

"What did you say your name is?" the thick, oily voice asked.

I hesitated—only a second or two, but long enough, I was sure, to arouse suspicion.

"Seeley," I said. "William Seeley."

"Where did you say your hotel is?"

This time I was prepared with an answer. I gave him the name of a fictitious hotel in a well-known resort in the Catskills.

"Just a second," he said. He went out.

NOW I was really in a hole. Doubtless he had gone to call up the hotel

and when he found no such place he would know my whole story was false. Perhaps it was wisest to leave now, slip out while he was gone. Once in the darkness escape would be easy.

But did I want to escape? This man and this place was my only contact with whatever had happened to Nancy and Vera. I had to take the chance.

Then I realized that I was not alone in the room. The woman in black had been standing against the wall ever since she had entered with me. Now she glided forward with a slow, sensuous motion. My eyes of their own accord fixed themselves on her body which shimmered through her sheer gown.

"Do you think I am beautiful?" she muttered.

This was absurd, of course. I had believed myself in danger of my life and here was a beautiful woman trying to make love to me. But possibly this woman could help me discover what I had come here to find out.

So I stepped forward to meet her, and almost at the same time I became aware of the danger behind me. Maybe something in her eyes told me that she was using her body only to trick me, maybe instinct warned me—at any rate, I whirled just in time to see a lifted club descending toward my skull.

Had I turned an instant later my head would have been crushed down between my shoulders. I jerked to one side, was pulled off my feet by the motion, and the club grazed my hip.

The malevolent eyes of the hunchback glared down at me as he raised his club for a second blow. I was on the floor, helpless apparently, and in the powerful arms of the hunchback the club was a dreadful lethal weapon.

Twisting myself to my hands and knees, I lunged in a perfect football tackle. My shoulders hit him two inches below the knees and he crashed down. The club, which had been in the

midst of its downward path, flew out of his hands. I was on my feet before he was, and as he rose groggily I was ready. I put everything I had into a right which caught him flush on the jaw before he was upright on his feet. He went down heavily and stayed down.

Then the bull-necked man was on my shoulders. He'd come in through the door while I was battling the hunchback. His arms locked around my neck; he clung as tightly as the Old Man of the Sea as I swung to keep him off. I tore at his hands, pounded his flabby bulk against the wall, but he hung on.

I saw the hunchback stirring, beginning to rise to his feet. I locked my arms backward around the bull-necked man's neck and with every ounce of strength in my body I heaved. He flew over me, crashed to the floor. Then again I turned my attention to the hunchback.

I forgot about the woman in black. I did not see her grab up the club and edge behind me. But I did see her raise the club—too late. I felt the club strike above my left ear. I felt myself tottering, clutching at consciousness, while stars exploded in my brain. Then I sank into a void.

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## CHAPTER IV

### ISLAND OF DESPAIR

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I DO not think I was long unconscious. The blow, dealt by a woman's hands, had been only hard enough to make me lose my senses for a short time. When awareness returned, I found myself being carried. Hands gripped my shoulders and feet.

I tried to open my eyes and could not. Then I realized that my eyes were actually open but that darkness was as complete as if they were shut. Vile tasting cloth brushed my lips. A bag or sack

so heavy that it permitted no light to enter had been placed over my head. My hands and ankles were tied.

I was dropped to a wooden floor. At first I thought the blow had made me slightly dizzy. It wasn't until I heard the cough of a starting motor a few feet from my head that I knew I was in a motor boat.

The sea was choppy and tossed the motor boat about like a cork. Lying on the bottom with my hands tied behind me and the grimy bag over my head, I choked with nausea.

After a while I heard voices in heated argument. A voice which must have been that of the hunchback—I'd never heard him speak, but it was the kind of deep guttural voice I'd expect him to have—was urging that I be dumped overboard. But the voices of the bull-necked man and the woman in black replied that the boss had been anxious over the phone that I be brought to him alive. The bull-necked man sounded for a while as if he might consent to heaving me overboard; I'd hurt him plenty when I smashed him on the floor. But luckily for me the woman's calm insistence and threats of what the boss would do to them if they failed to carry out his orders prevailed.

How many hours the ride lasted I do not know. I thought I sensed daylight filter through the bag over my head, but I was not sure.

And all the time I was busy with my bonds. Given enough time I could work myself free. I had to be extremely careful; hardly dared move as I squirmed and twisted my hands. I had no way of telling if one of them was watching me.

Little by little my hands squirmed free, and the time came when I knew I could free myself in a few minutes. I stopped then. I wanted them to take me to their destination first. That was where, probably, Nancy and Vera would be. It was the only way I could get to them.

It wasn't an easy thing to do, waiting there like that with the knowledge that if I were to fight it out right then and there I would have a far better chance of coming out ahead. At our destination, I knew, there would be many more people, making the achievement of freedom much more difficult, if not impossible. It was clear that they were desperate men. What did they intended to do with me?

If they simply wanted to get me out of the way, the boss, whoever he was, would have ordered them to dump me overboard. Were the torture scenes in the picture real and did they intend to make me a victim in one of their scenes? The thought chilled my blood. There had been an announcement that there would be more pictures of the same kind. Was I being spared now in order to be broken on the rack or have my nails torn out by the roots or be flogged or burned alive?

The impulse to make a fight for freedom now was overwhelming. Panic engulfed me.

I fought it down. If I were in desperate danger, then so were Nancy and Vera.

THE motor boat chugged to a stop, finally. I strained my ears, certain that I heard all three of my captors step out of the boat. With as little motion as possible I freed my hands. I tore the bag from my head. I was lying on my back and looking up at a sky in which the first evening stars were beginning to appear. We must have travelled all day and now it was night again.

I turned, saw a wooden dock level with the boat and beyond the dock I saw trees. Hastily I untied the ropes around my legs. Nobody in sight. They must have gone only a short distance and would be back soon; surely they would not leave my unguarded for long.

I did a thoughtless, foolish thing then. The boat was in my possession;

I knew where the island was; I could have driven to the mainland for help. But such was my anxiety to get away before somebody returned and so strong was the feeling that Nancy and Vera were in immediate danger, that impulse sent me on the dock and into the woods.

I was not a moment too soon. From behind a large oak I saw the hunchback returning. I didn't wait to see his reaction to my disappearance but struck off in the direction from which he had come.

My steps led steadily uphill. Soon I saw that I was on an island. From where I paused on a knoll the island seemed to be about a mile long by perhaps half a mile wide. Where it was I hadn't the least idea. Along the Atlantic coast, no doubt, but whether north or south of Long Island I couldn't tell. About two miles distant was the low flat line of the mainland.

Behind me, on the highest elevation of the island, stood the only house visible. It was a large, sprawling house, built of stone blocks.

Suddenly I plopped down on my stomach. The knoll on which I stood was clear of trees, covered only by low grass. In this I grovelled. I had seen the hunchback running toward the house on his stumpy legs.

Luckily he hadn't seen me. I crawled through the grass toward a clump of trees. As soon as they heard of my escape at the house, every available man would pour out for the search. In all probability they would start searching from the dock, thinking that I would want to put as much distance between myself and the house as possible. They might even think I would try to swim to the mainland and would set out after me in whatever boats they had.

Slowly, keeping under cover, I made my way to the house. The moon was coming up, a great silver disc. I was right: by the light of the moon I saw

men running toward the dock.

I circled the house, left the woods when I came to the back of it. Light streamed from many windows, but I saw nobody, heard nobody. They must all be looking for me.

Then I heard the groaning. It seemed to come from below the house. There were cellar windows, two of them on that side, each rising to only a foot or so above the ground. And each was barred.

The groaning seemed to come from one of them. I peered in. Moonlight slanted through the bars, but all I could make out were a couple of tall shadows which may or may not have been human forms. I heard the groan again and then I heard a voice.

"Buck up, Vera. They'll have to let us go soon. They won't dare harm us."

Nancy's voice! And she was speaking to Vera. At last I'd found them. At last part of my quest was accomplished.

"Nancy," I called softly. "Nancy."

Nancy's voice, heavy with weariness, replied. "Who is it?"

"It's Phil, Nancy. Philip Robinson. I've come to get you out."

A CRY of joy and hope knifed the air. It was the cry of a doomed person who had gotten a reprieve. Poor girl! What had the beasts done to her? I swore then that if ever I got away from the island safely I would not rest until every person involved in Nancy's imprisonment was fully punished.

"My God, Phil!" This voice was Vera's. There was no joy in it; instead despair and fear. "Go away, Phil, before it's too late."

"I'm coming down there," I said.

"You can't help us," my sister pleaded. "Save yourself."

I crept away from the window, looking for an entrance to the cellar. My heart thumped wildly in my breast.

Was I afraid? Yes, I admit it. What awful horror was on this island to strip Vera of hope? What had they done to the girls to plunge them into such utter depths of despair?

I came to a side door. It was open; must have been left open in the excitement of the search for me. It led into a vestibule. In front was another door; to my left stone stairs leading downward. I took the stairs. They led down into a dank, windowless room.

I groped about, for all practical purposes blind. At last my fingers felt the outline of a door—an iron door, locked.

I almost wept with a sense of futility. How could I possibly open the door in the precious little time I had? And if, somehow, I did manage to release the girls, how could I get them safely off the island? Bitterly I cursed myself for not having thought of driving the motor boat to the mainland for help.

The creak of an opening door sent me huddling against the wall. The door was at the other end of the room and led into a second room which was lighted. A sliver of light came through the door, broadened. I could see now. I could see two identical iron doors—there must be two dungeons—and the flight of stairs. The room was bare.

And I could see a man come slinking through the door. He moved forward cautiously. Had he heard me? I sank into the darkest corner, held my breath. He was not a big man, I noted with satisfaction. It seemed hours before he came close enough before I could get my hands on him. Reaching out, I closed my fingers around this throat. We went down together, he tearing frantically at my hands, I grimly pressing with all the strength at my command.

I held on for some time after he was still. I didn't want to be troubled by him again. Then I searched him, found a batch of keys on him. Selecting the largest, I inserted it with trembling fin-

gers in the lock of one of the doors. A gasp of triumph gushed from my lips as I found it was the right one. The massive door swung open.

The moonlight streaming through the single small window revealed me at once to the occupants. I heard my name cried by lips I had kissed numberless times. I stumbled toward the sound, and in a moment I held the woman I loved above all else in the world in my arms.

"Phil, Phil," Nancy mumbled over and over again. "I knew you would come."

Ugly iron chains fastened her wrists and ankles to the wall. Her clothes had been ripped, exposing her white thighs and one lovely breast.

"Why did they take me here?" she sobbed. "What are they going to do to me?"

"How did you get here?"

"I was kidnaped," she said. "Vera wrote me inviting me up to the White Mountains. She said she'd call for me at the station. She wasn't there when I arrived. Instead a man called for me in her car. He said Vera wasn't feeling well and asked him to call for me. It was her car, so I wasn't suspicious. On a lonely road he stopped; some men ran out of bushes; they tied and gagged me and brought me here. Why are they holding me—for ransom?"

"Yes," I lied. "You'll be out of here in a short time."

I couldn't tell her what I suspected. It was too dreadful. Vera would know. She could tell me what this was all about. I went to her.

WHEN I was close to her, I gritted my teeth with horror and swore frightful revenge. The sight of her was enough to turn one mad.

She was stark naked, chained to the wall like Nancy, and her once beautiful body was a hideous mass of scars and welts—just as I had seen it in the picture the night before!

It was true then! The people in the picture had actually been tortured, all but Nancy, to death!

Two other girls were in the room, chained, both still partly clothed. Like Nancy, they were fresh "actresses" to be used in forthcoming pictures.

"I didn't tell Nancy," Vera sobbed convulsively. She clung to me, on the verge of utter collapse. But she remembered to speak too low for Nancy to hear. "She doesn't know what I went through—what's in store for her. I told her I fell and tore my skin. There's never enough light in here by which to see well. She'd go crazy if she knew about the—the moving picture."

"I saw it last night," I told her. "That's why I'm here. But I didn't think it was real."

She shuddered. "Horribly real! Why didn't they let me die like the others? Why did they save only me for more torture? Oh, God, don't let them, Phil! Kill me first!"

"I'm getting you and Nancy out."

She shook her head. "You can't succeed. I know this place—it's an island. And they are not men here; they're inhuman beasts. They'll capture you and lock you in the other room where they keep the men and then torture you the way they do the others."

I remembered the keys in my hand. One of them fitted the locks on the chains. As I fumbled with the lock, Vera continued to talk.

"They made me write the letter to Nancy. I wouldn't for a while, but they tortured me horribly. That's how they trapped Nancy. I could have held out and saved Nancy. I could have hardened myself to stand the pain. It wasn't worse than the whipping."

Hysterically she reproached herself for Nancy's plight. "They kidnaped me on a lonely road. I was in my car. Another car blocked the road. When I stopped men swarmed out of the car and brought me here. That was a mil-

lion years ago."

I freed Vera, then unlocked Nancy's chains. I was releasing the first of the two girls when I heard feet pounding behind me. I turned, fighting.

There were three of them and under normal circumstances I wouldn't have had a chance; but now I fought like one possessed. I'd been heavyweight boxing champion in college, but I'd never fought like this. I was fighting for my loved one and my sister, as well as for my own life.

One man I laid out; another was knocked senseless by Nancy. The plucky girl had grabbed one end of a chain dangling from the wall and when in the struggle with me one of the men came within reach she let him have it over his head. Which left only one opponent, a hulking brute. I knew I could take him.

As I drove for him, there was the sound of more feet outside, two more men rushed in, and now the odds were even greater than before.

One of the two newcomers was the hunchback. I knew the power of those arms and tried my best to keep out of their reach. But finally, while I was occupied with the other two, he got me; wrapped his arms around me from behind in a bone-crushing embrace. I felt his hot, slobbering breath on the back of my neck. I felt my body contract, my breath choke up inside of me. This time I was through and I knew it. My arms felt heavy as lead; my breath came in labored gasps. I was crushed down, pinned to the floor.

Even then I did not give up. I was a madman, beyond understanding of defeat. Great sobs wracked me as I saw chains again fastened on Nancy and Vera.

Still thrashing and clawing, I was carried to the adjoining room. Three other men stood chained to the walls. Chains were snapped on my wrists and ankles; the heavy door slammed shut.

## CHAPTER V

## THE DEVIL'S STUDIO

WHEN DAYLIGHT streaked through the single barred window hours later, one of the men was removed from the dungeon. Later a whirring sound reached us faintly from an upper portion of the house; and later still we heard the terrible screams of the man who had been our cell mate during the night. We also heard the tortured screams of a woman. The voice, I noted, was not Nancy's or Vera's.

My two cell mates stamped about within the confines of their chains like frightened cattle, fear stark in their faces. Frantic questions gushed from their lips. What were they doing with him? God, what was it they did to a strong man to make him scream so?

I pretended not to know, not having the heart to tell them. The wretched men had been lured here with promises of jobs, they had told me during the night. Each was homeless, without family, certain not to be missed by anybody.

The screams subsided. Then there was silence during which time held its breath, and the agony of waiting was worse than physical torture. Who would be next? There was no hope of escape or rescue—we were in purgatory where there was no reprieve—and each of us selfishly prayed that we would not be next.

I was next. For the first time I saw my captors in full light. Hulking, low-browed, bestial men they were, capable of any degradation without a qualm of conscience.

I put up no fight as they snapped shorter chains on me and bore me out. Meekly, as if my spirit were broken, I made no resistance. While waiting for my turn, I had evolved a plan. I would kill Nancy and myself, and Vera, if I

got a chance — kill swiftly, cleanly, cheating our tormentors. If they followed the same practice as in the picture I had seen, they would compel Nancy and myself to act in a scene leading up to our torture. That would be my chance.

They took me into an immense room on an upper floor. In it were all the props and mechanisms of a modern moving picture studio — false rooms, Kleig lights, sound machines, cameras, platforms, even a canvas-backed director's chair. I was chained to a post with a Kleig light glaring into my eyes and a camera focused on me.

Suspended from the ceiling by her wrists, with her feet just about touching the floor, hung Vera. Her head hung limply on her breast. Was she dead? Please God, let her be dead already or die quickly!

Her body was no longer hideous with scars. It had been skillfully made up to hide every mark of the brutal lashing, so that once again it was white and beautiful.

Nancy was not there. Where was she? Had those been her screams of agony before, which I had not been able to recognize because of the agony in her voice? Was I too late to dispatch her quickly and cleanly?

There was a stir among the men, each jumped to his post, and the director strode in. No director had ever been dressed thus, had needed to hide his face behind a black hood from even those who worked for him. His eyes—eyes in which evil incarnate, the fires of hell blazed—looked at me through the small holes in his hood with Satanic satisfaction. With a quick motion of his hand he tore the few remaining shreds of shirt off me.

“What entertainment you will provide!” he gloated. “The others were weaklings. They died too soon. They couldn't stand much. But you — ah, your torment will be my master scene.

Your torment and that of your luscious sweetheart."

I cursed him. I strained against my chains, calling down the wrath of heaven upon him.

He only laughed; called, "Camera—sound!" and my fury was being recorded. I stopped, grew quiet, resolved to cheat him of this shot at least. He laughed diabolically.

NOW all was ready. The director seated himself in his canvas-backed chair. The hunchback, wearing only a loincloth which revealed him in all his revolting deformity, stepped forward and selected a scalpel from among many on a table. Chuckling obscenely, his malevolent eyes gleaming sadistic lust, he went to Vera. The cameras whirred, concentrating on his face and on Vera's naked white body.

Vera's head wore wearily, and the terror of the damned sprang into her face.

"Please, not again!" she wept. "Oh, God, didn't you do enough to me? Please! Please!"

Her voice crescendoed into a shriek as the hunchback began to work on her. He was an artist with a flaying knife; his touch was as delicate and sure as that of a master painter.

The hunchback, drooling at the mouth with pleasure, skinned my sister alive. Delicately he inserted the razor-thin knife in her writhing thigh, dexterously pulled it down, around—until he could pull the skin off like a silk stocking. Then he went to work on her other thigh, on her breasts, stripping the skin from her living body.

I do not know why I did not go mad during what followed. I had resolved not to be an "actor" in the hellish picture; but when I saw what was being done to my sister I forgot about the cameras and sound machines and became a raving, reasonless thing. I saw the director nodding his head with satisfaction at my "acting," but I could

think only of tearing my chains apart and getting at his throat.

At last the hunchback was done—and what hung from the ceiling was no longer a living, shrieking body, or a body at all, but a revolting mass of raw, red flesh.

Time passed—perhaps ten minutes, perhaps a couple of hours. I was hardly aware that the set was being changed into an Oriental room, the interior of a Chinese Mandarin's home. A Chinese girl, dressed in luxurious silks, was brought in. I stared at her several moments, wondering where I had seen her before, before I realized that she was Nancy.

Nancy, transformed through the art of make up into a Chinese young woman! Her eyes were slanted by invisible tape; powder tinted her skin.

As a Chinese girl she was being led to terrible death—and she did not know it. But I would cheat them. If they followed precedent we two would be forced to act out a scene. Once released, I would grab a scalpel from the table which had been pushed to one side, and plunge it into her heart, then into mine.

Another figure entered. Myself! I saw myself walk into the room. I gaped at him, certain now that I was truly insane. Nancy was looking from him to myself in utter bewilderment. Then I saw that he wore only a clever mask fashioned to look like myself.

Now I was crushed, utterly beaten. They would have their way after all. They would not risk releasing me, no matter how well guarded. Instead my double would act my part until the torture sequence; then, during my torture and Nancy's torture, I would be substituted.

They must have known that I would urge Nancy to refuse to go through the act, for they thrust a gag in my mouth.

And so I stood there helplessly chained and without the power of speech while Nancy and my double and



several others went through the preliminary scenes. The bull-necked man played the part of Nancy's father and the woman in black the part of her sister. Nancy acted out her part woodenly, mechanically, not dreaming what the frightful conclusion would be. I could tell, through the words of the director urging her on to better effort, that he had promised not to harm me if she went through her part.

The story was the usual one of an American engineer in China and a beautiful Chinese girl falling in love. When the affair was discovered by the parents, both were condemned to awful punishment. The girl was to be boiled alive in almond oil, while the engineer would be forced to watch, after which the most ingenious Chinese tortures would be inflicted on him.

SO that was to be the fate of Nancy! Nancy, the girl I loved above everything on the face of the earth, to be boiled alive in oil!

I thought I had exhausted all my energy during the torture of Vera, but the insanity which closed down on me called up reserve strength. But it was strength impotent to do anything save leap hopelessly against my chains, and to shriek terrible imprecations on these fiends who pretended to be men.

The gag was jerked from my mouth so that my cries could be recorded on a sound strip.

A cauldron filled with oil was dragged by men dressed as Chinese to the center of the room and a fire was built under it. There was a wait during which the cameras stopped humming for the oil to come to a boil.

Deadly pallor crept beneath the yellow powder on Nancy's face as she stood waiting, held on each side by a man. Fear glazed her eyes. Seeing the oil actually heating, hearing my raving cries, she understood for the first time what was in store for her.

When the oil came to a boil, they removed her clothes and suspended her by her arms over the cauldron. The men in the room bent forward, their lustful eyes on her glorious nudity.

What was perhaps hardest to bear was the thought that her lovely naked body was being recorded on film and that after our deaths, thousands would feast degenerate eyes on her.

"Philip!" she screamed. "Whatever happens, remember I love you."

She was suspended by a pulley attached to the roof. Slowly a man who was attired as a Chinese turned a crank which played out the rope—so slowly that the downward motion toward the hellish seething liquid was barely visible. After her feet dipped into the oil it would take her a long time to die.

And the cameras recorded my frenzy, recorded the ugly horror contorting Nancy's face, and sound strips preserved my curses and Nancy's screams.

Nancy was capable of one last desperate act of self-preservation. When the bottoms of her feet were inches from the boiling oil, she called upon strength to jerk her feet up, holding her thighs at right angle to her body. It was futile, foolhardy; it would delay the final agony only a minute or two. Suspended by her arms as she was, she could not hold up her feet longer than that.

The director chuckled and rubbed his hands together. Nancy's desperate gesture served only to enhance the torture scene. The rope was dropped a full foot. When her outraged muscles would compel her to lower her feet, she would drop them into the boiling oil.

I was too far gone to make anything of the noises of scuffling outside, to understand the meaning of the shots which rang out downstairs.

But our tormentors heard and understood. Consternation broke out. Men jumped to the windows to see what was happening; others made for the door.

There were more shots, nearer now—then the door flew open and a man stood in the doorway with a smoking automatic in his hand.

No uplifting wave of hope surged through me. To me this was but one more scene in the torture picture. And I was certain of this when I saw that the man in the doorway was the same I'd seen twice on the grounds of the "theatre" on Long Island — the man with a nose like a corkscrew covered with skin and a livid scar running down the entire length of his face.

The director plunged his hand inside his coat and jerked out a gun. But he never leveled it. The man in the doorway raised his gun and fired. The director slumped to the floor.

Involuntarily I cried out. Nancy's feet were beginning to drop toward the boiling oil. The man with the corkscrew nose leaped forward and swept Nancy clear of the cauldron.

It came to me then that this, incredibly, was really deliverance; and as thankfulness gushed through me, I slumped in my chains in utter exhaustion.

THE next thing I felt were soft arms about me, and a man's voice saying, "He's all right. Just fainted."

Nancy's lips pressed against mine when she saw my eyes open. She was wrapped in a blanket and was kneeling on the floor beside me. The room was filled with police; our tormentors were herded together under guard in a corner.

Near me lay the director on the floor, his breath coming in gasping sobs, blood trickling from his mouth. His hood had been removed.

"Lucian!" I cried.

Lucian Jarrett, my friend, the mollycoddle writer of tender love poems, the man who was to marry my sister!

He was dying from a bullet in his lung. Between hacking fits of coughing

he told us how he had come to be head of this horrible motion picture "business."

"You wonder why I picked on Vera, the girl I loved and whom I thought loved me," he said. "Well, she was responsible for driving me into this. If only she had returned the love I offered her! But she didn't, except for the first few months. Then she tired of me.

"She was athletic, reckless and daring, and considered me a weakling, too soft for her. She told me as much when she informed me that she would not marry me. And she told me something else—that she also objected to me because I was poor; that however good a poet I might be I had no possibility of ever making money; that she had no intention to support a man the rest of her life.

"So I resolved to show her and the world that I was not a weakling and that I could make money. I hit upon this scheme. The pictures brought in a fortune. After a while it struck me that I could obtain revenge on Vera by using her in the pictures. There would be fitting irony in that. I would combine business with, as it were, pleasure. That's why she was made to suffer more than the others.

"As for you, Nancy, and you, Philip, I thought it necessary to get both of you out of the way. I knew that Philip would leave no stone unturned until he found what had happened to his sister, and that if Philip disappeared Nancy would do the same to find out what had happened to him."

He raised himself on one elbow. "So I was a weakling and unable to make money! I showed them!"

A final fit of coughing wracked his frame, a tremor ran through his body—and Lucian Jarrett was dead.

"Well, that saves the state the job of executing him," the man with the corkscrew nose commented drily.

He told us, this man with the crooked

nose and ugly scar whom I had suspected of being one with the criminals, that he was a Government agent. Lucian had his little "theatres" in a number of states, which made them something for the Federal Government to see into.

It was this G-man with the corkscrew nose to whom it first occurred, when he managed to get to see one of the pictures, that here was murder of the most horrible sort. The pictures seemed too good to him not to be true.

Lucian's "theatres" might have been raided, but that would have netted only the small fry distributors, so to speak, and not the criminal producer. So the man with the corkscrew nose hung around the Long Island place. He discovered the motor boat; had another ready nearby. He saw them carry me out; didn't know who it was or what

they were up to, but here was his chance to follow them.

It wasn't easy in the dark—he had to keep far enough behind so that they could not hear his motor, but a light they carried on the stern of the boat helped. During the day it was easier. He could keep out of their sight and at the same time keep them in sight with the aid of powerful field glasses. They led him to the island. He knew he couldn't do much alone, so he went to the mainland for help from local police. It was an isolated section, far from a town or even a phone.

"That's why we didn't come sooner," he concluded. "But it seems we were just in time after all."

"Thank God!" I said.

And with the police looking on, Nancy and I shamelessly enfolded each other in our arms.



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# MATE-FEAST of the FLAME-MONSTER

by Ray King

Author of "The Dead White Thing," etc.

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*She would hope against hope that George Harding would come at the last minute and save her, but he would not come, Sonya knew, and she would inevitably surrender her body and her soul to the flame-lover of her dreams!*

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*And then the grisly flame-lover enveloped her!*

**T**HE shape of the woman was only dimly visible in the moonlight—her tumbling dark tresses falling over her shoulders, merging with the dark cloak in which she was enveloped. Quietly she had slipped from the house. She was trembling, hot with desire as she hurried up the little rocky path, climbing presently more precipitously with the great tier of broken crags of the crater-lip above her. Her naked white legs flashed in and out of the cloak as she climbed. The dim red glare

of the fire-pit, deep in the bowels of the earth down in the broken crater, soon was a red crimson stain on the woman's climbing form. She could feel its heat now—heat that mingled with her own inner passion so that sweat came out on her face.

She reached the top; small broken little upper plateau, boulder-strewn, with the ragged crimson edge of the abyss before her. The moonlight painted the tops of the rocks with molten silver. Fantastic little landscape.

The shadows between the rocks were inky black, save that they glowed a little with the red glare of the earth-fires so that they were like turgid pools of blood.

At the crater's edge the woman stood panting, hot and breathless, murmuring her lover's name, as she peered around seeking him. She had discarded the cloak now. Slim, voluptuous, with sleek hips, flat abdomen that heaved with her panting breath, and her full high breasts upstanding, twin peaked mounds on the slimness of her chest. She stood eagerly peering. Here in the hollow beside her, where the rocks made a little cave-like recess, was the nest which she and her lover had made—dark little trysting place, faintly red from the fire-glow, warm and snug and secluded. The blankets and cushions lay there ready. . . .

But no man was there.

For a moment the woman gazed around. Soon he would come. Trembling she went into the little recess, discarding her cloak, throwing herself down with voluptuous abandonment among the pillows. With her arms back behind her head she gazed sensuously down her slim length, past her breasts to the slope of her abdomen and thighs where the glow of the fire-pit played with rippling crimson lights upon the perfumed satin of her flesh. Soon her lover would come. . . .

Then suddenly her passion was engulfed by terror. Through the recess entrance, the line of little crags at the nearby crater edge was visible. A blob was suddenly rising there—a red glowing blob of something which was coming up the tumbled inner precipice of the crater. Were flames clinging to it? Shifting crawling flames, little engulfing tongues of fire? Or was that merely her terrified imagination so that she thought it was living fire when only it was the red reflected glow from beneath?

The woman's hand went to her mouth to stifle a scream as numbly she stared. And then she was shrinking back among the cushions of her little nest, transfixed, frozen, too terrified to move, with all her beautiful naked body quivering with her terror. God! What was this? That ghastly murderous thing, enveloped by fire, was crouching over there at the crater edge, staring at her now with lusting eyes. Then the flames died from it. There was nothing but the blurred outlines of its monstrous form—dark rounded upright thing, monstrously cast in the fashion of a man-shape. Its arms waved. Its face—dear God its face was hideous with burning, lascivious eyes, its black mouth slavered, with tongue licking out in eager anticipation of her naked beauty as now it suddenly came shambling forward.

The woman's scream rang out—a little anguished cry, welling out through her constricted throat, choked by her parched mouth and thickening tongue.

"Oh dear God—little Sonya—Sonya—"

Impulsive, instinctive call—the name of her little daughter whom she thought was safely asleep down at her home. Her only child; and with a sudden guilty remorse, instinctively now in her terror she gasped out the child's name.

THE monster was close to her now. She could hear its panting breath. Its eyes were devouring her nakedness. And neither she nor the black slithering horrible shape were aware of the crouching little girl further down the rocky path—frightened child who had followed her shameless mother up to this clandestine midnight tryst.

"Sonya—" The woman gasped it just once more, as the grisly red and black monster enveloped her—hot, gruesome shape, with the feel of its flesh like dead warm ashes rubbing her as it pressed itself upon her. With

death at hand, one's last cry goes to the one most truly loved. The guilty woman had forgotten her human lover. She thought only of her little daughter as her senses swooped with the feel of the monster's arms around her. And then perhaps she thought of nothing as she felt herself being carried . . . over the lip of the crater, down the inner slope . . . down to the monster's lair . . .

A whirling chaos of horror. A minute? Ten minutes? The woman could never have known. There was only the pawing, lusting thing crouching with her, gloating over her nakedness . . . its caresses . . . its hot, fetid, sulphurous breath. . . . And then it had raised her up again. Thrown her? God! She was falling . . . falling endlessly, with all the world a phantasmagoria of tumbling rocks and whirling red fire-pit that rushed up to meet her. Fumes choking her, so that at the last there could have been nothing but her anguished lungs needing air. . . .

Far down, where the smouldering molten rocks of the little volcano was a bubbling cauldron of viscous fire, there could have been only one extra tiny fiery splash as the woman's naked body struck. A split second, to yield an infinitesimal extra puff of light as the glory of her rounded flesh which had been a human passionate woman was reduced to nothingness. For her, there was only the great Unknown, as whatever of her remained was hurled away into Eternity.

There had never been any real tragedy come upon little Sonya Blake, until that ghastly night when the monster of the crater killed her mother. She was ten years old, that moonlit summer night. Grim weird circumstances of course preceded the tragedy, but she was too young to have been aware of them. No hint that her widowed mother was a woman of secret passionate lust, meeting her lover often by night,

had ever reached her. Little Sonya knew nothing of that. Nor would she have understood it, save that it was something of which her mother was ashamed.

That night of her mother's death, Sonya had gone to bed with a vague apprehension upon her; an aura of evil, which she could not understand, though she trembled as she felt it.

"Mother dear, come kiss me again. I—I don't think I'm very sleepy mother."

Then her mother came and bent down. Perhaps then the mother was thinking of her own guilt—thinking of that lover whom so soon she was to meet. Whatever it was, in the dim light the look in her eyes frightened Sonya. And there was a whiteness to her mother's face, with burning eyes that suddenly looked away and out into the night, where the moonlight on the crags was bright with silver.

"All right, mother dear," the docile little child murmured at last. "Good-night, mother."

At last the little girl was asleep. . . . She knew it must have been several hours later when she awakened; the moonlight had shifted with its lacy silver pattern on the bedroom floor. She thought she had heard an outer door slam. And as she jumped from bed and went to the window, she stiffened. Her mother! She saw her mother in a cloak, hurrying up the path. The moon, low in the west now, behind the house, sent a great slanting shadow ahead of her mother—hurrying monstrous shadow which to the imaginative child seemed a hideous, fantastic thing that was luring her mother up into the night.

Imaginative child? Or was it not, perhaps that the child's intuition saw more clearly than any adult could have seen!

"Mother! Mother, don't go up there!" She called it with childish

treble out the window. Then in a panic she ran downstairs, out to the foot of the path. She had always been forbidden to go up that path, up toward where the fire-pit glowed red against the sky. Awesome place; made doubly awesome to the child's mind by the many grim admonitions she had had that never must she go there.

HER faint childish calls were un- heard. Horror engulfed her as she scurried up the rocky path. . . . And then she saw the ghastly rising thing that came up from the crater, and suddenly had seized her mother's naked body. And she heard her mother's choked, anguished call: "Oh dear God—little Sonya—"

"Yes mother—here I am, mother dear—"

But there was only the horrible vision of the monstrous fire-thing dragging her naked mother over the brink of the abyss. Then her mother's last scream—and silence, with only the low, hissing guttural rumble of the smouldering fires down in the earth, like a monster growling with pleasure at this human victim which had come to it. . . .

Who can say what horrible change came to the little girl as she crouched there whimpering. Jangled nerves. Childish mind with the imprint on it of having seen something no child should see, so that now the child was no longer normal. . . .

For another moment little Sonya crouched, babbling: "Oh mother dear—mother dear, come back to me—"

What weird thing was within her then that she suddenly wanted to go to the lip of the abyss and stare down? . . . But she did not; and presently, still whimpering, she turned and ran back, down to the house to babble out to the servants the ghastly, horrible thing she had seen. . . .

The days that followed were a tragedy and confusion to the frightened

little Sonya. It was arranged that she was to continue living in the big old house where she had been born, where her father, whom only vaguely she remembered, had died several years ago. A grim and dour old maid governess came now to take the place of her dear mother. Thomas Balt, the family lawyer who lived in the village five miles down in the valley came and told her that now he was her guardian and that she must be a good girl and do always what her governess, Miss Jenks, instructed. And never—never—must she wander up that path to the crater-lip.

Sonya shuddered as he said it. How could he be guessing that somehow she wanted desperately to go up to the crater and stare down? Sonya Blake, now at ten, was a tall slim girl, with black braids to her waist. Her face, with its great lustrous dark eyes, gave promise of a strange exotic beauty with her coming maturity.

"All right, Mr. Balt. I won't ever go up there," she promised.

"Don't," he said. He was a big tall, wide-shouldered man, with a mass of black hair that had a little gray streaked in it. Sonya had always been just a little afraid of him. His dark eyes under the heavy shaggy brows always seemed to stare at her as though he could read her mind. She didn't want him, most particularly, to read her mind now—because more than ever she knew that some day—some night—she would go up to that crater . . . like her mother. . . .

"All that stuff you said about a monster carrying off your poor mother," Thomas Balt was saying severely, "is silly nonsense, Sonya. I know that ignorant people have been whispering about that monster around here, for years. You shouldn't have heard such things."

But she never had heard it! Other people had seen that monster. It made her tremble now, with the eager desire

to find out more. But she didn't dare ask Thomas Balt.

"Your poor mother must have been ill," Balt was saying. He suddenly gripped the child with his big hands—gripped her shoulders so that she winced, terribly afraid of him. "You must never talk about the fact that your mother went up there with no clothes on. Do you understand, Sonya?"

"Yes. I understand," she agreed.

The days passed. Winter came. Then another summer—and another; and always, particularly in summer, the sleeping little volcano seemed to wake up a little, grumbling, sometimes panting with his fiery breath, so that when the night was cool, steam came up from the crater-lip—steam and his stinking sulphurous breath. And the red glare of him was always visible on the night sky.

There had been no one that Sonya dare ask about her mother; and about the living, monstrous man-shape that people whispered had sometimes been seen coming out into the moonlight at night. . . . Sonya grew through the years, tall, slender, with her body rounding into voluptuous maturity—full, upstanding pointed breasts on her slim chest; hips that were sleek and lithe, so that when she moved, it was like a dark puma moving. Her face, generally pallid, bore the strange, wild exotic beauty which her childhood had promised. Big eyes, sometimes with a wild look of sudden passion in them; sensuous red lips which sometimes quivered with her strange brooding thoughts that even now, at seventeen, she hardly understood. . . .

MISS JENKS was still with her. Thomas Balt was still her guardian, still living in the village five miles away—a man of forty-five now who sometimes came up to see her. . . .

And then there came that summer

night, when for no reason save that she was somehow frightened at the weirdness which seemed to be within herself, Sonya was whimpering, and Miss Jenks heard it.

"You're a queer girl," the dour, thin Miss Jenks declared. "What in Heaven's name is the matter with you, Sonya?"

What indeed? So often, Sonya wondered! So often, she murmured it to herself: "Dear God, what's the matter with me?" Was it that still, after all these years, her mind carried that vision of her naked mother, with white limbs flashing in and out of her cloak as she hurried up the hill to the crater. Her mother's nakedness—what that could mean of course was shudderingly apparent to Sonya now. Her dear mother, passion-swept, hurrying up the rocky path to keep her tryst with something that was horrible, yet alluring.

God! How terribly, especially this summer, Sonya's whole being longed to go up there, by night, with just a cloak . . . She had, by now, often been up there in the daytime, of course. Once, when she was sixteen, she had gone, at sundown, with a girl from the village—Grace Smith, who also was sixteen. Together they gazed with awe for a moment, down into the ragged, steaming red abyss, with the hot breath of the fires burning their faces. Then they had moved back; sat together on the path, half way down, watching the sunset.

"You ever been up here at night?" Sonya said presently. She was breathless, but she tried not to show it.

"Me? My Gawd, I should say not," the village girl declared.

"No one would ever tell me—because of my mother, you know," Sonya persisted. She had always been kept from village people because of her mother. This was one of the few times she had ever had a chance to talk like this. "You—you've heard of me and my



family, haven't you, Grace? Tell me—it's all so—so mysterious."

The other girl stared at her keenly. "I only know what they say. There's something queer about you, Sonya. That disease your father died of—or an accident or something."

Sonya could remember having heard of it. Once, when Sonya was only five, her mother had hugged her, weeping—hysterical—and she had babbled out something about Sonya's father having died, been killed maybe by a monster. Had that been the monster of the fire-pit here? But she remembered so well that in calmer moments, her mother had explained how her father had been alone in the house; they had found him unconscious, horribly burned, by an accident to the old fashioned kitchen stove. . . .

The village girl now was shuddering. "This crater's cursed," she declared. "We all know it. There's a monster that lives up here. It can lure you—and it can come out and get you. Especially it lures women."

How much more shuddering were the words, to Sonya! She could feel that lure! Dear God, she knew now that she had always felt it—ever since that weird night when she had come up here and seen her nude mother, struggling in the monster's grip.

Suddenly Sonya didn't want to discuss it with Grace, the village girl; and as the sun sank, they went back and Grace went on down to the village. . . .

A ghastly conflict was within Sonya, that year when she became seventeen. Often at night, that early summer, she would lie in her bedroom, panting in the dark—lie nude in her bed with the sweat pouring out on her as she fought with all her little strength to keep from jumping up, rushing out into the moonlight. . . . Like her mother. . . . Yes, she must wear a cloak over her nakedness. Her white limbs would flash in and out, glistening in the moonlight,

like her mother's. But up at the crater she would cast off the cloak, open her arms with her breasts held high and all her body quivering as she waited for the monster to come. She would scream, as her mother had screamed. But the thrill of it—she could feel that thrill as she lay on her bed now, staring at the rectangle of moonlit window. Voluptuous thrill, mingled with terror that made it even more poignant.

God! Why shouldn't she go up there now? Had she gone mad? What ghastly tragedy for her, that still in her mind was that horrible vision—so weirdly voluptuous to her now—of her mother in the monster's grip. Terrible thing for a little child to see. It had marked her. It had made her different from all other girls. She knew it—and now tonight, suddenly she didn't care. . . .

THE bed was rumpled with Sonya's naked body as she writhed in it—fighting the grisly thing within her. . . . Mistress of the fire monster—that's all she was destined to be. How could she fight it? She knew—dear God, tonight at last she knew she could not escape it. . . . The bedroom window was a dark casement outline. Moonlight was out there, with just a little dim-red glow, high up in the sky. God! *What was that at the window now?*

With so great a terror flooding her that the dim bedroom swam before her gaze, Sonya seized one of her pillows, instinctively drew it against her nakedness, hugging it to her breast as she peered over it at the window. A blob was there. Black, formless. Or was it dark crimson—dark like blood that has dried and clotted? Was that a little tongue of flame licking over it? Or only the red glow of the sky behind it. . . . A man-shape, here at her window.

"Oh—you—you, dear God—" She heard herself mumbling it. Eyes were

peering in at her — ghastly lascivious eyes staring at her nudity. The monster had come to claim her! He saw her now, grown to be a woman. He knew his time had come. Seven years he had waited, since her mother's death, so that now the little child was voluptuous, matured.

Then suddenly in that stricken second, Sonya's terror strangely swept away her own weird desire. She heard herself faintly cry:

"No! Don't take me now! Give me a little more time! Oh dear God—a little more time—please—"

Was the ghastly shape coming in the window? She huddled down in the pillows; and then with cold sweat pouring out over all her body, the anguish of terror so swept her that she fainted. . . .

It was dawn when Sonya came to herself. She lay shuddering, cold and pallid. And the dawnlight, coming into the bedroom, showed her rumpled white bed. God! It seemed that the smudge of ashes was here! One of the pillows was blackened a little. And her thigh hurt. She stared down at the rounded whiteness of her thigh. A little seared red place was on her flesh—caressing touch of her ghastly macabre lover. . . .

Fate may play strange tricks. It was only that next afternoon that Sonya met young George Harding. The doctor had come from the village that morning; Miss Jenks had sent for him, fearing that Sonya was ill. What she had said to the doctor to explain her sullen hysteria, she did not know. All her wits had gone into trying to tell him nothing. But he had stared at her with keen physician's eyes.

"You're too neurotic, Sonya dear," he had said. "Strange, wild little creature—heaven knows what thoughts a girl like you, just at your age of budding maturity, may have."

Then he had told her that she was too introspective. She needed compan-

ionship — young men . . . Dear God, young men! Sonya, through all her maturing years, had avoided them. They made her feel tainted. They made that vision of her naked mother rise like an evil leering thing so that she wanted to scream with the anguish of it. And they aroused in her, sudden wild emotions — emotions voluptuous, like her thoughts of the monster. . . .

And now George Harding, the little village doctor's distant cousin, came up and found her as she sat in the garden behind the house. He was tall, handsome, with laughing blue eyes, and a way of wrinkling up his face with lugubrious amusement at the slightest little thing that he could contrive to seem comical. . . . Or did he have the doctor's orders to try and cheer her up? . . . Sonya, despite herself, talked with him that day. And then he came again, and again. . . . Because the doctor wanted him to come? She resented it. Never would she let him come again. . . .

But she did let him come. The summer wore on. . . .

George often said, "You're only seventeen, Sonya. You shouldn't mope around these grounds. You must learn to laugh—dance—sing—"

SHE could feel his gaze trying to bore into her fearful thoughts. Always those boring eyes trying to read her! Did she hate him for his prying, puzzled gaze? Or had she already grown to love him?

One afternoon, it was late summer now, she was gruff with him. She had come to fear him; to fear his prying eyes in which now she could see love for her growing. And was this strange tumult within herself, love for him? Dear God, she mustn't let him love her! She could only bring him degradation; torture; and then at last an anguish of grief when the monster claimed her. . . . Grief, like Sonya herself had felt at her mother's death. . . . And now she knew

that she loved George Harding too much to bring anguish like that upon him.

"You don't like me," he said suddenly. "Don't you want me to come any more? I want to come. I'm lonely, you know. There are no girls, like you, down in the village."

Lonely! Sonya was lonely too, sometimes—lonely with a vague longing for all that life should bring to a normal girl. Lonely for what she knew George Harding could give her. But she could not forget those other nights, when her mind and body were crowded with surging, wild, unnatural desires. Tonight, for instance. Tonight she would lie naked, with her hands cupping her breasts as she thought of the weird thing that waited for her, up there at the crater lip. Horrible macabre lover. . . . How dared she sit here defiling the decent manhood of George, by letting him touch her?

He was gripping her by the shoulders now, staring into her eyes. And he was suddenly vehement, aroused:

"Sonya dear—what in God's name is the matter with you? What is it that tortures you like this?"

"Oh dear God—George, please—"

"Tell me," he demanded. "I can see it. Feel it. It's in your eyes. By God—it's quivering in your shoulders now as I hold them."

Wild terror swept her. "No! No George—oh please—"

Then he cast her off, and stared at her. "I love you," he said with a sudden quiet grimness. "I love you and I want to marry you."

"George, no!"

"I do. By God, if you marry me, then whatever's the matter with you will stop. I'll make it stop."

She could not fend him off, and he swept her into his arms. "Now say you'll marry me," he demanded. "Say it, Sonya! Say it!"

Marry him! Suddenly she wanted it

more than anything in the world. The protection of his arms. How good it was to feel his arms around her! Nothing to be afraid of now. Nothing. . . .

She heard herself murmuring, "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you, George. Oh I do love you. I'll be all right after—after tonight." God, what was she saying? "After tonight, George—I'll fight and finish it tonight."

Did he hear her? He was kissing her tenderly. And then he held her off again and stared at her. In the dimness of the garden where now the purple twilight was falling.

"We'll be married tomorrow, Sonya."

"Yes—yes, tomorrow, George dear."

Then at last he had gone. She wanted no supper. She avoided Miss Jenks. The middle-aged Thomas Galt came to see her on some business matter concerning the investments of her mother's fortune, but she would not see him. From the seclusion of her bedroom she heard him mutter something to Miss Jenks about having the doctor come and examine her again in the morning.

Then the house was quiet. Her last night, and tomorrow George would have her. She must fight this ghastly thing out tonight. Fling it away; be done with it forever. . . . But suddenly in the darkness of her bedroom she found herself stripping off her clothes with a wild abandon. Her last night to lie here with the feel of the stirring night-breeze through the window on her hot flesh; to feel her breasts palpitate with desire. . . . Dear God, she never felt it like this! What was the matter with her? That coffee which Miss Jenks had brought her a little while ago — had it done something to her? All her body seemed on fire. . . . She threw herself on the bed to fight it. And abruptly she knew that a triumph was on her. She wasn't just like her mother. Her mother had been afraid. Unwilling. There would be real ecstasy in not being afraid. More ecstasy than her mother had ever felt.

The supreme culmination of all her tortured struggles. Tonight! She would have that last great thrill — tonight. Now! Why not now? Full surrender of her young womanhood—and then merciful oblivion, down there in the glowing red depths, with her mother. . . .

IT was the same dark cloak which her mother had used. Sonya had kept it all these years. She could feel and see her white limbs flashing in and out of it as she hurried up the hill—up the little tortuous rocky path to her unholy tryst. . . . She had furtively been up here many times, by day. She found the little recess now — and like her mother, crouched in it. Would he be long coming? His fiery breath — his searing touch—she must not be afraid of it. . . . God! That coffee Miss Jenks had given her! Surely there was some medicine in it that made her feel like this! Was she going to faint?

In that second she was on her feet, naked, trembling with all her unnatural passion draining from her. She must get out of here! Something was wrong. Something had always been terribly wrong, with her and everything connected with her. It was as though some strange intuition like a sixth sense was flooding her, so that she saw herself a victim — and her mother and perhaps even her father, too—all victims. And she knew that never in her life had so ghastly a terror engulfed her as now. What a terrible thing she had done, coming up here. She must get back . . . get back. . . .

“Well, little Sonya, I’m glad you’re here.” Human voice. Familiar voice, save that it was blurred and throaty, thick with man’s passion. That blob in the little cave-mouth entrance—dark clothes, wide shoulders, a head of grey-black hair, disheveled now, plastered dank with sweat on the man’s dripping forehead. Thomas Balt. . . .

“Why — why — Oh you —” she

gasped. She had been stooping to snatch up her cloak. She tried to smile, as though this man had come here to help her; as though he would take her back down now. But her terror was screaming other things at her, so that she staggered back, crouched on the cave floor, her black hair streaming down over her breasts and all her naked, beautiful little body quivering with her anguish of terror.

“No! No,” she gasped. “You go away—you let me alone! I—I shouldn’t have come—”

“Oh yes you should. The drugs you’ve been having—” He sprawled suddenly down, half upon her. His chuckle was horrible, with a sucking intake of his breath. “That Miss Jenks, she thinks she loves me—like the maid your mother had, who helped me drug her. Drugs of desire, little Sonya — that and the brooding that any emotional female might have, thinking of the lure of this fabled master-lover who comes out of the abyss—”

Then his irony died, as his lust rose with the feel of her flesh under his pawing caresses. “God, it’s been a long time I’ve had to wait for you, little Sonya. All I could do was peer at you through your window at night—waiting for you to turn into a woman—”

“Stop! Oh God, please—”

“Don’t fight me, Sonya. Be docile, like your mother. I taught her to be docile. She really got to love me—love me with all her woman’s passion. Often she came up here to meet me at night.”

“Stop. Oh God, please—” The cave blurred, so that to Sonya there was only the feel of Balt’s caressing hands; his body pressing hers, with his hot breath on her face, her neck, her breasts. . . .

“Be like your mother, Sonya—”

“No! No, dear God—”

Abruptly he sat back, angered. “I killed your father,” he said, “so your mother would belong wholly to me.” Again he chuckled. “It was a good idea

also—it gave me a chance to handle the estate. It's quite big, Sonya—Oh much bigger than you've ever guessed. And when your mother — died, I kept on managing it, for you. It's made me rich—who is there to pry into what I've done with your money? And now, you and I will meet up here, lots of nights, Sonya. I'll be good to you—like I was to your mother. Why, I wouldn't hurt you, so long as you keep silent and let me—love you."

"You—Oh my God, let me go—"

"You're going to love me—and you're going to keep silent. Your mother did that—a guilty woman finds silence is best. She is content to keep on loving."

Her mother! His words about her mother drove with such a poignant stab into Sonya, that almost for a moment they cut into her terror.

"My mother," she murmured. "What did you say about my mother?"

"She just—loved me until that night when remorse overcame her and she threw herself into the crater. I would have thrown her in, if she had been rebellious, but she wasn't."

"But she—she didn't," Sonya gasped. "I saw—I saw—she didn't kill herself. I saw—"

He was chuckling. "You were just a child. You thought you saw what the servants all whisper anyone will see who comes up here at night."

His face was down at her again, and suddenly his arms were around her with so lustful a grip that she gasped, "Stop—Oh please—I want to go—I don't want to be here like this—"

And then before his hand could clap over her mouth she had wildly screamed. Like her mother, screaming instinctively the name of the one she loved best.

"George! George! Help! Help me, George!"

**B**ALT'S muttered curse mingled with it. His hand clapped over her

mouth. "Shut up, you little fool! No one will hear you anyway. Do you want me to kill you? I can do it—I can impersonate that crazy fire monster. I've got a suit of asbestos—the one I wore when I burned your father to death in the kitchen. And when I came to your window and caressed you just a little in your bed. Remember? I burned your thigh. That was to be sure you'd believe that there really was a fire monster—which is only me, whom you're going to love madly. I'm the fire monster, Sonya dear—love me now, just the—the way you thought you were going to love him—"

"No! No—Oh George—help me!"

God! What was this? George's voice! It echoed, muffled in the cave. George who had wondered this afternoon what she had meant by muttering things about tonight; who had lingered around the house, watching, waiting. And now was here. His answering call, mingled almost with her own scream; and with Balt's oath of alarm as he cast her off and sprang to his feet.

Dear God. . . . She saw the two men's figures meet with thudding fists and then colliding bodies in the cave-mouth. And then they were outside, fighting in the moonlight; fighting on the crimsoned brink of the abyss.

Sonya screamed again. George would be killed. . . . Oh God, George would be killed. . . . At last she knew what love could mean; the man she loved, here being killed. She was at the cave-mouth now, little white naked figure, crouching with a hand at her mouth as she stared at the two men where they swayed on the brink. And then her heart seemed to stop beating. God, they had fallen! The brink was empty!

How Sonya ever dragged herself, cold with the anguish of despair, to the yellow-red lip of the crater, she never knew. Just to gaze down there where George had gone. . . . And then she was tremulously peering, with her heart

pounding again and a wild surge of thankfulness upon her. A little ledge projected out here to one side. Ten feet down. And on it, George and Balt still were struggling. Ten feet down. She saw the men break apart; crouching, gathering their strength to spring at each other again. Only ten feet down. . . .

She was hardly conscious that she had run until she was over Balt. And then she jumped. The impact of her nude little body flattened him. The crash knocked the breath from her; made her senses reel. . . .

"Sonya darling—"

Vaguely she was aware that Balt was lying motionless, where the impact of her body had crashed his head against a rock. And George had come, with his arms around her, lifting her; carrying her up a little crevice until presently they were again on the upper brink.

"Oh Sonya darling — it's all right now. And you saved me, little sweetheart—"

He held her shuddering nude body against him, his hand tenderly stroking her hair. . . .

"Let go of me! Oh—damn you—you is damned thing, let go of me—"

Balt's anguished voice! They could not see him. He was down on the ledge,

ten feet below the upper brink. Balt, who had come to his senses from the blow on his head, and now was wildly screaming:

"Oh God, you're burning me—killing me—"

Sonya and George crept to the brink, stared down. Was it only that the fires below had momentarily become more active? Steam and sulphurous fumes were mounting, so that through them there was only the dim vista of Balt, down there on the ledge, struggling. Was that a fiery shape, engulfing him now? Monster of the Abyss! Was he down there on the ledge? Had he taken Sonya's mother, shameless woman, coming up here night after night to her passionate trysts? And now was he taking the murderous Balt?

Sonya and George could never say. There were Balt's wild screams—the dim blurred vision of him writhing—with flailing arms as he neared the brink. He gave a last horrible scream as he toppled. Far down, there might have been a little puff that marked his cremation—so tiny that it was gone in a second.

And nothing of him was left, save perhaps his malevolent soul, hurled off to the judgment of his Maker.

THE END

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of *Mystery Tales*, Published Bi-Monthly at Chicago, Illinois, for October 2, 1939.  
State of New York, }  
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Abraham Goodman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of *Mystery Tales* and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are:

Publisher, Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Business Manager, Abraham Goodman, 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.)

Western Fiction Publishing Co., Inc., 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.; Martin Goodman, 330 West 42nd St., New

York, N. Y.; Jean Davis Goodman, 330 West 42nd St., New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

ABRAHAM GOODMAN, Business Manager.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 2nd day of October, 1939. [SEAL] MAURICE COYNE.

(My commission expires March 30, 1940.)  
New York Co. Clerk No. 562.

WHERE HELL HALLOWS ITS HENCHMEN!—EERIE HORROR NOVELETTE!

# MISTRESS of DEATH and DESIRE

by Arthur J. Burks

Author of "Dance with My Bride and Die," etc.

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*Passion's purgatory had in the end claimed those men who had gone before him, yet, remembering, Pat Garrity went to worship at the shrine of the lust-lost Vampire of the Everglades!*

---



*Then he was racing after her, crying to her to come back!*

## CHAPTER I

### CALL OF DESIRE

PAT GARRITY lay on his cot, within the canvas tent he had brought into the heart of the Everglades, and wished he had never been born—at least that he had never accepted the wild assignment to come

here, among the alligators and rattlesnakes, and mosquitoes, to make motion pictures and "stills." Particularly that he had not come alone, to shut himself away in a ghastly swamp for two whole, horrible months.

But he had not wanted to share the profits with any man, and every woman he had—half laughingly, half seriously—asked to go into the swamp with him,

had rolled her eyes in horror. Women liked him, most would have gone a long way to please him, but the mere mention of the Everglades had driven them away.

And now, he had been here a week, and it seemed to be ages. He was, he told himself, slowly going mad. To be deep in the unknown, where he knew he could not find a woman if he tried, was a torture he had not thought to inflict upon himself.

As he lay there, looking up into the dark, every bone and muscle in his body ached from the grim toil of the day. Ached, too, with a pain that was greater than all else—the desire, stronger than any mere physical strength, to hold a woman in his arms. . . .

He cursed himself and turned on his side, trying to drive the thoughts away. Seven more weeks of this and heaven knew what would happen. All the wild tales he had heard of the Everglades went through his mind. Tales of people lost in the swamp, sinking into the quagmires. Men whom the ghosts of black, and red, and white harpies preyed upon, driving them mad with dark lusts, sending them naked and screaming into the black bayous and inlets.

Pat Garrity, lying there, listened to the sounds of the great primeval swamp; listened to the drumming of alligators, snapping their great jaws together, while his mind went rocketing back into ancient times, when reptiles like these, only a hundred times bigger, and winged, occupied the wet, steaming places of the earth.

And he thought of a woman he had known in New York, of whom the 'gators reminded him — of Eileen Doret, who had been slinky, and undulating, like the snake to which he had likened her. Eileen Doret, whose white teeth had desired his lips, whose body had been that of a white reptile. His mind went back to her, and a frantic, soul-searing interlude, when she had come,

at his invitation, to his apartment—for a cocktail before the theater, he had said, and had meant it.

But when she came in he had known there would be no theater, had known it from her mocking eyes, with deep, ancient secrets in their black depths. And when she had come to him, without a word—this woman of whom he had heard tales bordering on vampirism—and put her arms about his neck, and pressed the full length of her body against his, and had turned her head a little aside, to kiss him—his arms had tightened around her, and she had become a python to catch and hold him.

And after that a dizzy moment, or an age, which did it matter? Only he recalled that shortly after the kiss the lights had been out, and she had walked away from him, toward the window, through which a faint glow from the street lights had come, and there she had stood, with her left side toward him, so that he could see her gorgeous profile against the light, and that it was perfect, designed by Nature to enflame him, and men like him. And, going to her, he had tripped over her garments, in a little circle upon the floor, and had sworn—and she had laughed at him, a low, sensuous laugh, and then had used words to welcome him when he ran to her, that were more filled with ancient meanings than any words he had ever known.

He recalled how, when there was nothing between them but their desire, she had held him off, until he was half mad. And how, in the end, she too had gone mad. And when they had kissed he had tasted his own blood on his lips. She had bitten him, or he had bitten himself, he did not know which. And it did not matter. Nothing, then, mattered at all.

Not even that she was the sweetheart of his best friend, would soon be his best friend's wife, and that the man was out of town for two days and nights. He



had lifted her, a bundle of warmth that quivered in his arms, and taken her out of the glow of the street lights, into the darkness of his own chamber, and there she had whispered.

"The lights, please, Pat. I like the lights, and mirrors. . . ."

AND he had snapped them on, and the madness had not become less, but more. He hadn't asked her to come to the Everglades with him. She could not have come, for afterward, though she knew he was dying of hunger for her, she had married his friend—and then had told the friend, and Pat had lost both friend and sweetheart. It had been an agonizing thing.

It hurt now, terribly, to remember. And his name had been in the papers, and she had written him, wanting to visit him—in the midst of a place of horror, because horror was the thing she best understood.

Not so far away from the clearing in which his tent was pitched—on high ground where the rising waters, even when the sea backed in from a hurricane—he heard a wild scream that reminded him of Eileen. It was so wild, and savage, and primal. It was a panther, hunting for birds perhaps, that nested in the mud along the black tarns—tarns in the depths of which none might guess what horrors lurked.

The panther made him think of Prudence Laurence, the redhead, who had belied her name, and been not prudent at all. Of how her body, in his chambers—not the same for he had not taken Eileen where there had been anyone else to remember—had been a golden glow of riotous delight. . . .

He groaned with anguish, because he remembered too much. Each of the women in his life—somebody else had always married them, because he had thought at the time that he was finished with them—came back to him now, and stood beside his bachelor's bed, and

mocked him, and their curvaceous bodies were close enough for him to touch, until he actually reached forth to touch them, and found nothing but the dark.

"I can't stand it for seven more weeks!" he told himself, while the canvas walls of his tent threw his own words back into his face. "I'm no lone wolf. I'm . . ."

Then he fell silent. Outside, to the south, there was a loud splashing in the tarn. A 'gator, he supposed, had caught a deer come timidly down in the moonlight to drink. The threshing sound, however, was louder and longer continued than any one 'gator could have made it. Something about it, something *other*, caused him to shiver—and remember Eileen again. But why did the threshing, with a wild suggestion of primeval desire in it, continue so long?

The 'gators were everywhere. Perhaps, even, some of them were close to the tent, staring at its black shadow with beady eyes. The canvas would be nothing to hold them back if they surged against it, hungry for the human flesh they could surely smell beyond it.

He listened, caught up by his vivid imagination, forgetting for a moment the women he desired. The tarns, the stagnant pools, were all about the high ground. In the bayous barracuda came foraging at times, and in the deeper places sharks moved along, just below the surface. Death was everywhere.

Spanish moss hung like shrouds from the trees. In the eye of his mind he could see great patches of it, to remind one of death. And then, he could see women through the screen of the Spanish moss, women who wore no clothing, and whom the moss but slightly hid from view. And the urge to go out, to follow the mirage of desire, almost drove him frantic again.

But he lay back, listening to the sounds from the bayous, the creeping, slithery sounds. He heard a snake crawl past the door of his tent, where

the flaps were so tightly tied that only the mosquitoes could get through. He thought he heard one crawling under the canvas floor. He heard something strike against the canvas wall. A beetle, perhaps, hitting in full flight. Yet it might have been a rattler, striking at the billowing canvas. Suppose, just suppose, that his hand or leg or arm, had been against the canvas, and the thing that had struck *had* been a rattler!

Strange how desire and death and horror were all mixed up in a man, when desire was so strong. He thought of a woman—and of a man being torn asunder by barracuda. He thought of a woman—and of a man being attacked in opaque black water, by sharks avid for human flesh. He thought of a woman — and of a man being clawed to bloody ribbons by a panther.

And then he was intent on the growing sounds in the night. On the sound in the tall grass of the tangled clearing, beyond his tent door. He had not cleared it all away, because among the pictures he must take were many of reptiles, and they hid in the grass, and it was an adventure to hunt them, and make motion pictures of them.

THE sound outside was like the slithering of many reptiles, of huge ones, through the grass. He frowned a bit, wondering what it was that dared to come so close. It came to him that creeping, crawling things, of great size—he visualized rattlers twelve feet long, with heads like baseballs—were closing in on his tent from all sides, as though the evil denizens of the swamp had decided to attack him en masse, because he dared to come into their domain, photograph them, and take the story of them out to the world from which they had hitherto forever been hidden away.

Finally, and his hair almost stood on end when he knew, he guessed what was happening. The curiosity of the 'gators

had got the better of them. There were monsters, all through the swamp. There were large ones and small ones, and middle sized ones. And now, by dozens, scores and hundreds, they were closing in on his tent. As they approached, and were packed more closely together, they were crawling over each other, like murderous snakes in an overcrowded den.

Frightened half out of his wits, he could only lie there and wait. He knew that already the tent was surrounded. And there was no longer a chance to mistake the identities of his midnight visitors. For all around his tent he could hear the drumming of monster jaws, as the 'gators snapped down upon something, or on nothing, just to keep in practice.

He remembered watching the big ones feed, on the alligator farm at Jacksonville, of how the manager had thrown great hunks of meat to the 'gators, and they had closed on it, fastening their jaws upon bites of it, and then spun, a mad blur of speed, on the axis of their own bodies, until they had twisted off what they held between their jaws.

In the eye of his mind he could see what might happen, if they came through the canvas of the tent. He could see a monstrous 'gator on each arm, each leg, spinning—and knew, even as the sweat of terror poured from his body, that the resulting pain would be no worse than the pain of desire which could find no object upon which to be realized.

'Gators, dozens and scores of them, all around his tent. But when they were within ten feet or so, and their fishy odor came through the meshes of the canvas in his tent, they stopped, as though at word of command. But did they? He heard a body moving, straight as a dye, toward the door of his tent. But that was absurd, impossible!

What did 'gators know of tents, and

doors, and canvas? How could this one, lacking human intelligence, know where to come to gain entrance the easiest possible way?

It couldn't be, yet he heard a vague scratching at the door. And the tent quivered, and he knew that something, or someone, was fumbling at the flaps, unfastening the ropes. But they unfastened them from the top down. 'Gator? God in Heaven, no! Yet what could a human being be doing, out there where the 'gators were, by the scores and hundreds—big ones and little ones?

He must be going mad! Malaria must possess him this moment. He must be in delirium. His desire for the sweethearts he had known must have driven him entirely off his head. For the person outside could not possibly be human, and stand so close among the 'gators. Or maybe it was someone who was fleeing from them, to the tent, seeking sanctuary!

If this were so, and the Fates were kind, and the visitor might be a woman who could be grateful . . . but a man like Pat Garrity did not think of the possibility that any woman might fail to be grateful. His experience had taught him that no woman is invulnerable, that even the coldest may be won, if only because she is curious about something for which she really cares nothing.

The flaps parted, just as he spoke,

"Are you in trouble? Is there something? Come in!"

How foolish his words sounded! But they were out, and words even more foolish poured from his lips when he saw what stood at his door—something for which, certainly, his body had been crying—with such urgency that Nature herself had made provision for him? But that was foolish, too.

A low laugh, half a sob, came from the woman at the door. He saw her against the moonlight—as he had once

seen Eileen Doret. Her hair was long, hanging to her hips. And her body was innocent of any clothing whatever, save her glory of ebon hair. And there were streaks in it, as though she had decked herself in Spanish moss, for her own amusement.

"I'm so sorry," she said softly, "to come to anyone like this. But the saurians. . . ."

AND beyond her, as far as he could see, stretched an unbroken mass of writhing, squirming, black horror. The moonlight struck the mass, up through which the waving grass protruded like some primeval hirsute adornment, and was reflected in scores of reptilian eyes that were like glows of hell-fire, fixed on the prey that just seemed to have escaped them.

A writhing black, fermenting mass of utter, abysmal horror.

"Come in," he said, "for God's sake come in! Fasten the flaps. It won't hold them back unless they are afraid, but it's a chance. Come in, for the love of heaven!"

Then, she was in, and against the blackness he could see the snowy form of her, as glorious as that of Eileen, or Prudence, or any of the women he had known and loved. He was utterly amazed at her fearlessness.

"How in the world did you get away from them? Where is your camp? Did you dare to go in swimming at night, or any time, in the swamp? How is it that I haven't seen you all week, when I have been dying for . . . for. . . ."

"For me?" she asked softly. "Yes, I was in swimming. Near here, yes. But there is no danger, really. My name is Cienega. . . ."

Had he known Spanish the name might have struck a cord in his memory that would have filled him with more terror than all that crawling, squirming mass outside had done. For the word *Cienega* means "swamp." . . .

"I am not afraid," she whispered, there against the door, which she had now fastened securely shut. "I am not afraid of anything, save of being alone, as you are afraid of being alone—too long. I do not fear the reptiles, large or small, of the swamp, for they . . . for I . . ."

Pat rubbed his eyes. He sat up, fumbling about on his locker for his flashlight. When he found it he turned its beam full upon her. She did not cry out. She backed against the canvas, her arms flung wide as though she were crucified, and her long hair lay like a mantle over each of her arms. Her eyes were full upon him, challenging, unafraid, with something in their depths he had never seen in the eyes of any woman, anywhere, at any time—however ecstatic the transports.

"Do you mind, terribly?" he asked, softly.

"Would I have come, like this, if I had minded?" she asked, scarcely above a whisper.

He was conscious, as she slowly lowered her arms to her sides, that the night outside was very still, and that he had not heard the 'gators turn about, to crawl back to their bayous, their inlets, their tarns.

His lax fingers dropped the flashlight. It fell upon the canvas floor, and rolled drunkenly, splashing the canvas walls with its circle of light, that now seemed eerie—and filled with a strange and unaccustomed danger.

And the trick of the rolling flashlight that had not gone out, did strange things to his senses—even as he looked at the dark-haired, enigmatic woman, who still stood there, against the door of his tent.

## CHAPTER II

## EVERGLADES MADNESS

HERE, in the jungles of the Everglades, when his whole being had cried out for a woman—preferably one who was young and lovely—the fates had brought him a woman. In a nightmare setting. For he knew the 'gators had not gone away, that they were outside, all around his tent, in silence, as though they waited and listened. And their very presence hinted of primal fecundity somehow.

He rose, moved toward her. In the uneven canvas of the floor the flashlight still rolled crazily, erratically, splashing its light all over the walls, the hillocks of the floor—throwing their shadows on the wall in strange relief that might easily have been terrifying to the imaginative—and on the woman who stood there, watching him, her eyes asking him what he intended doing.

He stared at her. And then, because he was never one to be indirect in his approach, he began to tell her of his thoughts, in the endless quarter hours before she had come to him out of the mystery of the night.

"I wanted a woman," he said softly. "I wanted her until my heart cried out for her in abysmal pain. I wanted, and you came. Does that mean anything to you?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps I heard the call, Patrick Garrity."

"You know my name, Cienega?"

"It is the business of Cienega to know the names of men, if they be young and strong and burly men, who come into the domain of the tarns, and of Cienega."

"What a strange way to say it!" he said. "But then, you are strange. I can't imagine a woman who does not fear the saurians."

"They are my . . ." she began, then



closed her mouth tightly, secretively, as though she were afraid she would say too much. A shiver of dread—which had in it still something of mounting, increasing compulsion toward this strange creature out of the night, who was strange only because of the time, and the place and the weird horror of the circumstances—ran up his spine. But even that was a thrill—along the byways in which some men must probe for their desires.

He did not ask her to finish the queer sentence, because he was afraid that she would, and that what it told him would cause his reason to rock on its pedestal. Here was something like nothing he had ever known.

"If I were to come to you, Cienega, now, this moment, and take you in my arms, what would you do?"

"First, I would ask you a question, Patrick Garrity—How great is your need of me? Is the need so great . . ."

"That fear of death would not deter me, if you were one with me in the desire to explore the ecstasies of, for the moment, not being alone—a man alone, and a woman alone? It would not."

"Would you go out now, among *them*, if I were to bid you, and promise you much, much more than you have ever known—and you have known much, Patrick Garrity!—if you could go through them to the nearest tarn and return to me?"

"I would do it, Cienega," he said grimly.

She laughed, and the laughter did strange things to his body, his brain, his very soul. It made him think of a wind across a pool of ebony, of a shriek of terror in the night—of Hell let loose in a hurricane.

"For though it will not happen tonight, Patrick Garrity, this going forth that I mention, it may happen before your seven more weeks have ended. I must warn you, my friend, that it is almost certain death to know Cienega!"

"I do not believe you, but even if it were, I would not hesitate."

"And if I were to tell you that there have been many before you, and that some have been men who have been reported lost beyond all finding, in the heart of the Everglades?"

He shivered. His teeth chattered for just a moment. But he could not refuse the challenge he saw in her black eyes, that seemed to become bolder and blacker as they met his, in almost the unwinking stare of the saurians themselves. Now her eyes played over him, and he realized that his own state of undress, because of the heat of the evening, was akin to hers, and he had not, until now, noticed. Coolness had come in from the tarns with the advance of night, but so great had been the urges of his being he had scarcely noticed.

"I am afraid of nothing, except that you will leave me!" he said hoarsely, advancing toward her, holding out his arms, as though he would clutch at her lest she try to escape him, even now. And she smiled a little, showing white teeth, like Eileen's, and when her lips closed on the smile they did not close quite entirely, and the white teeth were still visible, almost like a suggestion of fangs against the ruby redness of her soft lips.

HE did not believe her talk of dead men, nor of many who had gone before. And what if it were true, of the many she said had gone before him? What sophisticated man but desired a sophisticated woman, wherever and in whatever her sophistication was acquired.

Her arms lifted to him as he stepped close to her. With a little cry in his throat—a cry for Eileen, and Prudence, but which he brought all together with the murmured name of Cienega—he took her in his arms. Her body was warm against his. She met his surge of passion with a strength of

mutual comprehension that set his brain to whirling, that made the floor of the tent seem to rock under his feet like a small boat in a heavy sea.

He moved back with her, back from the door, almost lifting her from her feet, so that her back was bowed toward him, as she put her head back after the first kiss, to look into his eyes—and laugh in his face! That laughter of hers was so much like Eileen's, filled with ancient wisdom, and urges that man himself would never truly understand—that women were born understanding.

"Oh, I've . . . I . . . I can't believe it, even when my arms tell me that it is true!"

"I warned you, Patrick Garrity," she answered, "that when you took me in your arms you were but foretasting the ecstasies of Hell, for I am Cienega, and my knowledge of . . . of . . . this, comes from . . ."

But again she closed her lips tightly, as though she were afraid she would frighten him. Outside the night was deathly still, but if it had been filled with the drumming of alligators' jaws, the screaming of many panthers, and of countless raucous night birds, he would not have heard the sounds.

Her lips were like the caress of fire itself. They held that first kiss until he felt as though his brain were going to explode. And then, when he thought that madness had reached its zenith, and there were nothing left except fulfillment, she began to return his kisses—with a madness beyond his comprehension, beyond his courage to believe in.

Her lips were against his, her teeth hard against his. Her mouth opened to catch his lower lip between sharp white teeth. . . .

And then, while her nails bit into the skin of his shoulders and his back, she kissed him on the chin, the neck—and for a moment of horror he expected her

to sink her teeth in his neck, like the vampire he had come to believe her, almost, to be—and the undulations of her body in her anticipatory transport reminded him horribly of those black creatures outside, with their eyes of lidless obsidian.

But he responded. There were dark byways here, but he had never been one to hesitate when the ways ahead were dark and dangerous.

He lifted her in his arms, when he could stand no more, and turned with her toward the wicker chaiselongue. . . .

"No! No!" she whispered. "I do not like the softness of mankind. I am a beast, Patrick Garrity, and a beast knows nothing of beds. There is no softness in you, either, my foolish friend, and so I know that you understand when I beg of you . . ."

He looked about him. His own shadow and hers, intertwined, was on the wall, grotesque and huge. Her hair, in the shadow, hung down, free of her back, and well away from it.

She pulled him down with her, slowly, to the floor of the tent. Their eyes were locked, and on occasion their lips were locked, as they approached the moment when, the Rubicon crossed, there might be something ahead for Pat Garrity like no aftermath he could remember. Of one thing he was certain: already this girl had driven all thoughts of others from his mind. He could not, for the life of him, remember the face or name of a single woman he had loved—and left.

And there, with the flashlight playing its beam across them, and the silence outside possessing the world beyond the thin canvas walls, they kissed again. And their bodies were savage against each other—and Patrick Garrity was trying to forget, so many things.

In the slow caresses of mounting anticipation, the canvas was agitated under his hand—and the ghastly thought

came to him that, fleeing from the crawling horrors outside, innumerable creeping things, including those with fangs of death, had crawled for safety under the canvas floor. He could feel them there, darting this way and that, mad things trying to escape the weight above them, trying not to be driven forth among the squirming, silent creatures that had come out of the night with Cienega.

"Cienega! Cienega!" he whispered, his lips almost touching hers. "What do I care what you are, or what effect you will have upon me? If it prove that you are the only woman I have ever met who can hold me. . . ."

"I can hold you, Patrick Garrity, to the day you die! It is my curse that I cannot *cease* to hold any man who has known . . . has known . . . has known. . . ."

HE would have closed her mouth with kisses, because he still feared the things, the dark, dank things that she might say. But love itself caused her to go silent, because in her own transport she lost the thread of meaning in the spoken word, forgot what she would have said.

Under the canvas floor the crawling things, outside the silence. With the flashlight beam playing upon them, and now the tent as silent as the night outside, two strangers who might never meet again, for whom even this one meeting might well mean death, were as one with the swamp, the jungles stretching away and away—the slow, black, crawling water, the undulating things, the madness of life where the jungles steamed and were never motionless, even as man himself, in his highest moments, must move to express his infinite delight. Moments when man was divine in his person, and neither life nor death held any terrors for him.

And then, the tent was gone, and the world was gone, and everything within

it, and the glow of the flashlight beam was a far constellation, a cold distant star, and Patrick Garrity, on a wave of incomprehensible bliss, wherein he wished to speak and could find no words, save that he could chatter like an ape—became, slowly, a living man again, conscious of his surroundings.

"Damn you, Cienega!" he rasped. "Damn you! Damn you! I never thought to tell any woman that she drove me mad—and really mean it. I never thought that when desire was ended for a moment, it would begin at once to mount again, stronger, more overpowering than ever before. . . ."

Her laughter was low, challenging again. Her eyes drank deeply of his eyes. Her lips were moist, close under his lips, and slightly parted. For just a moment she was still, but he knew that even her stillness was a promise for the future.

"Let the night be filled with all your life, with all the desire of your long life, Patrick Garrity," she whispered, "for I did not lie when I said that I was accursed. I tell you, certainly and surely, that this night, or its like, will never come again for you and for me! For me, with someone else, yes. For you, with someone else—though none who will be anything but dust and ashes after Cienega—but never you, and me, my friend!"

"All of my life, in a single night," he said.

"In a single hour, is more like it, Patrick Garrity," she said, looking first into one of his eyes, then into the other, a trick of women he hated, yet which now, in Cienega, seemed the grandest trick of all femininity. "For though I do not wish it like that, I, who can hold any man for all his life, am incapable of being held by any of them."

"But I, Cienega," he said, terror in his voice, "am different, I swear it! Nothing like this can possibly end tonight, within an hour!"

"Forget my words," she whispered, "for there is so little time!"

Again the world was blotted out. Again the tent became a spinning wheel upon which two people were caught up in revolutions that were faster and ever faster, and then began to slow down, to become agony, and they, on a burst of spinning, to stop dead still.

Again the silence, the dying away of sensation, the glory of companionship. At such a time a woman who understands, who is everything that a man can desire, is the woman for whom a man would die without complaint.

How much time was there left? It did not matter. There was no need of waiting, because strength came into Peter Garrity, from the firm, brave strength of mysterious Cienega, until it seemed that there need be no end. . . .

And then, the end was here, with them, and Patrick could not believe that it had happened—that she stood facing him, the ancient mystery, tinged with unutterable sadness now, in her eyes, ready to leave.

"No, Cienega!" he cried, fear in his voice that she would go. "No, I can't let you go, ever!"

"You couldn't stop me," she said. "I must never allow myself to love you, though in that much that you said to me, you spoke the truth, Patrick Garrity! You could be the man to hold me. I shall go before I find it to be true—for I cannot be anything to you that . . ."

Behind her back, though he had not noticed—noticed anything save the warm glory of her, there so close to him, yet suddenly so remote, so unattainable—she had been fumbling again with the flaps of the tent. A cry of horror escaped him as she bent toward him, backed from the tent, allowed the flaps to fall.

Pat Garrity, forgetting the guardians outside, flung wide the flaps, to follow

her. Right in his face sounded the sudden threatening drumming of a dozen pairs of great jaws, snapping together with power that would crush a man's leg from his body. Had the waiting creatures devoured Cienega, before she could even start away from him? If this were so, he told himself in that split second, he would fling himself among them, and die with her.

**B**UT nothing of the sort had happened. She was moving straight away among the saurians. In her right hand she held a switch, with a tuft of leaves on the end. She brushed one great snout with it, then another—and the creatures squirmed away from her, fell in behind her, following her.

Her hips swayed through the thick of the saurians. Her black hair mantled her perfect white back to below her hips. She was a naiad that he had known but a moment, and she was leaving him. That it might be forever made him cry out to her, with all heart-break in his voice.

"No, Cienega, don't leave me! I can't stand it, I tell you! Not after . . . after . . ."

But she did not look back, and he could not, with the cold wind playing over his warm body, bring himself to rush after her, out among the alligators, scores of which seemed to be a rear guard for her, to make sure that this very thing did not come to pass.

"Cienega! Cienega!"

But if she heard she did not heed, nor even look back. Instead, playfully, she flicked the switch into the deadly snouts, and the snouts drew back, advanced again. Not until he realized what a dreadful thing he was witnessing, did the utter impossibility of it strike him. He had never so much as visioned a thing like this in nightmares. He would dress, and go after her. He must touch her again, to prove to himself that he was not completely mad.



Had she really been here with him, at all? How could he be sure?

There was one sure way to know, or would have been had Cienega been any woman he had known. For with any other woman, satiety would have been the proof. With Cienega it was nothing of the sort, for in going away she had left him hungrier than before, than ever he had been in all his life.

He would go after her, no matter what might happen, even though she had not looked back—as though already she had forgotten about him. But perhaps she had been afraid to look back, lest she be unable to leave him, lest she run back to him and stay—when she knew that she dared not, because a husband or a lover waited somewhere, who might slay her for jealousy.

But when he dressed and started, the clearing was empty. The grass was trampled down, but that was all. However, grimly, holding the flashlight that now he would keep forever, he followed the traces the 'gators had left behind them. They traveled straight and true to the east, and as he followed them his horror mounted until he staggered with sickness to think of it. For straight to the east was a black, still tarn whose surface never seemed to move—save when a swimming snake fell into it by accident, and was sucked down by hideous unseen things below, before it could swim free again.

But his desire, his positive desperate need to see her again, if that were to be all, took him right to the bank of the still, black tarn. In it was nothing, save silence. A breeze struck its surface, ruffling it. He stared across it, where the moonlight struck against a screen of Spanish moss. It showed no way through, yet there must be a way. He shuddered, knowing that she could not have crossed this ghastly place without swimming. And if she could swim this black horror, so could he.

He stepped purposefully down to the muddy bank. Out of the black depths, instantly, came two great snouts—the snouts of saurian monsters. They opened wide as they broke water, then drummed together. Then, having missed him, they sank back, disappointed, and he could see their beady eyes, just under the surface, as though they thought he could not see them, and would venture in, after all.

He whirled, screaming in spite of his usual iron control, and raced back to the tent. Fanged things struck at his flying feet, and if he knew he did not care.

Inside the tent, alive and warm still with her presence, he sat on the couch that had known only his own agony, and cursed life with all the profanity at his command.

She was everywhere here. She was on the walls, the slanting roof, the floor. He dropped the flashlight, and again it rolled erratically around the floor—and again she was here, in the light.

Down by the black tarn the two 'gators drummed their jaws together, as though challenging him to return. And the night closed in on him jumping to the attack, so that in a sudden frenzy of fear, he whirled back to the door, and fastened the flaps as tightly as he could.

WHAT sort of a mad experience, he asked himself, had he gone through? Had he dreamed it? Had he gone mad? But he knew he had not, knew with a certainty that could not be gainsaid. . . .

He flung himself flat on his cot, and bit his lower lip until it bled again—but it only served to remind him, that salty taste of his own blood, that it *was* "again." And he remembered the first time, and that it was madness. He had cried out in body and soul for a woman, and a woman had come—to rob him both of his body and his soul. But then, had she not warned him? Had he paid

the slightest heed to her warning? Did he not deserve whatever suffering, body and spirit, that might be his lot because of what had happened?

There came no answer save the drumming of the monsters in the muddy, still, black tarn, where they still seemed to wait—or to be on guard. He would never sleep again, he told himself, yet sleep he did, to be wakened in the morning by a cheery voice . . . a voice, he thought at first, that belonged to Cienega. Calling her name, or shutting his lips hard against the urge to call it, he burst from the tent.

But it wasn't Cienega; it was Eileen! He had never expected to go to any woman, like a baby, for comfort, for reassurance. But now he rushed to Eileen, and buried his face in her breast. And she, not understanding at all, because she did not know—how could she?—held his head hard against her, and looked about at the jungles with a strange mysterious smile on her red lips, a smile which would have meant volumes to Cienega had she seen it.

And perhaps, even then, she did.

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### CHAPTER III

#### RETURN OF THE SAURIANS

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EILEEN pulled away from him then, looked at him strangely.

"It just struck me, she said, 'it's odd, considering that you're always going away to some sort of place like this, and therefore must be used to it, that you're on the verge of hysterics. Let's open the tent, so I can get my feet on canvas, on anything that isn't crawling, and you can tell mama all about it.'"

He regained some semblance of control of himself then, and followed Eileen back to the tent. He looked around once, along the trail to the nearest

bayou, and saw her dugout, moored beside his own. She had come in, characteristically, alone. But she would tell him in due course. Now he must tell her, because he must tell someone, everything that had happened to him. She didn't love him, was incapable of loving anyone, therefore it would not matter to her, because of what had once happened between them. Two men had killed themselves for love of Eileen, and when their names had come up, Eileen's lips had simply curled with contempt.

Yes, she would have understood Cienega, as Cienega would certainly have understood Eileen.

"I'll get some breakfast, if you'll show me where and how," she said. "I'll die if I don't have some coffee. And you haven't kissed me, but never mind. I don't really care to be kissed unless I want all that can follow, and at the moment I'm not in the mood. . . ."

"Nor I," said Patrick Garrity. She whirled, looked at him sharply, little furrows appearing in her brows.

"No? Not even me?"

"Not even you, or anybody."

"And you have been here, alone, for a week? And you swore no longer ago than a month, that you would die without me? Explain, Patrick Garrity!"

"I will if you'll give me time," then he bethought himself of the strangeness of her presence here, that she had been coming to him last night when he had thought of her, and had scarcely been able to contain himself, before Cienega came. Then, all at once, he was shy, disliking to tell her. She would think him mad. He would sound foolish, and she was a woman to whom he had sworn love that would break his heart if it were not requited. "But you haven't told me what brought you here."

"I could say that you did but that wouldn't be entirely true. I have experienced many things with many men, but never in surroundings like this, so filled with the suggestion of the utterly

primitive."

"Where is Radcliffe? Your husband, remember? You took him instead of me."

"I took him, yes, because he had plenty of money. But I kept you, in my heart, because there was something unfinished between us, after all. Oh, he's figured out where I am by this time, and is probably not more than a day or two behind me. He can inquire and find out where you are, the same as I did."

"So you're bringing a jealous husband down on me, when I've got so much to do already."

"Yes, deliberately, if you like it that way! Here you can fight over me and have done with it. I've always wanted to be fought over, to the death, by two men who cared enough about me to fight like that."

Garrity shook his head. "I don't, Eileen. I'm sorry, or rather I'm not sorry."

Again she looked deeply into his eyes. Then, without a word, she moved to the tent, went inside it, throwing back the flaps. She looked all around the place. There was no clue in the tent that Pat himself could see, but in some weird woman's fashion she knew, and whirled on him.

"There's been a woman here with you!" she charged.

"Yes," he said simply. "Maybe you'd like to hear about it. She's the one woman I've ever met who could make me—or any other man!—forget all about Eileen Doret, even about Eileen Radcliffe."

"A woman, here in the swamp? Where is she? Let me have a look at her. What sort of a woman is she? What is she doing here? Did you bring her here when you came?"

"She went away last night, where I could not follow her. She was here about an hour. . . ."

"And . . ." Eileen arched her brows.

PAT GARRITY shrugged. He saw a black cloud of jealous fury— to his utter amazement— come over her face. Not that she loved him, but that she was a greedy, insatiable monster in her own right, who believed that anything she had once possessed must belong to her forever thereafter. But she regained control of herself, by a supreme effort of will, that told him she had but held in for a propitious time.

As she prepared the coffee, and the bacon and eggs, at the rough fireplace he had made behind the tent, under an awning, he watched her, in a detached fashion, and wondered what he had ever seen in her. Yesterday he had been empty, hungry and lost without her. Today she was just a woman he had known, and that but slightly, for all the depth of his knowledge by most standards.

"I heard a story, in the little town I left before dawn this morning," she said, conversationally, "about an old woman who lives out here in the swamp somewhere. Seems she believes she has a sort of affinity for alligators. Goes right among them, unafraid, swims with them, raises them for market. . . ."

She whirled on him so suddenly that he had to rescue the breakfast.

"I only got the *impression* that she was old, when the woman who told me may not have meant for me to have any such impression at all! Could the woman of the secret alligator farm, possibly be the woman who came to you last night?"

"Did anybody tell you what her name was?"

"Yes. Yes, I remember it was Spanish for 'swamp'—*Cienega!* That the woman?"

"Yes. Let's eat. Then I'll tell you about her, everything. And then you'll go back, and meet Radcliffe before he gets here. I've no urge to fight anybody for you, Eileen. You don't matter to me that much, not any more—

though yesterday morning I would have welcomed the chance. I'd have killed Radcliffe with my bare fists for you, and would have been electrocuted with delight, if I could have had you again before the law got me. But today it's different. . . ."

"No," said Eileen, "it isn't different. Now, there is zest to my visit, quite aside from the prospective descent of an angry, crazy, jealous husband. The woman doesn't live from whom I can't take the man I want!"

"No, Eileen, you're wasting your talents!"

"Nor any man who can say things like that to me, and get away with them!" And then, abruptly, her tone changed, became quiet, calm: "You know, this isn't bad coffee. When we've eaten, I want to talk with you, a long time, in your tent, with the door closed."

"You forget, my sweet, quite aside from any romantic interludes, I have work to do, a schedule to keep. I shall keep it, no matter what. If you want to talk to me, you'll have to do it on the run."

She did not answer him, nor did she agree. When she and he had eaten, and she had left the breakfast dishes for him to wash and dry, she went to her dugout, returned to the tent with a small handbag. She entered and lowered the flaps. He could hear her inside, changing clothes, he supposed. Yesterday that fact alone would have sent him to her, crazy with desire for her. Now, he was not interested. Now and again, as he waited for her to join him, he looked away toward the tarn of the alligators, trying to make up his mind about last night, trying to convince himself that it had been a nightmare—trying to convince himself that it had been nothing of the sort—and not succeeding either way.

For his empty hunger for Cienega, instead of being lessened by the pres-

ence of Eileen, was growing. If, as the day passed, it continued to grow, he would go seeking Cienega, though the way led to death in the tarn. A feeling of fatalism possessed him. If he must die in the tarn for Cienega, it was far better than living on without her—without making some attempt to regain her.

"Pat?"

"Yes?"

"Come in here a moment, will you? I want you to help me for a few moments, if you can spare the time from your silly schedule."

STILL thinking of Cienega, he went to the tent, spread the flaps, stepped inside. For a moment he could see but dimly in the tent, and then he could see all too plainly. Standing in the middle of the floor, looking oddly as Cienega had looked against the open door last night, was Eileen.

"Now, look at me for a full minute, Patrick Garrity!" she said, all the old challenge in her voice. "And if you can turn away without taking me in your arms, and kissing me, and going madder by the minute over me—then I'll say you've really found the right woman. And I'll dress my shameless self, and go away from here, and never bother you again. For that will be love, or something suspiciously like it, my sweet, and even I wouldn't go up against that."

Pat looked at her critically. She was undeniably lovely. No man—who had never seen Cienega!—could see her like this without trying his level best to know her better. Pat himself, meeting her eyes, then allowing his own to play over her, moved closer to her. There was no upsurge of desire, though the delicate perfume she used, individual as Eileen herself, and just as seductive, tickled his nostrils. Her skin was white, and smooth, and perfect, and seemed to thrill with life, with

new, rampant life, because he was close to her.

But he shook his head. "It won't do, Eileen. You're lovely, all right, but you don't click with me. Not today—nor will you click tomorrow or ever again. I'm so sure of that that I could kiss you, hold you in my arms, and then turn and walk out of the door without a backward glance."

"Could you?" she asked, and he thought how silly a woman's coqueties became, when used on a man who didn't give a damn about that particular woman.

He strode to her. He put his arms about her. He held her close. He kissed her on the lips—and was fiercely kissed in return. Almost as fiercely, savagely, possessively kissed, as Cienega had kissed him. Almost as thoroughly possessed, in strong arms, against an urgent body, as Cienega had possessed him. Yet the all-important something was lacking in Eileen that was rampant in Cienega.

He released himself, and told her so. Instantly she slapped his face, screamed obscenities at him. She scratched him, while he backed away. The blood streamed down both his cheeks. She ripped and clawed at his clothing. She jerked his shirt from his body, and his undershirt, so that his muscled, tanned flesh was uncovered before her greenish vindictive eyes. She advanced on him again. He could not bring himself to turn and run from her. Let her fight this all out within herself, see where it got her. Let her know, once and for all, just how little she really meant to him—this woman who had deliberately left a trail to him for her husband to follow, because it was not enough for her that two men had slain themselves because of her; that she wished a man to kill another man because of her.

"No man ever refused me, shamed me, like this, and got away with it!"

she said in a low, tense voice, through set teeth. "I won't have it. I'll stay here until Radcliffe comes, if I have to sleep in the swamp like an alligator, or like your friend of the jungles. And I hope he kills you! But if he doesn't, let me tell you this: one day you'll want me again, and I'll laugh at you until you are shamed as I have been shamed. . . ."

"I didn't bring this situation about, Eileen," he said patiently. "I didn't want or expect it to happen. . . ."

"Not even when you heard me this morning, saw me outside?"

"I did not want it to happen. I was simply lost, terrified, lonely, and in need of being comforted, babied. That's why I ran to you as I'd have run to my mother if she had been here."

"I'm nobody's mother, you fool! I never will be. My kind of woman couldn't be. But I'm here, and I've made a fool of myself, because of you, and you'll pay for it. Not only that, but that floosie of yours will pay for it, too. I dare you to tell me where she hangs out!"

Pat sighed, turned, and pointed toward the east. "Over there, through the woods, is a deep black pool. As nearly as I could figure out, she ran away from me with the alligators last night, and simply dived into the pool and disappeared! That's the ghastly thing I wanted to tell you about."

Eileen laughed, savagely, biting her lower lip as she did so. The resultant sound was far from pleasant.

"She isn't afraid of the 'gators, and they won't bother her, because they know her! She feeds them, or something. She simply swam the pool. She's got a flophouse for her men visitors, somewhere beyond the pool, that's all! But go on, tell me about it!"

HE studied her for a moment. "Keep your fingernails out of my hair," he said, "and I *will* tell you! First,

Eileen, she has something, something out of the jungle, out of the dawn of time, that a woman of the cities like you could never understand. You are a beautiful woman. You drive men to drink, and to self-destruction. She drives them to madness because they cannot have her. They fear death because they fear that, after death, they will not exist, even in the spiritual world, where they can eat their hearts out for her!"

"She sounds like a blood-sucking vampire! She certainly got her incisors into you, didn't she, you sap!"

"There is something of the vampire in her, yes—just enough of that something to have what so many men, especially men like me, desire in all women, and so seldom find."

"No woman has more of the jungle in her—if men happen to want that!—then little Eileen, and you of all people should know it."

"I know both of you," said Pat quietly, "and I still say—what I just said. Compared to Cienega—I might as well make it clear first as last, for all time—you are a harridan. You're a skeleton. You're nothing. A bag of bones and flesh that looks like a woman, that's all! Beside Cienega you are absolutely nothing at all! Nothing. She puts every woman I ever knew so completely in the shade, out of the running! Why, take Radcliffe. You've no doubt that he's your absolute slave, have you?"

"Of course not, the fool!"

"He would take one look at her, and follow her anywhere—even into that tarn!"

The face of Eileen Radcliffe began to work crazily, as though she were about to go mad, knew she was going mad, and were fighting with all her power to remain sane. Low, savage words poured from her shaking lips, as Patrick told her, in complete detail—because he knew without prompting

that she would be satisfied with nothing less—what had happened last night. He watched her lash herself into a fury that knew no bounds. But he never expected to happen, what did happen.

SHE suddenly flung herself past him, raking him across the face as she did—and was out in the clearing, running with the speed of a deer. She was unconcerned about snakes striking at her, and there might well have been some. She screamed as she ran—toward the black tarn he had pointed out to her.

Not until she was almost there did he suspect that she was really going to hunt out Cienega. . . .

Then he was racing after her, screaming for her to come back, telling her of the savage, monstrous snouts just under the black water. She heard, and understood, and screamed back at him.

"If she can fool them so can I! No woman is better at anything than little Eileen!"

Then, while he raced after her, yelling like a madman, she vanished into the woods. A moment later, approaching the woods himself, he heard a splash as she hit the black pool in a running dive. He broke through the brush, to see her head on the surface. . . .

Then came the snouts, and Eileen screamed. She twisted, or *was twisted*, toward him as she went under. Terror, appeal, were in her eyes as the black water closed over her. For more than a minute the black water boiled and bubbled like a pit of tar. Then it was still, and its surface was tinged with red that was gradually being absorbed by the black.

Horrified, frightened, almost crazy, Pat Garrity returned to his tent. There was nothing he could do. Radcliffe, husband of Eileen, came out of the tent as he approached. His face was livid with jealous rage.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Where

is Eileen? Her clothes are in your tent! Where is she, damn you? I'll kill you, out of hand!"

"The pool," said Garrity, mumbling like a half-wit. "She went in, to get away from me. The alligators got her! This is bigger than either of us, Radcliffe. There's nothing you can do. Sit down, and I'll tell you about it."

**R**ADCLIFFE sat down upon the ground suddenly, as though the world had been snatched from under his feet. The harassed, tortured eyes he lifted to Garrity's begged him to say that the horrible statement he had just made was not true. But Garrity could not say it.

He forced food, and coffee, upon the stricken man. Then, slowly, scarcely believing it himself as he talked, and forgetting all about the schedule that had seemed so important, he began again to tell the strangest story a man had ever listened to, or a woman. When he had finished Radcliffe said,

"Show me the woman, Cienega, and I'll believe you. If it's a lie, if you're hiding Eileen out on me, I'll take you apart with my bare hands."

And with a horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach, Garrity realized that Cienega would come again, in spite of what she had said, not because of Garrity himself, but because of Radcliffe, a new experience for the eldritch mistress of the tarn.

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## CHAPTER IV

### RETRIBUTION

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**W**HEN night came down over the everglades again, after a day spent with a madman who could scarcely be prevented from leaping to his death in the black tarn, Garrity and Radcliffe sat in the tent,

made lighter than day now because both were afraid of the dark, and Garrity had lighted his gasoline lantern.

Moreover, he had brought in an extra cot from his supplies—not that either expected ever to sleep again. Radcliffe kept raving about his Eileen, in the bottom of the pool, what there might be left of her. He could not be convinced that Garrity spoke truly. He could not believe that, in spite of what Garrity said, she had not reached the far shore of the pool. He'd been mistaken, hadn't he, when he had seen the alligators drag her under? There wasn't, really, any such woman as Cienega, even though he had heard of a woman by that name, in the small town where he had got the pursuit dugout?

"Yes, there is such a woman, Radcliffe," said Garrity, something akin to contemptuous pity in his eyes for the broken wretch before him. "She was here last night, as I have told you. She will come again tonight, because you are here."

Garrity didn't really believe it, because he didn't wish to; but he saw the pale eyes of Radcliffe brighten with anticipation, in spite of what had happened here, because it was always in the nature of a man, even a weak man, to believe in his own charm where women were concerned.

"When night comes, really," said Garrity, "she will come. Then, from her own lips, you shall hear the story."

"Tell me, tell me again, what happened last night when she came."

Garrity wished he had never been such a fool as to tell this weakling what he had told Eileen, that had sent her headlong to her death in the pool. But he had had to, and he made it clear she had gone crazy at the mere thought that Cienega could rob her, not of Garrity, but of Radcliffe. So now Garrity must tell it all over again, while Radcliffe sat forward on his cot, weak mouth hanging open, to drink in every word.

Some imp of the perverse in Garrity bade him furnish details, enlarging on them for the morbid satisfaction of seeing the light of weird desire kindle in the face and eyes of Radcliffe. He knew that behind Radcliffe's brain the pictures he was drawing were taking shape—but that Radcliffe saw himself in Garrity's place, in all the pictures.

When Garrity had finished Radcliffe was silent a long time. Then, he chose the supreme torture for himself.

"Now," he said, "tell me about Eileen, and about you! Not about today. I believe that. But she told me, taunting me, about a night with you. I want to know if she told me the truth. If she didn't, it can't matter now that she is dead, but maybe it would help the hurt a little if *you* would tell me—and perhaps make me hate her, so it won't hurt so much, so that I can tell myself that it is better for all of us that she is dead."

Garrity stared at the weakling in stark unbelief. Could it be possible that he actually wished to hear the details of an affair his wife had had with another man—even though it was before they had married? Well, so be it; if that were what he wished, he should have it.

A little cry of pain came from Radcliffe's lips as Garrity told of his memory of Eileen, when her nude profile had been against the dimly lighted window of his apartment, before the holocaust that had sent Garrity into semi-madness when she had cast him aside. At the sound of the cry Garrity paused,

"You'd rather not hear the rest?"

"I've got to know—the worst, Garrity, you see?"

Garrity did not see, but he told him, just the same. And he had scarcely finished—and gloated not a little over the greenish cheeks of the man he was torturing—than Radcliffe raised his head, said in a hoarse, scared voice,

"What's that, outside? I hear some-

thing coming! I hear a lot of crawling things!"

HIS heart cold in his breast, Garrity made answer. "It's Cienega. I told you she would come. And she's bringing her hellish bodyguards. I wish to God I could step to the door this minute, and shoot her to death! It would be better for both of us—and for her. For she will never be aught but abysmally hungry, for men . . . men . . . men. . . ."

Then Garrity listened in his turn, to the slithering sounds, the crawling sounds, until they stopped—though he could hear no signal, no word of command, but only the hissing of the great reptiles, and their jaws snapping down, hard—and the soft voice of Cienega came in to them,

"Patrick Garrity! Patrick Garrity!"

"Yes, Cienega?" he rose, went to the door, peered through the flaps. She was out there, in the midst of the black ferment, rained with countless obsidian eyes. Nude, as she had been last night, save for her mantle of hair. "What is it, Cienega?"

"It is about the woman. Come out. I must talk to you, where the other cannot hear."

"She is safe?" called Radcliffe, rising, trying to push Garrity away. But Garrity thrust him back. He suffered agonies when he thought of Radcliffe, the weakling, seeing his gorgeous Cienega.

"Yes," said Cienega. "Yes, of course. She is safe—with my children."

Then Garrity, bidding Radcliffe sit down and remain quiet, lest a disturbance set the saurians to an attack, went out to Cienega. She kept the saurians back from him, with little hissing sounds. He strode past an honor guard of opened jaws, while odorous breaths hissed in his face, to stand before Cienega. Her allure of last night came back, utterly overpowering, and he



would have taken her in his arms.

But when he reached for her she placed the limb in his hands—the limb with its tuft of leaves. Then, before he could realize what she had done, or that he held the limb, she had slid past him like a wraith, and gone into the tent with Radcliffe. Garrity started to follow her—to be met by a wall of hissing, certain death.

He stood stock still, his body a statue of horror. Then, in spite of his terror of the saurians, he turned his gaze on the tent. With the great light on he could see the shadows of the two people, inside the tent. He could hear the low, challenging laughter of Cienega. He saw her standing with her arms flung wide. Then he saw Radcliffe rush to her, clasp her in his arms. Saw her bend backward until her black hair hung free, down her back. Then he saw, not Radcliffe's hands, but Cienega's own, pulling and ripping at the clothing of Radcliffe. He tried to rush the tent again, and again the hissing held him back. Something in the sound

of it reminded him that Cienega, in passing him, and leaving him to her guardians, had told him something. He had scarcely heard it, so upset had he been at seeing her again:

"Remember, when you come to the end, that Cienega said that it was death to love her! *Remember that I am all the women you have loved—and have cast off!*"

Fury gripped him as he hurled himself at the tent—fury, and mad jealousy, and fear. . . . Fear that this was no insane nightmare, fear that this was reality. . . .

He felt terrific pain in his leg. He had forgotten the hissing, drumming guardians. Forgot until he had fallen flat on his face, his legs and arms flailing wide.

But then it was too late to remember, for they had fastened upon him, wherever they could. And before he could understand the horror of what that meant, the 'gators had begun their grisly spinning. . . .

FINIS

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**SEX HEALTH**

# BLACK-MASS BRIDE

by Mindret Lord

Author of "The House That Horror Built," etc.

---

*Yes, I, Jay Arnold, erstwhile sane up-standing young business man, had become the notorious Archfiend from Hell, and to-night, like all nights, I would go forth to brand my newest Black Mass bride!*

---



*The man-goat raised a sharp hoof and plunged it downward cruelly*

**M**AYBE it's just coincidence that I had this dream—and maybe it's something a lot less easy to explain. . . . I was in a small, black room that was almost like a chapel. But the furniture was not the furniture of a chapel, for though, it, too, was upholstered in black, it was rich, soft and luxurious. I was alone in the room and it was very dark, but presently a dim, rosy glow began to appear. There was an acrid, sulphuric odor in the air. I heard a sound like a woman moaning hopelessly. Then the black drapes parted and a young woman entered. Her only clothing was the long, dark

hair that cascaded down her graceful back. The light was not strong enough for me to see her face distinctly, but the youthful beauty of her body made me gasp. Sobbing as if her heart were broken, she sank to the floor and bowed her head in her hands. The curtains parted again and a second apparition entered. From the waist up, it was the figure of a man. But below the waist were the furry legs and sharp, cloven hooves of a goat. The creature approached the young woman, apparently said something that I did not hear and made an imperious gesture with his hand. As if in obedience to a com-

mand—but in mortal terror—the girl lay back upon the floor. The creature was not yet satisfied. He gave another order and she crossed her arms behind her back. Suddenly the reason became apparent—the man-goat raised a small, sharp hoof and as it plunged toward the girl's firmly swelling breast—

The telephone rang. More than half asleep and still shocked by my vivid dream, I picked up the receiver.

"Jay! Jay, darling! I—I'm frightened!"

It was Victoria, my fiancée.

"What is it?" I asked. "What's the matter?"

Her voice sounded hysterical. "It's—I don't know what it is. Something has happened to me. Can you come, now? Right away?"

"Certainly! I'll be there in a minute!"

AS I threw an overcoat over my pajamas, I noticed it was a little after two in the morning. The night air was cold against my face as I drove the half mile to the big, gloomy mansion where Victoria lived with her father, Henry Starr. Though Mr. Starr was away from the city, I knew that there were servants in the house, so I couldn't imagine what could have happened to cause Victoria to call me at such an hour. And still in the back of my mind was the troubling picture of my dream.

Turning into the driveway, I noticed that the only light visible was in the front hall. I slammed on the brakes, skidded to a stop and ran up the stairs as Victoria opened the door. A flowing, black satin robe concealed a lacey nightgown. I took her in my arms and kissed her and felt her shaking with fright.

"What is it? What's—"

"Sh! I don't want to wake the servants!"

I closed the door and followed her

into the stiffly formal living room. We sat down on a couch and she turned on the reading light at her side.

"Now!" I said. "Tell me what frightened you. I hope it wasn't the same dream I had."

She hesitated. It was as if she had to force herself to speak. "Jay—darling—I know you won't believe me. It's too—too strange—"

"Stop it!" I said. "I'll believe anything you tell me. If you told me the end of the world had come yesterday, I'd believe it."

She smiled in spite of herself. "But I don't believe it—or at least I don't understand it, myself. All I know is that I went to bed about eleven-thirty—and then, just before I phoned you I felt a terrible pain—here—" and she gently laid her palm over her left breast. "It was in my sleep, you understand—and even thought it hurt, I couldn't seem to wake up. Finally I did, though—and then—when I looked at myself—!" Suddenly she was weeping on my shoulder.

"But what is it?" I demanded. "Shall we get a doctor? I'll call him—"

"No, no! I don't want a doctor. No doctor could help me now!"

In a moment, she straightened up and seemed to have better control of herself for she spoke in a voice that was almost normal. "Jay—I've never been immodest with you—or with anyone—so you won't think badly of me if I show you what happened to me? I've got to show you! After all, you're going to marry me—and it's your right to know!"

Victoria tremblingly parted her satin robe and exposed a bosom of such perfect, ivory white beauty that my heart leaped and pounded painfully. Then I saw! Distinct and sharply outlined, just above the coral tip of the left breast, was the mark of a cloven hoof!

"For God's sake!" I exclaimed.

"How? Why?"

"I've told you everything I know about it. I've tried to wash it off, but it won't come off."

I didn't tell her, but I knew why it wouldn't come off—it was burnt in, either with heat or with acid.

Wincing at the touch of the material, Victoria recrossed her robe over her breast. "But how did it happen? How *could* it have happened?" Then, whispering, she asked, "Jay—you don't think it's anything—supernatural?"

"No!" I tried to sound a whole lot more certain than I was. "Some madman—some escaped lunatic must have done this! Or perhaps somebody in the house—and if that's so, we're going to find out, right now!"

**FURY** and fear mingled in my brain.

I was determined to find a logical explanation—and to punish the fiend who had harmed Victoria. All the rest of the night I worked—beginning in Victoria's bedroom—testing the windows to see if they could have been entered—examining the door which she claimed to have locked—then, interviewing the butler, the cook and the chauffeur and going through all their rooms for some sign of the instrument that had been used to make the brand.

But it was all to no avail and as dawn began to light the sky, I had to admit that I had not discovered one possible clue. Finally, I made Victoria take a sedative and go back to bed—and, tired and discouraged, I went home to dress.

After I had shaved and gulped a cup of coffee, I went to the office and tried to work—tried to concentrate on the letters I had to read and to write and to attend to the thousand routine details of my job. But this morning it was far from easy to do even the simplest task, for, crowding everything else out of my brain was the memory of that angry red stigma on the alabaster breast

of my beloved. And then, there was that other, no less terrible memory of my dream. What connection could exist between the two? Was it, in fact, Victoria whom I had seen in that vision? And if so, what in the name of heaven or hell, was the man-goat creature who held her in such complete subjection?

Miss Elwin, my secretary, always opened and read those letters which were addressed to me and were not marked, "Personal." When she had disposed of the afternoon's mail, she handed me a sheaf of letters which required my attention—and then she gave me one more, single sheet.

"This came in a plain envelope," she said. "Is it a joke, or something?"

She laid it on my desk. Scorched into the surface of the cheap white paper was the mark of a cloven hoof—exactly similar to that on Victoria's flawless skin.

I cursed and Miss Elwin looked at me in amazement. Despite the fact that she was pretty beyond the average, I had always been most formal and polite with her and I suppose my sudden anger was a shock.

"What's the matter, Mr. Arnold?" she asked. "Is it something—"

"It's nothing! Nothing at all!" And I crumpled up the paper and flung it into the waste basket. She looked at me curiously for a second, shrugged her shoulders and went back to her desk.

When I saw the headlines of the afternoon papers, my stomach seemed suddenly to knot inside of me. **MURDER VICTIM BRANDED! . . .** *Early this morning the body of Miss Lorna Dane, only daughter of a wealthy society family, was found in the Dane garden . . . The young woman had evidently been the victim of a sexual degenerate . . . Marks of branding . . .* The story was vague about details, but God knows it was definite enough to chill my soul! I jammed my hat on my

head and strode out of the office without a word in answer to Miss Elwin's questioning gaze.

Jim O'Leary, the District Attorney, was a casual friend of mine. When I got to him, he asked, "But Jay—why do you want to see the poor girl?"

"I know her," I told him. "I knew her well. Lorna was one of my fiancée's best friends."

"But is that any reason for wanting to see her—now?"

I WAS tired—and scared, I might as well admit—and that made me incautious. "Damn it all!" I said. "I just want to see her! Isn't that enough for you? Do I have to draw a diagram of my reasons?"

"All right," said O'Leary. "We'll have a look at her together."

Lorna's body was lying in a private undertaker's establishment. O'Leary asked the manager, "Have you started work on her yet?"

"No. She's still on ice. We always do our embalming at night."

The three of us went into the mortuary. The manager pulled out a slab and O'Leary said, "You wanted to look at her—look at her!"

One glance was enough to tell the tragic story. It was as if some wild, satanic dance had been performed on the girl's delicate torso—she had literally been stamped to death. But it was the sight of the red, cloven hoof brand on the crushed flesh that made me groan aloud.

In a cold, hard voice, O'Leary said, "It's not pretty, is it? Now tell me why you wanted to see her."

What could I tell him? How could it possibly help to drag Victoria into this affair?

"If you know anything about this, I advise you to talk—now!"

"I don't know a thing about it," I said. "Call it morbid curiosity, if you

like."

O'Leary stared at me for a second before he snapped, "Be that way if you want to. But I warn you—you're not doing yourself any good!"

Without another word, we parted on the sidewalk in front of the undertaker's. He drove off in his official car and I took a taxi to Victoria's house.

I left the taxi in the street and walked up the driveway to the house. Old Peters was trimming the hedge and I stopped to speak to him. I had known him and his wife ever since I was a child. He was a gardener and general handyman who worked for a lot of the older residents of the neighborhood, and his wife did the heavier cleaning and housework.

Peters said, "I heard the awful news about Miss Dane. I do some work for them. I used to see her around. It's terrible, isn't it, Mr. Jay?"

I didn't want to talk about it. Instead, I asked, "How's Mrs. Peters?"

"Isn't she at your place? I think this is the day she cleans for you."

"She probably is," I said. "I forgot."

I went on to the house. Arthur, the butler, let me in.

"Is Miss Starr here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her I want to see her, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

But he didn't go and I asked, "What's the matter?"

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and asked, "About last night, sir. Would you mind telling me what you were looking for?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"If anything is missing, sir, I wish to say—"

I interrupted him. "Nothing's missing! Get Miss Starr and don't worry your head about it."

"Yes, sir." Still, he didn't move.

"Well?"

"If—if it had anything to do with

Miss Dane—”

“Why do you ask that?” I yelled it at him.

Not a line changed in his fat, placid face. “Because, sir—it’s my own opinion there’s a devil in this house!”

“There’s a what!”

“A devil, sir. A devil in Mr. Starr’s secret room. Sometimes when I put my ear to the door, I’ve heard it moving.”

AT any other time, I would have laughed and dismissed the whole thing as the fancy of a harmless idiot. As I opened my mouth to demand an explanation, Victoria called, “Jay! Is that you?”

Arthur stood aside for her to enter the room, then stepped out and closed the door. Victoria was dressed and apparently somewhat rested, but her skin was very pale and her eyes were wide and dark with fright.

“Have you heard about Lorna?”

“Yes.” And then I made the mistake of saying that I had seen her.

“Did she—did she have—this?” She touched her breast.

I wanted to lie about it, but she could see the truth in my eyes. Shuddering, she clung to my arm, and asked, “Jay—will I die that way, too?”

“Of course not!” I told her. “They’ll catch this fiend within a few hours. Why, you’re perfectly safe. I’ll bet half the police department’s in this neighborhood, right now!”

“But—suppose it’s not a *man*?”

“Nonsense! . . . Now, what’s this I hear about a secret room?”

Victoria nodded. “It was in the house when father bought it and he’s just left it the way it was. I can’t get in because he has the only key, but I can show you where it is, if you like. Why are you curious?”

I didn’t tell her about Arthur’s “devil.” Instead, I asked, “Have you ever been in it? What’s it like?”

She said, “I don’t think anybody’s been in it for years—it’s so—so depressing. All black—black draperies, black furniture, black everything. . . .”

As we walked toward the concealed door, Victoria went on talking but I scarcely heard her. What could this be, but the black chapel of my dream?

The small black boor was set behind a sliding panel in the library wall. Victoria said, “Isn’t it strange? Why on earth would anybody want to build a thing like this?”

Though she had said that her father had the only key, I tried the door. To my astonishment, it was open!

“That’s funny! It’s always kept locked. I suppose father must have forgotten—”

I turned around, “Victoria,” I said, “I’m going in there and I don’t want you to follow me. You stay here, will you please?”

“But why?”

“Just—for no reason. But do as I say, will you?”

Beside the door there was a light switch. I flicked it on and closed the door behind me. My first feeling was one of relief, because it seemed to me that the room was not exactly like the one in my dream—but then I realized that in my vision, I had seen only one end of the room.

Without being absolutely certain of what I was looking for, I went through every inch of the black chamber, thoroughly. And the most that I found was a possible explanation of the noises Arthur had said he heard—apparently rats were in the walls.

When I had examined the floor and the furniture, without finding anything revealing, I looked behind the wall draperies. Opposite the door leading into the library, I found another door which was locked. Trying to remember the plan of the house, I concluded that this door must lead into the garden

—but it, too, must have been cleverly concealed on the outside for I was sure that there was no sign of a door in the house wall, at that point.

IT was perhaps three quarters of an hour later when I stepped back into the library. Victoria was not there and I supposed that she had tired of waiting for me. I went into the living room. She was not there. I shouted her name. There was no answer. With sudden panic clutching at my heart, I raced through the house, shouting, "Victoria! Victoria!" In the hall, I ran into Arthur who said he hadn't seen her. She was not in the kitchen, not in the basement—she was gone!

Perhaps she had just stepped out the front door. I ran down the front steps to the driveway. There was no sign of her. Peters was just driving away in the broken down truck he used to carry his hoses and gardening tools. I yelled at him, "Have you seen Miss Starr?"

"No—she hasn't been this way. Is she lost?"

I shook my head. After all, wasn't I getting excited over nothing? Peters drove his rattletrap away and I went back into the house to wait for Victoria.

It was just about five-thirty and I decided to call my office. Miss Elwin answered the phone.

I said, "I won't be back today. Has anything important—"

She cut me off with a startled exclamation. "Oh! Oh, Mr. Ar—" She didn't finish my name.

"Now what?" I asked. "What's the matter with you?"

There was a moment's pause and then she spoke in a tone that was absolutely different from any I had ever heard her use. "Why yes, Mr. Arbutnot—I'm so glad you called. . . . Yes, I'll be delighted to see you, tonight—at seven? Yes, seven should be

all right. You know the address? Apartment 12 F, 4502 South Washington—"

I said, "Have you gone crazy? What is all this?"

"Would you mind repeating my address, so that I'm sure you've got it right? I'd hate to think of you wandering the streets all night . . . trying to find me."

Then I knew. Detectives were sitting in my office, listening to this conversation and waiting for me. I said, "I've got the address. I'll be there—and thanks."

When, after a half hour of agonized suspense, Victoria had not returned, I called the police. Without giving my name, I reported her missing. Then I left the house and walked down the darkening street to the boulevard. At the corner, I bought an extra paper. Headlines screamed, BRAND MURDER SUSPECT HUNTED! There it was—*Jay Arnold, advertising executive and socialite, wanted for questioning in the murder of Lorna Dane. . . .* The story told nothing more than that I had shown an unexplained interest in viewing the corpse—that I had received a mysterious, symbolic message at my office—and that I had disappeared. Adding it up, I could hardly blame O'Leary for his suspicion.

I pulled my hat down over my eyes, hailed a taxi and drove out to Miss Elwin's address, arriving just about seven. I waited until I was sure that there were no detectives hanging around the entrance to the big building, and then I went up. Miss Elwin let me into a modernistic, two-room apartment. She was dressed in lounging pajamas. For the first time, I realized how pretty she actually was. She pushed me into a chair and handed me a drink that she had poured.

"Miss Elwin—" I began.

"Call me 'Pat.' We're not in the of-

face, now."

"Pat, then—I suppose you know the police are after me?"

She nodded. "But you didn't kill that girl, did you?"

"Of course not! But my innocence isn't going to keep me out of jail. Will you let me use your phone?"

I CALLED the Starr residence. Victoria had not been heard from. I asked Arthur where I could reach Mr. Starr and he gave me the address of the Claymore in Boston. I put in a long-distance call. The Claymore said that Henry Starr had checked out the day before, leaving no forwarding address.

When I put the phone back on the hook, Pat said, "You look tired to death. Let me fix up your drink—and you just try to relax for a little while."

She switched on the radio and tuned in an orchestra. I leaned back in the chair and tried to think. . . . I knew that since the dawn of Christianity, the mark of the cloven hoof had been regarded as the seal of Satan—a symbol of paganism, of witchcraft—and that it was in some way associated with the vile, horrific rites of the Black Mass. But this was the Twentieth Century—an age of science and of reason! To believe that the Archfiend of Hell had set his seal upon Victoria's white breast was to admit both madness and defeat, for what could a mere mortal hope to accomplish against so powerful an adversary? No!—some human had done these things—but how? and for what purpose? Would Victoria be crushed to death as that other poor girl had been? How had she disappeared from the house, unobserved? There were only the back and the front entrances to the Starr house; the cook swore she had not left the kitchen and Peters had been in the driveway where he could not have missed seeing her if she had passed. . . . And what was the signifi-

cance of that black chamber? Could it mean that Mr. Starr, himself, was in some way involved—was it his hand that had set those foul marks upon his daughter and his daughter's friend?

Pat returned with a freshened glass of whiskey and soda. "Drink it," she said. "You need it."

I was a fool, for I should have known the effect that liquor would have on me. After all, I had had only about one hour's sleep in the last thirty-six and I had eaten neither breakfast, lunch, nor dinner. God knows I was frantic with worry for Victoria, but when Pat sat on the arm of my chair, drew me back and began to stroke my forehead, it was almost hypnotically soothing. My eyelids drooped. . . .

The radio woke me—not because it was loud, but because it was saying something of such vital importance to me that it could actually penetrate my sleeping brain. Apparently, I had missed the opening phrases, but I heard the words that followed—"murdered in the same way as Lorna Dane. Rosetta Lawson was a friend of the Dane girl and was also a friend of Victoria Starr, who has not yet been found—"

Another one! I knew Rosetta—had known her all my life. She had been a charming, gentle girl whom everybody liked—and now she was dead. Horribly dead. "Victoria!" I thought. "Oh my God—Victoria!"

The radio went on: "The police report that they have discovered definite evidence in Jay Arnold's apartment which links him with the crimes—a branding iron answering the description of the instrument sought. A state-wide search is being made and authorities believe that it will be only a matter of hours before Arnold is taken into custody."

So I was to take the rap for Satan! It was a grim idea. My wrist watch indicated eleven—I had been asleep about



three hours. And meanwhile, where was Pat? I wanted to tell her that I was going, though I didn't yet know where.

APPARENTLY slumbering, the girl lay on her back in the bedroom. The top of her pajamas had been discarded and her skin was bare above the waist—bare and gleaming in the moonlight that struck across the couch. Feeling guilty, but perhaps a little reluctant, I was about to turn away, when I saw the brand on her shadowed breast!

If you have ever doubted your own sanity, you will know the torture of that moment. Was it I who had done these things? Could it be that I deserved to be hanged for murders I had committed in an unconscious state? As I stared at this girl, for the moment imagining that she had been the victim of my own attack, I suddenly saw her breast rise and fall in a deep, long-drawn sigh.

She was asleep—unaware of what had happened to her—just as Victoria had been. Presently, the pain would wake her—screaming. But at least she was not dead.

Questions demanded answers—all the old questions and now, a hundred new ones. Had Pat let an intruder in the door without shouting to me or to her neighbors? Was it because it was someone she knew? Why had I been left sleeping in the apartment with her? Suddenly the answer to that one occurred to me—the police would arrive, find me with my latest "victim" and the case against me would be complete. I would be as good as executed! Perhaps it would be only seconds before the heavy fist of the Law would be pounding on the apartment door.

I pushed up the bedroom window. There was an iron fire-escape outside. As I reached the bottom, I saw a basement door standing ajar. I stepped in-

side and closed it, finding myself in the furnace room. There was nobody there, but a pair of dirty overalls lay over a bench. I threw my hat, coat and tie into the blazing fire, struggled into the loose-fitting overalls and smeared a couple of lines of coal dust across my face. As a last touch to my disguise, I picked up a shovel, shouldered it and walked out to the street. Squad cars arrived at the building's entrance as I turned the corner. I would have given a lot to know who told them where I was. But the tip-off had probably been anonymous.

I was afraid to take a streetcar, or a bus, or even a taxi. I was even afraid to walk too fast, so it took me over an hour to get to the Starr house. As I walked, my mind worked overtime. . . . Who but Henry Starr, himself, could be guilty of this whole ghastly business? Supposing he had no alibi—he knew all three of the girls and they would have trusted him—he knew of my secretary and he could have found her address—any number of times he had had the opportunity of stealing my apartment keys long enough to have duplicates made. And in addition, his was the black chamber in which the murders might actually have been committed. But if it was Henry Starr, would he do to his own daughter what he had done to the others? I hoped against hope that, fiend though he might be, some faint spark of decency and compassion might still burn in his soul.

I approached the Starr place from the back and as I entered the grounds, a blinding beam of light stabbed at me. My heart banged against my ribs, but somehow I managed to stand my ground.

The cop said, "Who're you? What you want?"

"I'm the janitor."

"Hey!" he exclaimed. "How many janitors do they have here?"

"Two," I had the wit to answer. "There's Bill and me. I just take care of the ashes."

He snapped off his light. "Okay. Go ahead."

HE stayed where he was, which was lucky for me because I had to let myself in the basement window, the door being locked. In the pitch darkness, I listened for sounds from above. The house was silent as death. Still carrying my shovel, I climbed the back stairs, passed through the kitchen and the quarters where the servants were all asleep, and finally tip-toed into the main hall.

On a table against the wall, a heavily shaded lamp was burning. In its rays lay a man's hat, gloves and walking stick. The initials, "H. S." were stamped in the sweat band. Henry Starr—murderer, torturer, madman—and father of my fiancée—if she were still alive!

I thought I knew where I would find him. In the library, the panel was in place, covering the small black door. As I slid it aside, I thought I heard a kind of metallic click, inside. Slowly, silently, I turned the knob and opened the door. The interior was as black as a photographer's darkroom. "So he's not here," I thought, stepping in and reaching for the light switch. Then—something soft dropped over my head and shoulders. I raised my hands to claw the stuff away and realized that I was too tired to make the effort. I was sinking—sinking—

Probably it was not many minutes before I came to. I was gagged and roped into a chair—as were Victoria and her father! Standing before us, cackling as if at some wonderful joke, were the last two people in the world whom I might have expected to see. Yet why had I not thought of them? I cursed myself for my stupidity. Of course—

Old Peters and his wife!

"Well, well," Peters drawled. "Isn't this just fine? Why, it's almost too good to be true that we have the three of you here, together. I thought sure the police would have young Arnold long before now. Didn't you leave that brandin' iron in his room, like you said, Mame?"

"Sure I left it—and they found it, too. But I thought you said you left him drunk in his sec'etary's place? Why didn't they get him, there?"

Peters scratched his head. "Darned if I know. They certainly should of. Well—it's better this way, anyhow."

The old man chuckled and turned to us. "I hope you folks will pardon an old couple for doing a little boasting—but it just seems to me that the occasion demands it. After all, we've been so *darn* clever! But maybe you'll want to know *why* all this, first? Well, it goes back quite a number of years—back to when Mame and I were still fairly young and had a daughter about the age of Victoria, here. I was a builder—but you wouldn't remember that. In fact, I built this house we're in, right now. I knew Henry Starr, in those days—and Arnold's father—and the fathers of the girls we—we took care of. But when my business began to fail, do you think they'd loan me so much as a penny? Me and my family went away broke. My daughter died. After years and years, Mame and I came back—and not a soul recognized us. Not even when they gave us work. . . . You know how my daughter died? She got work as a strike breaker in a factory—and she was kicked and beaten to death!"

Victoria had been stripped of most of her clothing and as she turned her terrified eyes upon me, I could read in them the pain that the cruelly cutting ropes were causing. And I could see that she knew—as her father and I did,

also—that we could expect no mercy. Peters and his wife had been planning their revenge for too long to abandon it now.

IN that same self-satisfied manner, Peters went on to explain the few details I had not guessed: the thing that had dropped over my head was merely a pillowslip, to the inside of which strips of cotton saturated with ether had been sewn. Victoria's disappearance had been easily managed—she was lying unconscious in the back of his truck when I called to him and asked whether he had seen her. Peters and his wife had made duplicate keys for all the houses where they had worked. It all sounded so simple—and so horrible.

"Let's get started," Mrs. Peters grumbled. "I can't wait to get my hands on that brat of a girl."

"Okay—but let's brand Arnold, first. After that, we'll kill him. Then we'll shoot Starr and leave the gun in his hand. The cops'll be able to figure out that Starr planted that brandin' iron in Arnold's place—"

"You're smart!"

"I sure am. Get out the acid and the rubber, Mame!"

Peters tore open the front of my shirt while his wife produced a small, round piece of sponge rubber which had been cut down the middle. Over this, she poured some sulphuric acid. Peters took it from her and pressed it against my chest—only for a moment, but that was enough. The burning, searing pain of it was like the fires of hell. Somehow, it made it seem a hundred times worse, that I was unable to move a muscle or utter a sound.

Indistinctly—as if through a haze—I saw Peters remove the ropes that held Victoria in her chair. Her wrists and ankles were still bound. Laughing, he threw her to the floor. His wife

crouched at her side and raked her fingernails across Victoria's flesh.

Then, above the old woman's insane giggle, I heard a voice. No—two voices! At first the words were indistinguishable but as they came closer, I could make out the words.

One voice said, "Two janitors may be all right, but *three* is *too* much!"

"But I keep telling you—" that was the voice of Arthur, the butler. "I keep telling you, we only have *one* janitor—and this is the man, right here."

"Then what happened to the other two—one with a truck and one with a shovel?"

(I would have given my hopes of salvation for the ability to yell!) Peters and his wife looked as if they had been turned to stone.

"We've been through the house," said Arthur helplessly. "They're not here—unless they're in that secret room."

"What secret room?"

"Well—I'm not supposed to know about it—and I'll probably be fired for telling you—but here it is."

The panel slid back. The knob turned, but the door did not open. Peters had locked it again. But thank God for the bull-headed obstinacy of the average cop. There was a moment's argument outside, and then a revolver shot smashed the lock!

Surgeons grafted new skin over our burns—Victoria would not marry me until the operation was done and completely healed. With those marks gone, it is easier to forget the whirlpool of terror that caught us in its vortex.

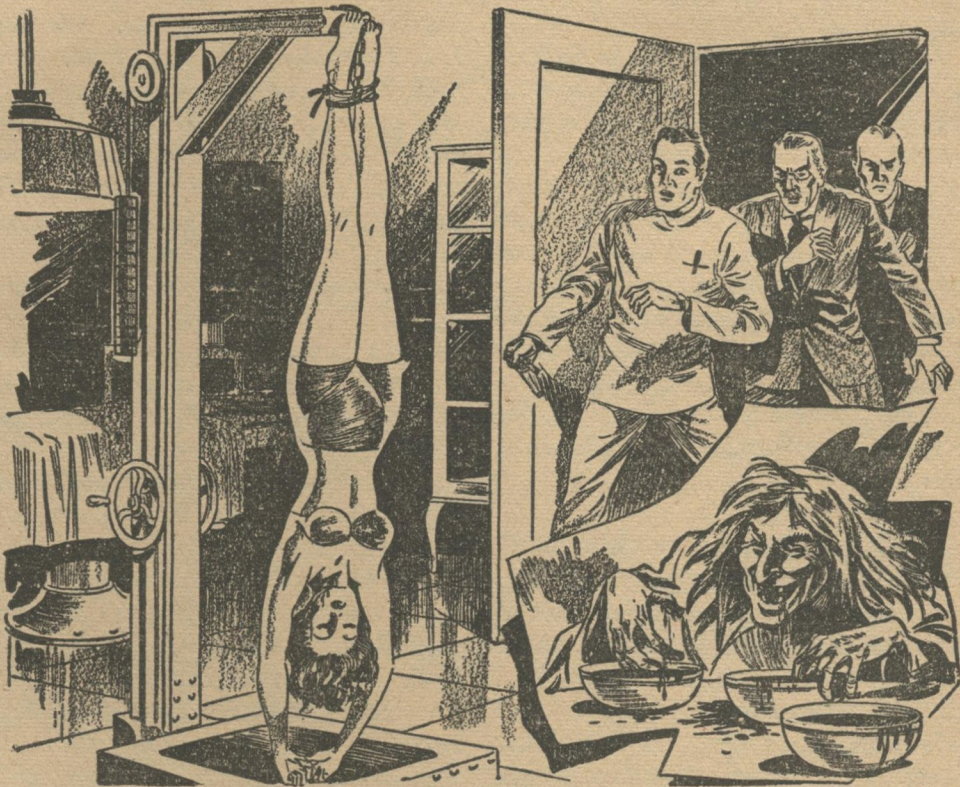
There is just one thing that I cannot explain—my dream. But for that mysterious vision, we would be dead, today. And the Peters would still be free to wreak their vengeance upon the rich and the daughters of the rich. Is it possible that a dream is no less real than reality, itself?

# BLOOD FOR THE VAMPIRE DEAD

by Robert Leslie Bellem

Author of "Curse of the Lovely Torso," etc.

*Was this then the horrible price Tim Croft must pay for his disbelief in devil-magic philtres?—forfeiture of his own lovely fiancée's life-blood to the undead corpse of Haunted Hollow!*



*Her lithe body swayed gently, and her flesh was fish-belly white!*

OVER the wind's midnight howling and the demoniac swirl of the mountain rainstorm came the frantic cry of a man harassed by some hideous mental torment. "Doc Croft! For God's sake open up afore hit's too late!"

Tim Croft, recently assigned by the state health authorities to take charge of this tiny charity hospital in the deep Ozarks, came abruptly awake as he heard the agonized call punctuated by an insistent hammering on the front door of his cabin, which was located to one side of the hospital proper. He slid his feet into worn slippers, made a light, crossed the cabin's single room and

opened the rough, hard-hewn door.

A spindrift of rain flurried at him, and with it came the man who had called out so despairingly. He was Jeb Starko from up in Haunted Hollow, a mile beyond the ridge—an area bedeviled, according to local superstition, by ghosts and similar evil creatures of the night. Soaked to the skin, his unshaven face pasty with fear, Starko stumbled over the threshold. "You got to stop 'em, doc!" he mouthed. "They're a-comin' to git my Eula!"

"Coming to get your wife? But she's—" Tim Croft choked back the gloomy news he had for the mountaineer. "Who's coming, and why?" he

demanded.

"The Ludwells from down in the flats, damn 'em! They're a-sayin' as how Eula is a witch-vampire like the hants that roam the ridge, an' they're aimin' to kill her. They'll do for you an' your nurses, too, if you ain't careful!"

Croft's nostrils pinched in as he drew a deep breath. The Ludwells were members of a clan which, from the very outset, had fiercely resented his coming to the region as only the deeply superstitious can resent progress. More than once they had muttered dark threats against him because of his efforts to educate the natives away from their old beliefs in herbs and charms and devil-magic philtres. If it were really true that they were now on their way to the hospital, then trouble was definitely brewing.

**T**HERE was an old revolver in the top drawer of Tim Croft's desk. He got it and thrust it into the pocket of his bathrobe. Then he pivoted as he heard scurrying footfalls behind him. His day nurse, Brenda Lemoyne, came pelting into the room, clad in a slicker over her nightgown. Daintily blonde and alluringly pretty, she panted: "Tim, darling, what's wrong? I heard a commotion—"

His arm went possessively about her slender waist. Some day Brenda would be his wife, when he had achieved a promotion to some more important post; and because his love for her was so great, he frowned uneasily at her presence in his quarters now. "You should have stayed in your cabin with Edith Paxon," he said gravely, referring to the nurse who shared duty with Brenda.

"But—but Edith isn't there. I looked for her before I came over here, but I couldn't find her. Tim—tell me what the trouble is!"

"The Ludwells are on their way here."

"The Ludwells? Oh, Tim, I—I'm frightened!"

"I'll handle them," he said evenly.

She shivered as she clung to him. "Maybe you won't be able to. You know how they hate us, Tim. And that Lige Ludwell is . . . dangerous. Only today, down in the village, somebody told me Lige turned his own daughter out into the storm after whipping her with a leather strap—because she'd fallen in love with a boy Lige disliked. A man capable of doing a thing like that is capable of doing . . . uglier things."

Croft summoned a smile. "Maybe they won't come here, after all."

Even as he spoke the words, the trembling Jeb Starko pointed through the open doorway toward the road. "Don't fool yourself, doc. Here they be now!"

Tim Croft peered into the storm and saw a group of grim-visaged men slogging forward through the ankle-deep mud. Three carried lanterns, while the remaining pair bore a limp burden that sagged gruesomely between them. It was the inert form of a young girl, stripped stark naked and horribly pallid in the lantern-glow.

Some inner sixth sense told Croft that the unclad girl was dead, and apprehension seized him when he recognized her as Lige Ludwell's daughter and saw the marks of a whiplash on her nude flesh. Lige was the acknowledged leader of the Ludwell clan, the bearded and sullen herb-dispenser responsible for most of the bad feeling against the hospital. But what had caused his girl's death, and why should he bring her body here?

The five surly mountaineers halted outside the door, and glowering Lige Ludwell stepped forward a truculent pace. "We-uns got business with you,

doc," he announced savagely.

"What kind of business?"

"We-uns want the witch-vampire."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes you do. Hit's Eula Starko we-uns air after. She vamped my datter, here. She kilt her an' drank up her blood." He gestured toward the pallid corpse held by his clansmen.

Croft's eyes narrowed. "There's no such thing as a witch-vampire. That's nonsense."

"No hit ain't, Doc Croft. You're a-harborin' Eula Starko here in your horspital an' you know she's a blood-drinkin' vampire. She hexed my datter up to the holler tonight an' kilt her. Now we-uns air aimin' to take her away from you an' drive a hick'ry stake through her heart, by God!"

Jeb Starko clutched at Croft's arm. "Don't let 'em git my Eula!" he choked. "She hain't no witch-vampire. She—she's jest sick."

"No, Jeb. I won't let them take her. But she isn't sick. It's worse than that." Tim Croft turned to the Ludwells. "I can prove you're wrong when you accuse Eula Starko of killing your girl tonight. You see, Eula died at four o'clock this afternoon."

A WILD cry surged from Jeb Starko's thin throat. "My Eula—dead? God, why didn't you tell me?"

"Hold it, Jeb. We did everything we possibly could for her. I told you at the start that she was suffering from nephrosis. That's an extremely rare disease, and very few cases ever pull through. You knew the treatment we were giving her. I'm sorry, old fellow. It wasn't anybody's fault. It was just Eula's time to go, I guess."

Starko shambled out into the rain, dazed, his bony shoulders shaking, his sobs rising above the wail of the wind. Meanwhile, Lige Ludwell came push-

ing into the cabin, bearded jaw jutting pugnaciously. "You say the witch-vampire's dead. We-uns don't believe you. We-uns want to see her corpse."

"I'm not compelled to show it to you, but I'm willing to let you look at her, just to prove my point," Croft answered steadily. "First, though, I'll examine your daughter. I want to know what caused her death."

They brought the Ludwell girl into the room and placed her naked body on the floor. And then Brenda Lemoyne gasped: "Tim—look!" She pointed a trembling forefinger.

He felt his scalp tightening. Marring the too-white flesh of the dead girl's throat, full over the jugular vein, were four deep incisions that looked as if they might have been made by the teeth of some sharp-fanged beast!

"Good God!" Tim Croft whispered as he went to his knees for a closer inspection of the wounds. Then he looked at the clansmen who clustered around him. "How did this happen? Tell me about it!"

Lige Ludwell snarled: "Reckon mebbe you'll be a-changin' your mind about witch-vampires now. Anybody can tell what kind of thing made them tooth-marks."

"Will you forget the witch-vampires and answer my question? I want to know how this happened."

"How do we know? We-uns jest found her a-hangin' to a tree limb in the holler by Haunted Creek. A-hangin' upside down, by God, an' still warm to the touch. An' she'd been bled white, jest the way you see her now. *But there warn't no blood on the airth underneath her.*"

Croft blurted out the first words that popped into his mind. "Of course there wouldn't be any blood. The rain washed it away, naturally. All the same, this is murder. Somebody killed the girl and then tried to make it look like the work

of a vampire in order to alibi himself." His mouth compressed. "I heard you whipped her and kicked her out of your house today because she was having a love affair. Maybe—"

Ludwell let out a bellow of rage. "Air you accusin' me of killin' my own datter? We-uns will git even with you for that, Doc Croft! Mark my words, you an' your nurses will wish you'd never set foot in these here mountains afore I git through with you!" He balled his fists and looked ready to spring, his eyes glowing like those of some feral animal.

CROFT drew his revolver, cocked it. "Keep your distance, Ludwell. I didn't make any accusations. I merely stated a fact. As for your threats—well, you're already trying to start trouble. By blaming the murder of your daughter on Eula Starko, you're hoping to stir up a lot of ill will toward the hospital because we harbored her, as you call it. Well, I can put a stop to that. I've already told you that Eula died at four o'clock this afternoon. You say you found your girl later tonight—still warm. Dead people don't commit murders."

"Witch-vampires kin. Because they don't die. Not really."

"That's crazy talk!" Croft snapped. He was growing tired of this superstitious palaver, this sinister harping on witches and vampires. Another ten or fifteen minutes of it and he'd be getting jittery himself. He stood upright. "Eula's body is still in the hospital building where I left her when she died. I couldn't make any arrangements for removing her corpse on account of the storm. Now come with me, all of you. I'll prove what I'm saying."

Muttering, the Ludwells permitted themselves to be herded out into the rain. Brenda Lemoyne kept very close to Tim Croft, while Jeb Starko trailed

along behind. They crossed the clearing to the hospital building, a low, one-story structure of hewn logs, just large enough to accommodate four beds, a surgery and a dispensary. Croft opened the front door, waved the others in, and made a light.

Brenda Lemoyne's hand flew to her mouth. "Tim!" she gasped. Her frightened gaze went to the mussed bed where Jeb Starko's lovely young wife had reposed in death's stillness. "Her body—it's gone, Tim! Gone!"

It was true. The bed was empty. Cold sweat formed on Tim Croft's palms, and he stifled the startled oath that leaped to his lips as he stared about the room. For a dead woman to vanish, to disappear into thin air of her own volition, was obviously impossible. Yet, apparently, that was what had happened.

"Eula! My Eula!" Jeb Starko strangled. He wheeled to face the scowling Ludwell clan. "You-all took her, damn your souls to hell! One of you came here an' stole her away while the rest was a-talkin' to Doc Croft! You—you—"

He would have leaped to attack the five burly clansmen, but Tim Croft grabbed him, pinioned him and fought him to calmness. And then Lige Ludwell, prowling toward the far end of the room, emitted a sudden roaring yell of triumph. "Come an' look at this!" he shouted. "I reckon you'll believe me now when I say Eula Starko is a witch-vampire!"

Everyone raced to the door through which Lige pointed, with the doctor in the lead. At the threshold, Croft froze in horror. "God in heaven!" he whispered as he stared into the surgery; and then he tried to shield the gruesome sight from Brenda Lemoyne.

In the little white-walled room the missing night-nurse, Edith Paxon, hung suspended upside down and naked from

an overhead rafter, her curvesome body swaying gently, like a pendulum, and her flesh a horrible fish-belly white. Exactly like the wounds on the throat of Lige Ludwell's daughter, there were a series of sharp incisions over Edith Paxon's jugular, and ruby rivulets ran down from the punctures to drip slowly on the floor. But the flow of blood had almost ceased; and that was a strange thing, because in spite of the obvious fact that the nurse's veins had been completely drained, there was practically no blood on the floor beneath her head. Just a few spattered drops, and that was all!

**B**RENDA LEMOYNE trembled against Tim Croft. "Darling . . . can it be true? Did Eula Starko come back from death to drink Edith's blood . . . ?"

"No!" he rasped. "It's not so! It can't be!" He grabbed for a stethoscope, jammed it against the slain nurse's heart and could find no trace of pulse-beat. "She's dead," he announced grimly. "And I'm going down to report this to the sheriff! Come on, Brenda. We're getting out of here. Don't you Ludwells touch anything," he warned.

"You needn't worry," Lige Ludwell retorted. "We-uns air a-goin' out to hunt the witch-vampire afore she does any more killin'. Follow me, boys."

Jeb Starko tried to block them. "I won't let you do anything to Eula!" he cried. "Maybe she is what you-all say. But she's my wife, an' I hain't a-goin' to let you—"

Lige struck him, knocked him staggering. "Shet up, you," he growled ominously. Then he glared at Tim Croft and Brenda. "As for you two . . . well, your time's a-comin'. If you-all hadn't harbored the witch-vampire, none of this woulda happened." He and his clan trooped out and vanished in the storm. Jeb Starko slunk after them

like a whipped cur.

Croft took Brenda's arm. "I hope the car will run," he said slowly. "Something tells me we haven't seen the last of this business tonight." He led her toward the lean-to garage where he kept his rattletrap roadster.

She crouched close to him in the car, as if seeking the protection of his hard body. "Tim . . . I'm frightened. Do you think there could be such a thing as—what the Ludwells claim?"

"No. Of course not." Secretly he wasn't so sure. All his knowledge, all his scientific and medical training, rebelled against the belief that a dead woman could have arisen from her bed to kill two young girls and drink their blood. And yet—how else could it have happened? Who else could have been responsible? And where had Eula Starko's corpse gone?

"Tim!" Brenda faltered. "After we go to the village and report these things to the sheriff, let's not come back here tonight. Please!"

"All right," he patted her cheek. "We won't come back until daylight, my dear." He stepped on the starter, and the motor responded with a heartening clatter. He headed for the muddy, deep-rutted road; saw no trace of the Ludwells. It was as if the night had opened up and swallowed them.

He drove in silence—until suddenly he felt the front wheels bogging down in an unexpected morass of red gumbo. "Damn!" he muttered as he gunned the engine. The little roadster slewed sideways, settled deeper. And there it stuck.

"Guess I'll have to deflate the rear tires for traction," he said sourly. He scrambled out, his feet sinking into the mire. He leaned over a back wheel, feeling for the valve—

Something leaped at him from the surrounding darkness, and a bludgeoning blow took him over the skull. Blind-



ing lights cascaded through his brain, and he felt himself falling. As if from some other world, he heard Brenda shrilly screaming. He tried to right himself, to go to her aid. But smothering blackness swooped down on him, enfolded him. He toppled into the mud and lay there, unconscious.

**H**OW long it was before he regained his senses, he had no way of knowing. But when at last he staggered drunkenly to his feet, he was quite alone. Brenda Lemoyne wasn't in the roadster. There was no trace of her anywhere. "Brenda!" he shouted thickly. "Brenda!"

She didn't answer. He heard only the souging of the wind, the hissing pelt of raindrops in the scrub oak. Sickened fear assailed him, then; fear, not for himself but for the girl he loved. He remembered the dark, sinister threats uttered by Lige Ludwell, and he recalled how Lige's daughter had died; how Edith Paxon had died. Maybe Brenda was even now hanging suspended head-downward somewhere, her life-blood being drained from her veins, either by vengeful clansmen or by something worse . . . such as an undead vampire-corpse . . .

Until tonight, he would have scoffed at such an eldritch, hellish fancy. But in view of what had already happened, a cold slime of horror slid into his marrow when he considered the possibility that the Ludwells had been right in accusing Eula Starko of vampirism. And while his reason rejected such an idea as fantastically impossible, his instinct compelled him to find out for himself; to learn the truth, one way or another. He started running through the storm.

The ridge lay to his left, and a tortuous footpath traversed it, precariously leading to the Starko cabin in Haunted Hollow. Up this treacherous path he stumbled, while branches flayed

his face and snagged at his bathrobe and pajamas. Panting, winded, he presently gained the summit and started down, his feet slipping in the oozy muck. Then, dead ahead, he saw a light and realized that he had gained his destination. The Starko shack was before him.

Silently he stole toward it; reached the uncurtained window. He peered in—and felt the short hairs prickling at the nape of his neck. "My God!" he breathed.

Eula Starko, whom he had last seen lying in death back at the hospital, sat upright in a chair before a plain deal table. There were bowls before her; bowls containing thick red fluid that couldn't be anything else but blood. She was staring at the window, her eyes glassy and expressionless—and *crimson streaks drooled from her mouth, down her chin, onto her breast.*

Then, from somewhere up on the mountainside, there came a thin, wailing scream—a woman's scream, terror-spawned and hideous, as if ripped from the throat of a girl whose reason topples close to the brink of horrified insanity!

"Brenda!" Tim Croft choked. He turned and hurled himself back along the path, seeking the source of that keening sound.

As he ran, he heard again; it seemed closer, this time. To his right he noticed a faint flicker of yellow light that seemed to glow from the mountain itself. He knew there were no cabins perched in that direction; the terrain was too steep, too inaccessible, for human habitation. Yet the light was real, and the scream was repeated again. "Tim—Tim—Help me—!" It died out abruptly, as if muffled by throttling fingers.

Tim Croft scrambled off the trail and started clawing his way toward the light, grasping at boulders and scrub

oak to keep himself from falling into the hollow. Once a rock went out from under his foot, almost pitching him headlong to the creek-bed that brawled and seethed far below him. But he regained his footing and pressed onward with a madman's singleness of purpose; and at long last he came to the seeping light.

HE saw, then, that it emanated from the mouth of a cave that burrowed wormlike into the mountain's dank bowels. Within the cave, lanterns gleamed and men muttered quietly to drown the sobbing moans of their feminine prisoner. Tim Croft crouched low as he crept toward the sounds. Then a frantic fury gripped him, and his nails dug blood from his palms. "Brenda—!" he shouted.

She hung suspended by her ankles from an iron spike driven into the cave's left wall. Her clothing had been torn from her liling body, leaving her charms exposed to the eyes of four Ludwells who hunkered down behind boulders beyond her. But at least there were no fang-marks on her sweet throat, and she seemed unharmed. Writhing and twisting, she was trying to raise herself in order to reach her fettered ankles. She saw Croft coming. "Tim—oh, thank God!" she moaned.

But he didn't reach her. As he sprang, the quartette of clansmen tackled him and threw him heavily to the floor of the cavern. He fought them like a maniac, striking out with fists and elbows and feet; but in the end, they subdued him, tied his wrists and ankles with rope and dragged him back behind their barricade of boulders. "Be quiet, unless you want us to kill ye right here an' now."

"You fools! Let go me! What's the meaning of this?"

"We-uns air a-trappin' the witch-vampire, an' we're a-usin' your gal as

bait for the trap, that's what."

"Where's Lige? He's the one I've got to find! I—"

"Lige is out a-scoutin' around. Now will ye shet up, or must we-uns crack your skull with a rock?"

"God! You men don't know what you're doing! If you persist in this thing, Miss Lemoyne's blood may be on your hands! You've got to cut her down, I tell you! A trap isn't necessary. I know the answer to—"

They hit him, then. A fist caromed off his jaw, dazed him into silence. Dimly, over the buzzing in his ears, he heard one of them say: "Reckon mebber we'd better put out them lights. I've heerd tell witch-vampires like the dark better." There came the shuffle of footsteps, and one by one the lanterns were extinguished. Blackness as solid as anthracite settled upon the cave, and a silence broken only by Brenda Lemoyne's muffled moans.

A sharp fragment of rock dug into Tim Croft's ribs, painfully, like the pressure of a blunt knife. He twisted aside, and a plan leaped into his brain. He pressed his bound wrists against the edge of the rock and began sawing the rope back and forth. He knew, now, that it had been the Ludwells who felled him back on the road; who had kidnaped Brenda and brought her here. And he realized Lige Ludwell's schemes; knew what the consequences would be unless something could be done at once. . . .

A frayed strand parted, and then another. He worked with increased vigor, unmindful of the pain that coursed through him when he scraped his flesh against the jagged bit of rock. And then, finally, his fetters gave way. His hands were free. Silently in the darkness he leaned forward to attack the knots at his ankles. He plucked at them until the tips of his fingers were white-hot agony and his nails peeled

back from the quick. It was just as he was untying the last loop of rope that he heard someone entering the cave.

HE gathered himself; prepared to leap. A match flared. Lige Ludwell was the newcomer. He was approaching the suspended girl, studying her leaning toward her pulsating throat and holding the match close to her flesh. Terror slithered into her widened eyes. She screamed out her panic.

Tim Croft catapulted himself at Ludwell's broad, bowed back. And as he struck, Ludwell's match went out. The burly mountaineer squirmed around, tried to lock his thick fingers about Croft's gullet. Croft sensed the attempt, eluded it and smashed both knotted fists home to the bearded man's mouth. Lige Ludwell moaned and went limp, with Croft panting over him. Over behind the boulders, the other four clansmen were scrambling out to help their leader. One of them swore as he searched for a lantern.

"Quiet, you fools!" Tim Croft whispered harshly through the blackness. "Your trap is about to work. That's why I hit Lige; to keep him from giving us away. Down, all of you—unless you want to scare off your witch-vampire!"

There was a slithering sound at the mouth of the cave, and suddenly a hellish crimson effulgence glowed there like devil's fire. Through the dim ruby light a shape scuttled forward, and something clattered metallically. Brenda shrieked again. "Tim—it's got me—it's at my throat—"

He surged toward her, and his hard arms closed about a jerkily-writhing form. "*You're all through killing girls for their blood, Jeb Starko!*" he said as he bore the scrawny mountaineer to the cavern floor and pinned him there. "Make another light, you Ludwells. Starko's red lantern gives me the

creeps!"

The clansmen came out of hiding, struck matches. Kerosene wicks flickered as flame was applied to them. Lige Ludwell swayed to his feet, staring stupidly. "You—you mean to say it was Jeb Starko that done all the killin'?"

Tim Croft nodded. "Hold him while I cut Miss Lemoyne down." They obeyed willingly, and Croft slashed at Brenda's bonds with a borrowed blade. He stood her upright, peeled off his bathrobe, wrapped it around her and held her in his embrace. "It's all over, darling," he whispered. "There'll be no more talk of vampirism in Haunted Hollow."

Pinioned and helpless, Jeb Starko sobbed: "There never was no witch-vampires, damn ye all! You got no right to say—"

CROFT cast a pitying glance at the prisoner. "You're right, Jeb. There weren't any witch-vampires; there was only you, and your ignorance of medical methods. I had told you that your wife was suffering from nephrosis, a disease where the blood rejects proteins and refuses to transmit water to the kidneys. The only way to treat it is by transfusion—putting borrowed blood into the patient's veins.

"You knew we were keeping Eula alive by giving her new blood, refrigerated and shipped here from the county hospital blood-bank. In spite of that, she kept getting worse. You conceived the idea that the reason she wasn't improving was because we weren't giving her enough fresh blood. You decided to do something about it.

"You caught Lige Ludwell's daughter in the woods, killed her, drained her veins into a tin bucket. You didn't know anything about transfusion methods; you thought the fluid was fed to your wife by mouth. You were going

to bring the Ludwell girl's blood to the hospital for Eula—until you learned that the Ludwells had discovered the murder and jumped to a wrong conclusion.

"That scared you. You knew the Ludwells thought Eula was a vampire. So you came to the hospital to warn me. Then I told you your wife had died. You went almost crazy with grief. While I was palavering with the Ludwells in my cabin, you sneaked around to the hospital building and stole Eula's corpse, carried it into the woods and hid it. Maybe my night-nurse, Edith Paxon, was wandering around and caught you; I don't know. But I do know you killed her, took her into the surgery and drained her blood into a container."

"I—I wanted to bring Eula back to life," the man choked.

"Yes. I realized that when I saw her corpse in your cabin, with bowls of blood on the table and blood streaming down out of her mouth. You'd been trying to force it down her poor dead throat, hadn't you?"

"She . . . she wouldn't drink. I tried to make her, but she . . . she wouldn't. Then I thought it was because the blood was cold, mebbe. So I went out to try an' git some that was warmer . . ."

Croft nodded. "Yes. And you heard Miss Lemoyne screaming up here in this

cave. So you came to investigate, carrying a red lantern you must have stolen from some road project." He sighed as he turned to the Ludwells. "You men can understand the rest of it, I guess. And—well, I won't hold it against you for knocking me out and kidnaping my sweetheart. You were on the wrong track, but your trap worked."

"Reckon mebbe we-uns been wrong about you, too, doc," Lige Ludwell said. "Me an' the boys air willin' to be right friendly-like with you from now on, if hit suits you."

Croft stuck out his hand. And then Jeb Starko, with a sudden burst of strength, broke away from his clansmen captors. "I'm a-goin' back to Eula!" he cried as he raced for the mouth of the cavern. But just as he reached the brink, he lost his footing. Screaming, he plunged downward; there came a crashing thud as his body impacted against the valley floor, far below. Then silence, save for the requiem of the rain and the wind's sighing dirge. . . .

They buried Jeb Starko and his wife in a single grave, the next day. Returning from the simple funeral, Tim Croft held Brenda Lemoyne very close to him. "Love's a queer thing, isn't it, my sweet?" he whispered.

"It's a very wonderful thing," she answered, and held up her lips for his kiss.



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# SCOURGE of the CORPSE-CLAN

by Donald Graham

Author of "Where Beauty Dwelt with Terror," etc.

*It was the leering, lusting eyes of the Thing that told us terror had not died with It, and the slavering lips that foredoomed our fate: "You'll curse the hour you defiled my mortal soul! You'll pay through the young bodies of your daughters and your sweethearts!"*



*The first girl leapt upon her victim with a wild scream!*

## CHAPTER I

### HOME OF MADNESS

IT was just by chance that young Dr. Bill King happened to be down by the railroad station late that afternoon. He was a newcomer to the small town of Chesterton, just starting practice, and he had walked about the village partly to familiarize himself with his surroundings, and partly to get a chance to think alone. There was a tense atmosphere in the town, a brooding terror that was close to open hysteria. At any moment it might flare into mad violence—especially after the

horror that had come to them that morning. Horror in the guise of a naked young girl who had come staggering down the main street, mutilated in indescribable ways, raving mad. . . . She was dead now, and with her death had come a rising demand for vengeance against the supposed perpetrators of that mindless, degenerate act—the inmates of Blair Sanitarium.

Dr. King knew that it wouldn't be long before the villagers took matters in their own hands, seized the directors of that strange institution and demanded an accounting. And when they did . . . but then his thoughts were abruptly interrupted by the sight of the girl.

She had alighted from the newly arrived train and was walking toward the taxi stand, her trim little figure striking in its white nurse's uniform, a suitcase in her hand. She pulled open the door of one of the taxis and started to get in, but the driver held out his hand in front of her.

"Just a minute, sister," King heard him say gruffly. "If it's Blair Sanitarium you're headed for, you got a long walk ahead of you. This hack don't go there."

The flat, impertinent statement caught the girl by surprise; it brought twin flushes of anger to her cheeks, making her appear even more beautiful than ever. Her eyes flashed with spirit.

"Isn't this a public cab," she asked evenly, "and aren't you looking for a fare? If not, there are others on the line."

"Look, sister," the driver said in an ugly tone. "There isn't a single hack in Chesterton that'll take you to Blair. And there isn't a citizen in town who wants anything to do with the damned place. As far as we're concerned, Blair and everybody connected with it can go straight to hell!"

THE girl's mouth was open, her eyes wide with surprise; she didn't know what to do or say. But King took the problem from her by walking up to the driver and gripping the front of his coat.

"Keep a civil tongue in your head, cabbie!" he said levelly. "If you don't know how to speak to a lady, maybe you need to be taught!"

The driver's expression suddenly lost its bitterness, became sullen. "Okay, okay, doc," he muttered. "Maybe soon you'll see!"

Janet turned to face the tall, good looking young man. He was smiling at her now, seeming to apologize for her rude reception.

"My car is just across the street," he said quietly. "I'll be glad to drive you to the sanitarium—if you insist on going."

The girl smiled faintly in response to that friendly grin, and nodded. He took her bag and crossed the street, Janet at his side. But King didn't speak until they were in the car, driving down the main street and headed out of town.

"According to the label on your bag," he said pleasantly, "you are Janet Beardsley. Well, I'm Bill King, local saw-bones—or, rather, I would be if I had any patients. I've only been here ten days—no luck yet. But tell me—what ever induced you to come to Blair? I had an idea the nurses in a psychopathic ward were all big huskies."

"Psychopathic!" Janet exploded. She remembered his earlier words, *if you insist on going*, and now the apprehension in his voice that he couldn't entirely hide sent little shivers along her back. "Why, the . . . the application never mentioned . . . Doctor King, tell me what you know about Blair. Please, I must know!"

"Now don't get me wrong," he explained quickly. "Remember I'm practically a stranger here myself. I've got nothing against Blair, definitely. But the place isn't properly run—and all hell is going to break loose there soon. Furthermore, it isn't the place for a young girl like you. It isn't exactly a mental institution, though they treat the organic reaction types—alcoholism, drug addiction, blood diseases that have degenerated the brain. Specialized cases."

"But what of the resentment in the town?" Janet asked. "I'd . . ."

Her words were cut off abruptly as a clod of earth crashed against the rear of the car, threw a cloud of dust and pebbles over the two of them. King slammed on the brakes and ground to a stop, then whirled around in his seat.

The gaunt figure of a man was loping away from the road and toward the near-by woods.

King's face was grim when he turned to the girl. "I guess you ought to know," he said in a clipped tone. "But God alone knows where fact ends and pure fancy begins. . . ."

"BLAIR HOSPITAL is only four month's old," he said briefly. "Doctor Stanley Howard, a stranger to the town, bought up an old estate on the outskirts, then announced the new institution. It's natural, of course, for the average layman to associate a gruesome atmosphere, an unhealthy, revolting aura with any mental institution. The villagers of Chesterton were no exception." He was silent for a moment.

"You could expect such an attitude to die down within a few months. But in the case of Blair . . . something very unfortunate occurred. The hate and terror of the villagers is increasing—building to a point where it's unsafe for everyone connected with the institution. You see, two nights ago a young girl from the town disappeared. She was found this morning, thirty-six hours later, and she was . . . well, call it murder. Anyway, it had taken her a long time to die, and the things that were done to her suggested only that she had been the victim of a band of maniacs. The villagers, naturally, blamed the inmates. The whole thing is being investigated, of course, but in the meantime. . . ."

"I know nothing about the hospital itself," King concluded. "My only concern is for the safety of anyone connected with it."

Abruptly, he put the car in gear and started forward. Neither of them spoke again until they had arrived before the gates in front of the hospital. During the ride Janet's mind had been filled with perplexing questions. Would it be

cowardice or wisdom to turn back now? Should she be frightened away from her first job? But caring for madmen! Men who had lost their minds through their own depraved actions . . . drink . . . blood disease . . . drugs . . . ! Janet got out of the car slowly. Now that she was actually there, her terror of the place seemed to increase. Her lips were trembling ever so slightly as she turned to Dr. King.

"Look here, Janet," he said quickly. "You take my advice and quit your job right now. Go in and tell Howard that you misunderstood your duties and that you're getting out. Then give me a ring at my office and I'll drive back for you—later tonight."

The girl looked at him silently for a moment, then she nodded in agreement. It was the only thing to do. Bill King's eyes were looking deep into hers, and as they stood quietly for a few seconds she saw his expression change, read something in his eyes that brought an answering warmth in her heart. She looked away suddenly as her cheeks colored.

A moment later she was walking determinedly up the gravel path to the rambling old house that stood at the top of the short rise. In those minutes before entering the place, she forced her mind to other thoughts, refused to admit fear.

Janet didn't know that Dr. King sat quietly in his car, his eyes anxiously following her slim, shapely figure until she had disappeared. And she wasn't aware, either, that a dozen pair of glittering eyes were focused upon her from behind the shuttered windows—narrow-lidded eyes that lusted after her virginal body with the lascivious cunning of demented things. . . .

THE massive front doors of the old place opened just before Janet came to them. She entered, wondering, and

turned to face a hard-faced young girl in a nurse's uniform. The girl was looking Janet over with coldly appraising eyes. Janet noticed with a start that the "nurse" was smoking a cigarette, her lips and cheeks heavily rouged.

"You're the new replacement—right, dearie?" the girl said in a coarse voice. "Kinda young and inexperienced, aren't you? But you'll learn, I guess. This way, dearie."

In her amazement, Jane didn't speak. She followed the girl without thinking, the numb shock of her surprise sending half-formulated, unanswered questions through her mind. What could this unprofessional, brazen atmosphere mean? Janet didn't care about the answer. For her, it could mean but one thing—she would leave Blair at the first opportunity. Tonight! Of one thing she was certain—this was no ordinary hospital. And then she was walking through a door the nurse held open for her.

A fat little man sat behind a desk at one end of the room, and when Janet entered he raised his head from a paper he had been reading. His head was abnormally large for his body, and the thick glasses he wore seemed to magnify his pale blue eyes to a frightening size. His look, as he studied Janet's figure, was like that of a man examining a piece of merchandise. Slowly, he took in her shapely legs, the firm virginal thrust of her breasts, the attractive curve of her trim hips. His lips were pursed, the tips of his fingers lightly placed together, as his speculative eyes roved her body.

"Doctor Howard?" Janet asked in a thin voice. She could feel her cheeks blushing furiously under the squat man's frank gaze. If only he would speak, she thought, it would ease the tension. "Doctor Howard?" she tried again, but there was no answer.

Stanley Howard's eyes came up to her face, the last item of his interest,

then dropped again in a caressing way to Janet Beardsley's lovely young breasts. They seemed to charm him; and as his eyes ran over her body the girl felt her skin shrinking in protest, as though a pair of foul hands were evilly besmirching her.

"You'll do!" Howard pronounced at last. The girl felt terror constricting her throat as she realized that the man had been interested only in her *body*, and hadn't even considered her nursing ability. "No need for any formalities," his deep voice rumbled on. "I know you're Janet Beardsley; you know who I am. You're replacing . . . that is, filling a vacancy on the staff. There are twenty patients here. It's up to you nurses to keep them comfortable and happy, and I don't care how. You can go to your room now—Miss Carboni will show you."

He picked up his papers and started reading again.

"Wait a minute!" Janet snapped. "You're mistaken, Doctor Howard. I won't do, and I'm not staying. In the first place, I haven't been instructed in psychopathic care. In the second place, the contract I signed called only for straight nursing. Furthermore, the personnel and conduct of this institution . . ."

"Shut up!" Howard roared. He had come half to his feet, his enormous eyes blazing. "You'll do as you're told!" He sank back in his chair, the spasm of rage slowly subsiding. After a moment, he spoke again. "If it's more money you want, you'll get it. Most of the girls hold out for more money after they learn what's expected of them—though, except for you, they have all been especially chosen. If more money won't tempt you, why, you can leave tomorrow. That's all."

"Not quite," Janet said firmly. "If I don't like it, I can leave *tonight*. And that's exactly what I'm doing."



THE doctor's lips had split in a cruel grin. "Not when the reputation of my hospital is at stake," he ground out. "Maybe you don't know the attitude of the townspeople; maybe you don't realize that if you left these grounds at night, you'd never get as far as the station. The one thing I can't stand is publicity. Due to one murder, the people of Chesterton are getting out of control and drawing attention to this place. Another such event, and this hospital would be finished. And so, Miss Beardsey, you're not leaving here tonight!"

As he had been talking, the doctor's hand had pressed a button on his desk. Now the door burst open and a burly "guard" walked in.

"Take this girl to her room," Dr. Howard said in a disinterested voice, his attention returning to the papers on his desk.

Janet screamed and whirled away from the man's outstretched hands as she saw the lust-cruel expression in his narrow-set eyes. She was over against the wall and working her way toward the door, but the heavy thug walked leisurely after her, then suddenly sprang with incredible agility. Janet screamed again, but this time it was too late. She felt her body crushed in his brawny grasp, felt herself lifted from the floor and borne from the room. One of the creature's arms was across her chest, squeezing tightly, and his big hand was deliberately cupping her breast in a tormenting way. He laughed obscenely in her face, his saliva-wet face close to hers.

Another nurse, pretty in a coarse sort of way, was walking down the hall as they came out. Janet screamed again, and the girl looked toward her without interest. She made some joking remark to the guard about "learning the business," then disappeared into a room with the tray she had been carrying.

Faintness was beginning to come over

Janet now, and her struggles grew weaker as she was carried upstairs. The crushing pressure on her breasts sent agony through her body, each bouncing step of her captor bringing new torture to her tender flesh. At last she was dimly conscious of a door being opened, of being thrown heavily to the floor. Sobs were breaking from her now, and as she cringed there in a half faint, she was vaguely aware of two rough hands that seized her face while a pair of obscenely wet lips were crushed against hers. After that, a door slammed, a key clicked in the lock. She was alone.

And then complete blackness came over Janet, her last conscious effort being to whisper Bill King's name. . . .

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## CHAPTER II

### TERROR LEADS A RIOT

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DR. BILL KING sat in his roadster for long minutes after Janet's figure had disappeared into the gloomy, shuttered building of Blair sanitarium. What was there that seemed to be so foreboding about that strange institution? And then King realized that during the whole ten days he had been in Chesterton, he had never once seen anyone connected with the institution appear in town. Once a person entered that mysterious place, he didn't reappear. And then, suddenly, Dr. King came upright in his seat as a scream, thin and muffled, came to his ears. Could it be one of the demented patients? Or was it . . .? He had the door of the car open and was half-way out when he caught himself. Such a move would be foolish.

Bill King didn't wait for any more. He swung his car around and headed back to town, his hands sweaty with ap-

prehension as he gunned the car recklessly over the roads. There was only one thing to do—get Sheriff Howley and return to Blair, forcing their way in on some legal pretext. There were plenty of things about that place that King wanted to know. And if they'd done anything to Janet . . .!

Then the car was entering the village. The first thing that struck King as he drove down the main street was the ominously strained quiet that had settled over the town, as though the coming of dusk had doubled the tight resentment of the villagers. And as he scrubbed to a stop before his rented cottage, King saw that a group of men were in his front room, saw a dark form detach itself from the shadows of his porch and come striding down to meet him.

"Doc King?" a man's voice asked. It was Deputy Sheriff Connor. He didn't wait for a reply, his words rushing swiftly forward. "Thank God you got here! We've picked up another girl—we couldn't locate old Doc Bent. You better hurry, King. I don't think she'll last very long."

"Who . . . who is it?" King asked, his voice heavy with fear.

"Daughter of one of the factory workers—Alice Androni." The two men were striding up the path now. "God knows what's going to happen after this. If word of the new outrage gets to the townspeople—especially to the gang that works in Bancroft's mill—there'll be all hell to pay. That factory outfit is a wild, unruly bunch. Howley is deputizing everyone he can lay his hands on—says he can take care of this thing without the state police. But I dunno."

The sheriff and a half dozen men were in King's outer office, but he didn't pause as he pushed his way through the room. The girl was in a smaller rear office that the doctor had fitted out as a

clinic. She was lying on his leather-covered operating table, partly covered by a sheet—and King noticed with a start that her hands and feet were securely bound to the table's aluminum supports. He looked quickly at Connor, his eyes questioning.

"Had to rope her down," Connor said briefly. "She come running down the main street, yelling at the top of her lungs. The girl was mad as a hatter. Took three of us to get her in here; she fought like a wild cat." The man shuddered. "God! The things they did to that poor kid! If I could get my hands . . ."

King waved the man out of the room, then stepped up to the girl. Her head was moving from side to side, slowly, as though her awful pain were past physical endurance. Her teeth had bitten her lips until blood flowed freely from the corners of her mouth. Now her wide brown eyes focused on the doctor, and immediately she began to scream in a faint, pain-wearied voice. She writhed weakly in her bonds, her body contorting under the sheet, as though she were trying to get away from him, as though any man sent unreasoning, mad terror to her mind. Then, abruptly, she relaxed, ceasing to struggle against the inevitable, her breath coming in deep, sobbing gulps.

KING prepared a hypo and administered it, watching her terror-crazed mind slowly succumb to the soothing sedative. Then he took the sheet and stripped it away—and stood motionless, paralyzed momentarily by the agonizing sight of that gruesome mutilation.

The girl was completely nude, her delicately formed body one single mass of criss-crossed welts and ugly abrasions. On her breasts and feet were raw, blackened wounds that were the result of fiendish burning, while her ab-

domen was a ragged, bleeding horror, the laced skin showing plainly the marks of teeth—*human teeth!* Torture-born perspiration had bathed the girl's outraged body, mingling with her blood, and parts of her skin had been plainly shredded by her own pained fingernails.

As King bent over her, Alice's eyes looked frantically into his, as though wondering what new horror was to come, her expression mutely pleading for mercy. Whimpers broke from her throat, pitiful cries of fear that even King's narcotic failed to still.

King was about to examine her for internal injuries when she suddenly coughed wetly, bringing up a mouthful of blood. Her lips were moving faintly, and the young doctor leaned down to catch her words. But out of the slurred, incoherent speech he caught only the word "madman!", and then Alice sighed, almost with relief, and was still. He did not have to feel her pulse to know she was dead.

For a moment longer he stood beside the dead girl, noting that some of her wounds were fresh, others hours old. And he noticed, too, that her hands and feet bore the raw wounds that are left by harsh bonds. She must have been a captive of some demon gang for long hours. King stifled the savage oaths that were in his throat, and turned away.

THE doctor felt a raging anger running through him as he went into the other room, and the memory of Janet Beardsley brought a quick fear to mingle with that rage. It was obvious that some incredible wave of horror was upon them, threatening every girl in Chesterton—and their only hope was to strike the evil at its source before the madness rose to engulf them all.

The rumble of voices stopped as he

appeared, and he stood silently for a moment, looking at the assembled men.

"Alice Androni is dead," he said dully. "We must have an autopsy later. It's obvious that she's been tortured and beaten—and I believe she has been criminally attacked, as well." He could feel his control slipping as he went on, his voice getting louder and higher. "This poor kid isn't the first victim—and she won't be the last! There is only one course we can take—clean out that damned sanitarium before the rest of the girls in town come under this festering horror! Strike this evil madness at its root! Sheriff, I demand that you take a party of men up there and place everyone under arrest, on suspicion of murder! Hold them for the state police!"

A man in the background laughed shortly. "Murder!" he spat out. "There ought to be a stronger charge than that! I suggest we string every one of them up with a good hemp rope!"

The speaker was Paul Bancroft, white-haired elder of the town. He was Chesterton's richest man, and it was probable that some of his anger was due to fear—fear for his own property holdings, fear for his bank and for the big mill he operated.

"Hold it, Bancroft!" Sheriff Howley commanded sharply. "There will be no necktie parties while I'm around! And for God's sake try to keep your head! That riffraff labor of yours is giving me enough worry as it is. Two of their daughters found foully murdered in one day! Heaven only knows what those men are likely to do!"

As though in answer to the sheriff's words, a distant rumble of sound came from down in the factory-workers' section of town—and it was a rumble of seething passions and unrestrained brute force, a coherent warning of the violence that was rising.

Howley strode to the window and pulled the curtains back. The sky over in the east was dimly lighted by the flames of a huge bonfire. Night had set in now, a starless, moonless night, the stygian vault of the heavens seeming to conspire with acts of lawless riot.

"Listen to that!" Howley ground out. "Hear it? That's exactly what I've been trying to avoid."

"But, sheriff," a voice broke out in the background, rasping unpleasantly, "we've no proof that the sanitarium is behind all this. It's obvious that some agency is visiting this horror on our young girls, but just because the hospital is new among us, we mustn't jump to conclusions. After all—" and now the voice was tinged with spite—"Doctor King is a newcomer, too."

An uncomfortable silence fell over the group. Bill King knew who the speaker was without looking. It was old Doc Bent, evidently just arrived. He had a natural resentment against the younger man—the man who was about to take over the lucrative practice that was slipping from his aging grasp. On several occasions he had shown his spiteful feelings toward King.

"I'll handle this thing!" Sheriff Howley roared. "And we won't need the state police or the marines to help us out. We'll investigate that hospital outfit right now—and do it legally!"

But the sheriff had hardly finished speaking before the door burst open and a white-faced young man stumbled in. It was young Tom Bancroft, Paul Bancroft's son, and he was breathing heavily as though from running a long distance.

"Dad! Dad!" he yelled. "The workers and millhands! They're on their way to the hospital—they're going to burn it down!"

Howley let out a shout and started for the door, the rest of the men at his heels. They went racing down the short gravel path and into the road, then came to an abrupt halt. Over to the west a glow was already beginning to redden the sky, growing brighter as the seconds ticked by. Faintly through the night came the sound of yelling voices.

"By God!" Howley swore. "They've done it already! The damn crazy fools are burning the place down!"

"Let's get out there!" Connor shouted. "Come on, men, pile into your cars—we may be able to do something yet!"

And five minutes later two cars were rapidly approaching the hospital grounds, motors wide open . . . were careening through the gates of Blair, tires screaming on the roadway.

When Bill King and the sheriff's men skidded to a stop on the grounds, the wild rout of laborers faded slowly back into the night, the fitful crimson light of the fire on their wild faces making them look like a band of avenging ghouls. But there was no time for them then—King was thinking only of Janet, of his last sight of her disappearing through the doors of Blair Sanitarium.

Another carload of sheriff's deputies arrived almost as soon as they did, but the group of men stood helplessly about, watching the fire slowly burn itself out. There was nothing that could be done. It was Paul Bancroft who found Janet, and his shout brought the young doctor running to his side. Miraculously, she had escaped that holocaust. She had been behind the building, out of sight, and as King fell to his knees and cradled her head in his arms, her eyes fluttered open. As those lovely eyes looked into his with slow comprehension, the look of utter terror left them and a small, tremulous smile

FOR a few seconds there was complete silence in the small room. Then

came to her lips.

"Thank God!" she whispered.  
"Thank God you came, Bill!"

When Doc Bent yelled to him, King left Janet in Bancroft's care and ran to the old doctor's aid. The sheriff's men had started bringing the occupants from the gutted building. But there was little that a doctor could do. Most of them were dead already; others retained a spark of life, but were fast dying. The two men applied salves and bandages, administered hypodermics, knowing that it was only a matter of form—there was no hope.

As King worked on one charred body, he heard one of the deputies behind him speaking in a strange, wondering voice.

"Jeeze, doc," he said in an unnaturally high voice, "if this isn't the damndest thing! All of these looneys were huddled right where the fire was worst, some of 'em clutching one of the girls or a guard in their arms. Doc, I know it sounds screwy, but—*it looked like these guys liked to burn, like maybe they thought fire couldn't harm them!*"

Other men had gathered about now, and then miraculously the eyes of the maniac that King had been working on fluttered open. Those eyes were still blazing with a savage, demented light, and they traveled venomously from man to man in the circle.

"You fools," he whispered through blackened, cracked lips, his charred face working painfully. "You thought you could get rid of us this way—but we'll come back to curse you! We'll come back for our revenge, because fire can't hurt us any more! And you'll pay, damn you! *You'll pay through the white young bodies of your daughters and sweethearts! You'll curse the day you let this happen!*"

THE man's voice had risen as he spoke, and his last words were ground out in a ragged scream, chok-

ing abruptly off. He stiffened once in a spasm of pain, then was still in death.

The men in the circle looked at each other, questioning, white-faced. Someone in the background laughed nervously and shuffled his feet. It was Sheriff Howley who came striding up to the silent group to break the nervous silence.

"All right, men," he snapped. "They're all accounted for—twenty inmates and six guards. The only body we haven't located is that of the head man himself—Howard. But a girl who escaped, Janet Beardsley, says she saw him burn to death."

The sheriff's last words had been hurried, but the men didn't miss the note of uneasiness in his voice. Howley himself seemed to be getting angry at his own nervousness too.

"Hell," he shouted suddenly, "let's get away from this damned place! Where's Connor? Connor you stick around for the rest of the night—only a couple hours now until dawn. We'll call in the county coroner tomorrow and have these stiffs moved."

The men were shuffling back toward the cars now, and King saw Bancroft supporting Janet as they walked over to join the group. He went to join them, taking Janet's arm and helping her into his roadster. White-haired Bancroft was looking down at the long row of blackened, charred corpses, fascinated gruesomely by the evil, leering expressions that twisted the faces of the madmen. It was almost as though they were crazily jeering the people who stood about them.

"Thank heaven it's all over," Bancroft mumbled as he forced his eyes away from the mutilated dead. "Now we can have peace."

His words were still in King's ears as he climbed in beside the pale young girl. It was at that moment that a faint, far howling laugh went up in the

night—a demoniac howl of evil glee. The girl heard it too, and her head turned quickly toward him.

"It's only the wind," he said shortly. "I've heard it before when it howls in the crags of Easthorn mountain."

But both of them knew that wasn't true. Some incredible, unearthly power was loose among them; impending horror, more awful than they could imagine, was brooding over Chesterton, waiting to prey on its fairest young maidens. The same question was in everyone's mind: Is this the end of horror? And Bill King and Janet knew that the wind had brought them the answer.

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### CHAPTER III

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#### PLAGUE OF THE FLAMING DEAD

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**D**AWN had broken before the party got back to Chesterton. King took Janet to his little cottage and surrendered his bedroom to her for the night. She was ready to turn in immediately, and he gave her a strong sedative to be sure she'd sleep soundly. Afterward he went over to Sheriff Howley's office, just off the town square, and joined the other grim-faced men who had found sleep impossible. They sat in almost unbroken silence, only occasionally speaking in terse sentences.

When the village awoke to the new day, the townspeople, too, seemed to live under a pall of fear. Everyone went about his duties as though he were listening intently for some sound—as though he were *waiting* for something he knew must come. And when that something struck at last, the awful tension snapped and a quick near-hysteria took its place. The madness had begun.

The sounds of shrill chattering down the street was the first warning that the

sheriff and his men had—they came to their feet as one man and rushed out into the town square, then stopped dead.

Deputy Sheriff Connor was running toward them on unsteady legs, his face streaked with blood from a scalp wound, and the villagers trotted along beside and behind him. He came up to Howley and stopped, fighting to catch his breath, while the villagers stood silently about. It was almost as though they knew exactly what Connor had to report.

"The corpses!" Connor gasped out at last. "I was sittin' there on guard, like you told me . . . I could see in every direction. No one coulda crept up on me. But all of a sudden I got belted over the head! One of the corpses must have gotten up and brained me! I swear it couldn't have been anyone else! I went out cold—and when I came to, *every one of those dead men was gone!* I'm tellin' you, chief, those corpses came to life and ran into the hills! They're going to do like one of them told us—*make us pay through the young girls of Chesterton!*"

Howley stepped forward and gripped Connor by the coat, shaking him. "Shut up, you damn fool!" Howley gritted. His nervous eyes were on the faces of the villagers, imploring them to be calm.

"Maybe you don't believe me!" Connor yelled. "Maybe you'd like to go back there and see for yourself—see the burned grass where the flaming bodies of those corpses walked away! Maybe . . .!"

Howley didn't let Connor say any more. He grabbed the man's arm and hustled him into the office, slamming the door behind him.

Bill King remained outside with the rest of the townspeople, saw their frightened eyes asking unanswerable questions, heard their nervous voices whispering in tight fear. And a moment

later one of the sheriff's men came out, jumped in his car and drove away. He was headed for the burned hospital to verify Connor's report—and nobody expected anything but confirmation. They were all certain that what Connor had said was gruesomely, unbelievably true!

Once King started toward his cottage, intending to awaken Janet, but he turned back. He decided to let her sleep as long as possible, then to put her in his car and take her as far as he could from the threatening horror that was over Chesterton. When he got back to the town square, Sheriff Howley had just appeared on the porch of his office. He held up his silence, then made an announcement.

"Listen to me!" he called shortly. "I've just sent Hank Cunningham over to headquarters to summon the state police. Once they get here, we'll wipe this whole thing out immediately. So keep your heads—there's nothing to be alarmed about."

His words seemed to give the people some feeling of security, and a faint cheer went up. But something he hadn't mentioned was obvious to Bill King. Sheriff Howley had *sent* a man—he hadn't telephoned, *because the lines were cut!* That was the only answer.

WHEN mid-afternoon came, the people of the village were still gathered in the central square. The daylight, the open air, and the company of one another seemed to be the only thing they had to cling to. A growing nervousness was apparent now. Cunningham hadn't return—and neither had the state police. Could that mean that the deputy had never gotten as far as state headquarters? But all speculation was abruptly thrust aside in a single instant.

The first intimation the people had of the new terror, was the sound of a car approaching the town, motor wide open.

Instinctively, the crowd broke and retired to the sides of the square as the racing vehicle came near—and seconds later it was speeding up to the sheriff's office, screaming recklessly to a stop.

Everyone expected the driver to leap out, but he didn't. He sat behind the wheel for a few seconds, slowly opened the door, then started to climb from the car in a laborious fashion. And then the people saw why the man moved so slowly, so painfully! Screams went up from the crowd, and even Howley stood looking at the man open-mouthed, his face paling, as the driver staggered toward him.

It was Ed Johnston, a farmer who lived on the outskirts of the town; they recognized him by the car he was driving—no one could have recognized his face. The man's face and body was almost naked, his clothes *burned* away, and the patches of his skin that showed were a charred, caked crust of blackened flesh. His face was a flaking ebony mask of torture, his eyes two pain-crazed white holes, his mouth an open gash. Johnston held his blistered arms stiffly out from the sides of his body, hobbled forward on spraddled legs, jerkily, like a mechanical man. Every movement must have seemed an hour's torture.

"Sheriff! Oh, God, listen!" His voice was dry and cracked, as though his vocal cords had been seared by flame. "In heaven's name, save my wife and daughter! I'm done for; it's up to you now.

"They came for us—the flaming dead men. A horde of them swept down on us from the woods. They must have been those dead men I heard about. Their bodies were all bandaged, and flames were leaping from most of them—real flames! I fought, did what I could to save my two loved ones—my pretty little wife, my young daughter. But it was hopeless. I knew that before

I even tried."

The man was forcing the words out, fighting down his agony. His single driving thought was to finish before death stilled him forever. Every villager waited silently, transfixed.

"Sheriff, two of them just grabbed me in their arms, held me for a few seconds, then dropped me. I was burned almost to death." His voice rose now as he lived again that final madness. "They grabbed my two girls and ran into the woods. I couldn't stop them. *How in God's name is a man to fight the dead? How can you defeat a corpse?* But, please . . . you men of Chesterton . . . save my wife . . . and daughter. . ."

Johnston pitched forward on his face, never once moving after he fell. There was no need to examine him. One of the townspeople threw a coat over the charred body, but the white, sick-looking faces of the townspeople continued to turn back irresistibly to that still, humped form that lay there so quietly.

Bill King suddenly saw Janet pushing her way through the silent mob, searching for him. He went quickly to her side, placing one arm about her waist.

"Bill, dear," she whispered, and that was all. She knew it was best not to ask unanswerable questions, or to try to find reason in this insane, impossible plague of the dead.

**D**USK was beginning to fall now, and with the coming darkness the people's hysteria began to give way to a surging panic. Sheriff Howley knew well what full darkness would mean, knew what frightful events might come, and now he shouted for attention again, holding up his hands and shouting down the jibbering voices.

"Listen to me, everybody!" he yelled. "Attention, all of you! I want every man to return to his home and get his gun, then come back here. The men will form a cordon around the sides of

one square block, the women and children staying in the houses that are within that guarded square. You are also to warn any of your neighbors who are still remaining in their homes that it is foolish to try to escape by auto. The highways are unsafe. Gather everybody within the block around the town courthouse. After that—bring on your walking ghosts! We'll be prepared for them!"

**B**ILL KING and Janet had turned with the rest of the crowd and were leaving the square—and it was just at that moment that the awful screeches came rocketing through the dusk, screeches of pain and terror-born dread. They wheeled with the rest of the crowd and went trotting toward the source of those awful cries, and fear was heavy in their hearts.

And then, at the end of the block, they saw the house that was being attacked—the home of Alan Greer, a man who had scoffed at the fears of the town, refusing to take his wife and two daughters to a place of safety. The building was already breaking into flames in many places, and when they were still half a block away they saw the band of fearful apparitions come storming out into the street.

The men of the town sent up a full-throated shout, most of them stopping dead in their tracks, stunned by amazement. Those pillaging ghouls were certainly an army from the grave! Their charred, blackened bodies were swathed in bandages, giving them unreal, grotesque shapes, and from the forms of at least half of them flames still licked hungrily. They were a horde of the flaming, bandaged dead!

The ghouls gathered in front of the house, unhurried, and looked with insolent unconcern at the gaping villagers. Then they turned and trotted off into the night. Three of them carried the



screaching women, and two other flame-spewing cadavers tossed a charred hulk on the lawn in front of the house—the lifeless body of Greer!

After a silent moment, the men went charging forward again. Bill heard a gun roar, saw Sheriff Howley triggering again at the retreating figures of the glowing madmen, and a heavy body dropped suddenly in the roadway. At least one had been brought down!

Bill was the first to the side of the fallen figure. He fell on his knees and turned the man over as the rest of the crowd gathered closely about. It was Janet who broke the taut silence.

"It's Howard!" she cried recognizing the hulking body and horribly charred features. "Dr. Howard—the man I saw die in the flames at Blair!" King from a far distance. His attention was riveted on the wound inflicted by Howley's gun, a ragged hole where the .45 had ripped through the man's back and blasted out through his chest—*because it was a wound that didn't bleed!*

The young doctor's hands continued their examination almost without conscious direction, and the evidence he found only confirmed his first impossible diagnosis. At last he turned to face the questioning eyes that circled him.

"This man," he said in a low, strained voice that he didn't recognize as his own, "has been dead for at least sixteen hours. *Rigor mortis* has already set in—and he died as a result of burns, not from a gunshot wound!"

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## CHAPTER IV

### BRIDES FOR THE FLAME MEN

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**D**ARK night had set in before the citizens of Chesterton had all gathered within their guarded square. And with them they brought

more tales of horror. Three other houses were found gutted by fire, their occupants swept into the maelstrom of growing insanity. Now even the most level-headed of the people had no logical reasoning to cling to. Blair Sanitarium, with Dr. Howard directing, had been the obvious source of the madness. But Howard had been dead for sixteen hours, and competent physicians had pronounced all the inmates dead. How could anyone explain a band of disappearing corpses? Or a horde of ghoul-like figures that preyed on the living? Or a bloodless corpse shot down as he ran with a pillaging rout of flame-spewing dead?

The nerves of the townspeople were fast giving out. Soon their minds would snap too, crazed by superstitions and fear of the unknown, and another hell would break loose. Even the men were fast cracking as they patrolled the street, rifles in their jumpy hands. But it wasn't terror that was seizing Bill's mind; it was a desire either to come to grips with the powers that faced them, or to get Janet far away from the reaching tentacles of the enveloping menace. And it was Janet herself who finally decided him. He saw her beautiful figure outlined for an instant as she left the house in which she had been quartered with some of the other women, and then she was at his side.

"Bill," she said quietly, "we've got to get away from here." Her voice was low, but it was filled with a troubled urgency. "Are you willing to make a break for it in your car, dear? Some of the things the women inside said . . . well, they seem to distrust everybody in their fear, and they can't forget that I was a member of the hospital staff. I'm afraid if things get any worse . . ."

"I know," Bill interrupted. "The men act the same way toward me. We're both newcomers to Chesterton; that's

the reason. And I'm with you on making a break. Anything would be better than this damned waiting. The car's only a step away—come on!”

The two of them pushed through the ring of guards and strode into the darkness. Behind them they heard questioning shouts, demands that they return, but they paid no attention. A shot was fired over their heads by one of the more nervous guards, and they broke into a run until they had turned the corner and were out of range.

Bill's car was standing in front of his cottage. They were about to climb in when he remembered the automatic he kept in his desk. Unwilling to leave her alone for an instant, the two of them walked up to the house, his arm about her waist—and then it happened! They had just entered the dark hall and Bill was fumbling for the light switch when a cold hand closed on his wrist and a deep, mocking laugh rumbled in the darkness. Janet screamed shrilly as Bill tried to lunge and grapple with the dark figure at his side. The next thing he knew he was on his knees, dizzy and sick from a blow on the head, trying desperately to get to his feet as Janet screamed again. The blistering curses that were in King's throat were suddenly cut off as a heavy boot crashed into his stomach and sent him smashing against the wall. Half unconscious, he lay there helplessly as taunting laughter mocked him, as Janet's piteous screaming tore at his heart—and then the slamming of the front door cut off all sound.

AFTER a few moments King had come out of his dazed state. He came to his feet and staggered outside, but the street was black and deserted. He thought for a moment of going back to the sheriff and his men, explaining the whole thing and begging for help, but then he thrust that plan aside. If he

were made a prisoner, Janet would have no one at all to depend on. But all his thoughts were quickly thrust aside as he spun around to the sound of a voice cautiously calling his name.

King recognized the voice—it was Deputy Connor. A second later and his dark form was materializing in front of King.

“That you, doc?” he whispered. “Who did I heard screamin’?”

“Janet Beardsley,” Bill King said dully. “They've got her.”

“I was afraid so,” Connor grunted. “But, doc, you gotta get out of here—fast. Doctor Bent is talkin' it up against you and the girl. Some of the men are on their way over here—that's why I came to warn you. Those men aren't thinkin' straight right now, doc. Old Bent is claimin' that you and the girl—a doctor and a nurse—were in with that sanitarium outfit, and know a lot about what's goin' on.”

The two men swung away from the cottage just as a half dozen men with flashlights appeared at the far end of the street. King and Connor headed down a side street, cut back toward the business section of town. Over toward the west the angry red glare of a tremendous fire lighted the sky. Connor grunted when he saw it.

“That's what we figured a little while ago,” he said shortly. “It must be Paul Bancroft's factory buildings. He was throwing a fit when I left the blockade, practically frothing at the mouth at the thought of losing all that dough. Maybe his own men . . .”

At that instant the roar of a heavy explosion drowned out his words, almost threw the two men from their feet. Then, without a word, the two of them were running to the corner, knowing what they'd find when they got there. The Chesterton National Bank—Bancroft's bank—was on that corner! And the two men were right—across the

street they could see the heavy doors twisted from their hinges, saw the smoke of the blast drifting out of the shattered windows, and after a few minutes they heard a second muffled blast come from the vaults of the stone building. After that a long silence.

King's hand was gripping Connor's arm, his thoughts racing, and now he felt his pulses quickening as a plan came to him, felt a savage happiness lighten his heart as he realized that he had found a way to unmask the master behind these horrors—and get to Janet's side.

"Listen, Connor!" King said quickly. "Dead men don't give a damn about money—and the criminals who are cracking that bank are just as alive as you or I. See those cars over there? That's where they'll load the currency—and that's how they'll make their getaway. And, mister, I'm going to be around when they get to their hide-out. I've got a hunch where it is, but there's a better way to find out than by guessing. Connor, we'll hook on the back of those cars and get a free ride straight to the headquarters of the ghouls!"

Several of those grotesque, misshapen forms had come out of the bank now, carrying sacks of loot. They dumped the stuff in the backs of the cars, then returned to the bank for another load. But even in that moment of cold logic, the sight of those impossible creatures was enough to shake King's conviction. Was it possible that they weren't human, after all—that they were the mad creatures of some master of evil? But the thought of Janet in their hands was enough to cement the young doctor's decision. There was one sure way to find out. . . .

"Are you with me, Connor?" King snapped impatiently.

For answer the deputy sheriff lifted his hand to his lips and sent out a long shrill whistle. King had time to see two

ghostly, bandaged forms jumping from their hiding-places beside the bank, and then he was swinging toward Connor, his left fist hooking at the deputy's chin as a curse left his startled lips.

But King's blow never landed. Connor's arm was already cocked back, and his clubbed revolver smashed down on King's head. The doctor was pawing on hands and knees when the second blow took him behind the ear. After that, he had just time to feel himself lifted and carried away before complete unconsciousness came over him. The last sound he remembered was Connor's amused, sardonic laughter. . . .

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## CHAPTER V

### DEATH'S UNDERGROUND FACTORY

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WHEN Bill King came back to his senses, the automobile into which he had been thrown was just jouncing to a stop at the end of its short trip. Still groggy, he was hauled roughly from the car, and as his captors carried him he glimpsed the framework of a fire-gutted building. A moment later he was in the very center of those charred timbers while the band of madmen scraped among the acrid-smelling, still smoldering beams, as though looking for a trapdoor—and then they were descending into the earth. Bill King knew where he was being taken then! Into the old cellars of the burned sanitarium!

At the bottom of a flight of stone steps a heavy door was pushed open, and brilliant light blinded King as a confused chaos of noise drummed on his ears—a noise in which was mingled the voices of young girls! He was thrown to the ground then, and impatient hands clumsily roped up his hands and feet.

As soon as his eyes could stand the

light, King examined the place he was in, saw with a start that it was the old operating room of Blair Sanitarium. The tiled walls gleamed in the light, and the tiered rows of seats in the amphitheater were filled with a crowd of brutal thugs whose evil faces were twisted in lewd anticipation.

King himself was on the main floor of the place, and now his eyes jumped over to the creatures who had come in with him. The yell that left his throat was lost in the confused jumble of voices—because at one side of the room he saw a half dozen young girls, and among them was Janet! All six of them were clothed in nothing but their brief silken underwear, their hands roped together and tied to solid iron rings set in the tile walls. Some of them cried pitifully, near-mad at the thought of the horrible things that would be done to them; others writhed and twisted in their bonds, trying to escape this hell of outraged modesty. The expressions of the girls showed the terror aroused by the obscence and disgusting jeers and threats that came from the low-born riffraff.

Several of the bandaged creatures now dragged two struggling, screaming youngsters into the room—girls who must have been in the car with King. As an evil shout went up from the observers, Connor, the man who had betrayed King, and a masked leader walked onto the floor.

At a sign from the leader, two of the bandaged henchmen seized the girls while others gathered about in a slavering circle, their drooling mouths agape and muttering nauseating sounds of unnatural enjoyment. The girls' shrill protests rose as their two tormentors slowly ripped their clothes from their bodies. Deliberately, garment by garment, the girls were stripped to the skin, and by now the salacious natures of their bestial captors had been inflamed

to such an extent that Connor and the leader had to force them back with drawn guns.

Then, both blushing girls absolutely naked and cowering on the floor, trying modestly to conceal their bodies as well as possible with their hands and arms, King saw a pair of operating tables rolled out into the room. He realized sickly that incredible horrors were about to start.

Both struggling maidens were thrown roughly upon the tables and their arms and legs locked in metal bands. At the same time two other youngsters had been released from their chains, their ankles securely tied with ropes, then their bodies were hoisted up to the ceiling by a pulley arrangement. They hung there pathetically, heads down, waiting. . . .

AT first Bill King had yelled sulphurous curses at the men who directed the awful outrages; then he closed his eyes in sick disgust as he realized his voice was lost in that ear-shattering din. But he opened his eyes quickly when he heard a voice beside him, saw the sardonic lips of the masked leader leering down at him.

"It's all over now, King," the leader said, "for you—and that girl Janet. This is the exit cue for both of you—with her going first."

King came up on his elbows, his voice trembling with fury and hate.

"Forget the disguise, Bancroft," he ground out. "I know you now—when it's too late. I wish to God it had occurred to me earlier that anyone but a madman would burn his own factory and rob his own bank!"

Paul Bancroft laughed shortly. "It was a beautiful set-up!" he gloated. "So elaborately simple that no one suspected. I had been planning a reign of terror in Chesterton for a long time—and during that outbreak both the fac-

tory and the bank would be ruined. You see, the factory had been losing so much money that my bank was about to go on the rocks from the drain on its resources. Foolishly, I even juggled the bank's books at the end, desperately trying to keep the factory from collapsing. I knew, of course, that everything would have to be covered before the Federal Bank Examiners arrived. So my way out was obvious—start a reign of terror, have the factory burn down and have the bank robbed at the same time, and everything would be blamed on the lawless outbreak. I could recoup all my losses and more—also getting a big fortune on the side. Perfect!”

King looked at the man in amazement. “Bancroft, are you mad?” he asked. “How could the destruction of your property possibly help?”

Bancroft seemed willing to talk. “First,” he said, “the factory carried heavy fire insurance. If a mob burned it down, I'd get paid handsomely for the loss of an otherwise profitless venture. Second, the robbery of my bank would cover up the shortages in the books—while the stolen money came back to me. The deposits were insured by the government, like all savings banks—and afterward I'd still be in business.”

“But what about this terror?” King persisted. “And how were you tied up with Blair Hospital?”

“Blair had nothing to do with me,” Bancroft said, “but its coming here gave me the idea—it was obviously rotten, criminal, a perfect foil. I carefully selected fifty men and gave them instructions; they prepared those two original ‘outrages,’ then talked up riot among the workers.

“As a matter of fact, I hadn't expected the stupid laborers to burn the place down, but it fitted into my plans. The corpses were stolen in the night—Connor arranged that. Then he spread

the silly story that the dead men had run away into the hills. Once the story spread, I had only to increase the terror by dressing up my gang and sending them out for further atrocities on young girls—the best way to raise hysteria.

“On one occasion, as you know, they dropped the body of Dr. Howard, pretending that he had been one of them. Such things, plus the awe-inspiring costumes, were a perfect shield for the fire and the robbery. It all resulted in a cool million profit for me!”

“But those flames?” King asked quickly. “How could you dress up your thugs in flaming suits; suits that burned others yet didn't cremate alive the men who wore them?”

“THOSE suits,” Bancroft explained, “were lined with heavy asbestos, then thickly padded with porous, heat-resistant felt. The flames were produced by *pyroxedin*, a chemical counter part of common marsh gas. *Pyroxedin*, burns at a low temperature—though it's plenty hot enough to sear living flesh if it comes into direct contact with the body.

“And now the whole plan is complete,” Bancroft concluded. “It only remains for me to pay off my gang—who don't know my identity—and to see that these girls, and your beloved Janet, are done away with.”

King began to scream curses at the man, but his voice was drowned out by a rising shout . . . by the screeching wails of the girls!

BILL KING shuddered in dread when he saw what they were doing to the two girls on the operating tables. A heavy electrical machine had been rolled into the room, and the thugs were affixing the electrodes to their trembling young forms—two diabolical, cup-like contacts that fitted snugly over their up-thrusting, tender young breasts! Straps

were wrenched tight, crushing the girls' breasts into those metal brassieres!

King knew that he was looking at an electro-galvanic machine such as mental hospitals use in physio-therapy for epilepsy and associated disorders of the central nervous system. The shocks, administered under careful medical direction, might prove beneficial. But in the hands of this brutish, ignorant crew, and with the special breast-attachments that had been horribly devised, they would destroy the whole nervous systems of the girls, breaking down tolerance until complete insanity resulted!

Each pretty little girl was screeching in fear of the unknown horror she must undergo, writhing wildly against the metal straps, and the mad-eyed Connor stood at the controls. Suddenly his hand threw the switch and the girls' screams knifed off abruptly as a low humming sound filled the suddenly silent room. As Connor's hand advanced the switch the humming sound grew in intensity and the girls' bodies arched slowly upward, tense and rigid, straining against the bands around their waists—and at the same time the two girls suspended by their feet from the ceiling were lowered until their faces were directly above the tortured girls.

For long moments the scene held—the electrically paralyzed girls staring into those faces above them, their young bodies straining upward with tendon-cracking force, and after a long while thin trickles of blood appeared where their involuntary effort had cut the skin against the cruel metal straps.

Their once-beautiful eyes were almost bursting from their sockets, their pretty faces slowly flushing to a purple hue. Then, abruptly, Connor cut the current and the girls fell back limply to the operating tables as the two youngsters suspended above them were hoisted again to the roof. And then King saw the incredible devilishness behind the

scheme! During their unimaginable torture, the two girls could see nothing but those features above them—and when their minds snapped, their pain and those faces would be fused, would become one, and the mad hatred of the girls would be directed at their companions! This was an insane twisting of the great scientist's—Pavlov's—experiments with pain and the conditioned reflex! Soon the two girls would blame those faces for their suffering!

Both tormented girls were moaning now, softly and piteously, tears of terror and exhaustion streaming down their white faces, and shuddering tremors racking their outraged bodies. The awful torturing force of that machine, striking through their tender breasts, had almost wrecked their nervous systems, and when they tried to speak, tried to beg for mercy and plead for their young lives, their words were only a thick-tongued mumble. Then Connor had thrown the switch again and the youngsters' bodies snapped back to the lash of the crackling current that coursed through every tender fibre of their naked forms—and again all they could see were the two girlish faces above them. Silently, unable to screech, they went through the searing torment of unimaginable pain.

King closed his eyes, unable to look, but still he worked against his bonds. But he couldn't close his ears to that never-ending series of shock and rest, shock and rest, on and on. . . .

When at last he looked again, a sick wave of nausea swept over him. The thugs were taking the steel brassieres off the girls, and the girls were giggling! Their heads were rolling from side to side, their abdomens shaking with gales of insane laughter! They were both mad!

THE two crazed girls were handed from man to man, were foully

caressed by the jeering, lascivious crew, and the two of them responded eagerly to the indecent fondling. Their naked little bodies curled avidly against those beasts, their eager lips and virginal forms offered willingly to their captors. But after a short time the men tired of the sport. The girls were cast roughly aside—and then began the second awful scene!

The two suspended girls had been lowered until their heads touched the floor, and now the two crazed youngsters were both given a sharp, gleaming scalpel! At sight of the two helpless prisoners, each of the mad girls stiffened in fear—then slowly began to creep upon their prey, their young faces distorted with hate. The first girl leaped upon her victim with a wild scream, slashing with the knife, disemboweling the helpless virgin—ripping out her entrails alive!

But the second was more deliberate. She taunted her victim, cut her slightly here and there to increase her terror, then squatted on the floor by the girl's head. Humming happily to herself, her mouth drooling saliva in maniacal delight—she began deliberately to strip the girl of her skin! Her knife inscribed a deep incision about each of the screaming victim's breasts. Then, with deft care, she began lifting the skin from the quivering flesh! Slowly, with diabolical cunning to increase the pain, one hand gripped the girl's hair to hold her still, she lifted the round pieces of skin off whole. Each breast she placed carefully in front of the agonized maiden's eyes. That done, she turned her attention to another intimate part of her victim's body. The indescribable act of heartless savagery made King close his eyes and turn weakly away. It was fantastic, unbelievable, utterly depraved!

And it was at that moment that King felt his hands break free! He lay

quietly for a moment, trying to form a plan of attack. But he realized with despair that he was one man, unarmed, against a wild rout of thugs. He couldn't even take his own life and Janet's before this salacious, mad crew had seized her lovely body for an awful sacrifice.

And then King heard another girl's voice knife through the room in wild panic—and it was Janet's dear voice! He was on his feet now, sobs breaking from him, and he saw a group of tormentors ripping Janet's chains from her limbs, preparing her for further foulness and depravity. Once she called his name, pleadingly, and he was about to hurl himself into the wild rout, willing to go down fighting rather than witness her degradation — when a sudden thought came to him! He knew one way to blow this whole crew to hell! If his hunch was only right. . . .

**K**ING crept carefully backward, unobserved, then stumbled up the stairs, out into the charred timbers of the burned sanitarium, and fought his way madly toward the dark cars parked in the driveway.

He had remembered that the gangsters had used dynamite to blow up the bank, heavy charges of it, and he was betting that they'd have extra sticks, ready wired. He fumbled wildly through the first car; it was empty. Then he was in the second—and his heart leaped as he found the lethal sticks. Wires, detonators and charger were all there! He grabbed his prize, careless of the instant death he carried now, and ran back toward the cellar chamber.

King's eyes swept the room as he stood in the now-empty amphitheater at one end. The hanging girls were gory masses of blood; the two mad girls were under restraint—and two other girls were strapped in the devilish electrical

machine! Janet was already standing in the center of the room, her head hanging in shame and terror, as two of the thugs loosely gripped her unresisting arms. King shouted once to Janet, and the pretty girl's head snapped erect, her eyes filled with hope. With a lithe twist she wrenched her arms from the listless grasp of the unsuspecting men, then she was racing across the room to join King.

But now the crowd had seen King too, and the young doctor knew they'd never have time to make the stairway. The thugs came raging across the room, a shot rang out—and that was when King tossed his first pack of dynamite sticks. Paul Bancroft was in the lead, and it was to him he threw the bundle. Instinctively, unthinking, the man's hands came up and caught the sticks . . . and King rammed the charger home!

**A** BLASTING roar thundered out, shaking the heavy walls and splattering the entire place with wet frag-

ments of the gang. In the background the girls stood unhurt, and beside them cowered what was left of the gang. But King didn't stay for more—he grabbed Janet and raced up the steps. Once outside, he threw his second charge back into the cellar—and again the ground heaved as the single exit became a solid mass of masonry and earth. The rest of the thugs were prisoners! All that was needed now was the State Police—and a gang of men with shovels.

King took off his coat and put it around Janet's near-naked body, and she came into his arms, sobbing and trembling, whispering his name in a tender voice. Bill King just held her like that for long minutes, not saying anything. It wasn't necessary to speak. Their minds had felt the force of terror—but their hearts knew the strength of love, and in that strength they were sure. The future was theirs.

There was pride in his eyes as he leaned down to kiss her.

#### HERE'S THE LINE-UP OF CONTENTS IN THE MARCH, 1940,

**F**ACT stories in COMPLETE DETECTIVE CASES are exactly what the name implies—COMPLETE!

The stories in this magazine are prepared only after a crime has been solved, the perpetrator has been sentenced and the sentence has been put into force. Only through such an editorial policy may readers be assured of really COMPLETE DETECTIVE CASES.

It is well to remember that stories and pictures in COMPLETE DETECTIVE CASES are obtained directly from active law-enforcement officers or their official records.

Quite obviously, all the facts pertaining to a crime cannot be released for publication until the guilty person is in custody and the necessary court procedure has ended.

Therefore, stories rushed, incomplete, to the newsstands before the criminals are captured, and before the trials are over, are seldom able to present ALL the interesting facts pertinent to the cases they purport to describe.

While certain stories may appear in other crime publications before presentation in this magazine, please remember that we give our readers COMPLETE DETECTIVE CASES!

## COMPLETE DETECTIVE CASES

15c

**STRIP-TEASED TO MURDER**—By Joe Whitley, who covered the trial in Houston, Texas.

"His Red-Hot Passion for a Burlesque Dancer Turned Him to a Cold-Blooded Killer!"

**SEX-HORROR AT LEIGHTON BUZZARD**—By P. J. Garnell.

A sex murder in England.

**BEAUTIES AND THE BEAST**—By Katharine O'Neal.

A sex-mad creature who attacked a number of women, finally killing one of his victims and being tracked down by police near St. Louis.

**THE COMELY CORPSE WAS NUDE**—By Edwin Baird.

Mystery of the slaying of a pretty young woman whose naked body was found in a Chicago hotel room.

**DYNAMITE DEATH AT DAWN**—By R. Lehman Neff.

A man was killed, and his woman companion was gravely injured in a mysterious explosion of their auto. Three persons were sent to the penitentiary as a result of this crime in southern Illinois.

**GRAVE-ROBBING ROMEO**—By Hollis Fultz. An eerie story of a grave-robbing gang at Indianapolis.

**CLEW OF THE DEATH-DEALING DRAGON**—By Frank W. Hanford.

Clever detective work solved this baffling killing in Seattle's colorful Chinatown.

PLUS OTHER INTERESTING ARTICLES—FACTS FROM OFFICIAL FILES!



# HORROR'S HANDMAIDENS

by Brent North

Author of "Horror in Hollywood," etc.

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*The hot blood of life pulsed beneath the pigment on that canvas—the hot blood of America's most beautiful models!*

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**O**CTOBER 20th.—It was a beautiful, warm night in southern California. At about 12:30 A. M., a young man named John Hyde drove his car down to the beach. With him, was his sweetheart, a girl named Catherine Frank. They parked the car just off the highway and walked along the sandy beach for perhaps thirty minutes. When they returned, Hyde noticed indignantly, that someone was sitting in the back of his sedan. He jerked open the rear door and commanded, "Come on out of there!" There was no answer. He reached inside and switched on the interior light. One glance was enough. The Frank girl

screamed and fainted, falling against the fender. For awhile, Hyde was uncontrollably nauseated, but when he recovered himself, he dragged the Frank girl into the car and drove to the Santa Monica police station. The police removed the body from the rear seat of the car. It was the body of a well-formed young woman of medium height. From the waist up, her skin had been carefully and completely removed, so that not a single shred still clung to her bare flesh. As for her head, the hair was gone, in addition to the skin—even the skin of the lips.

November 2nd.—Returning from a late party, a certain well known screen

star (whose name was kept out of the papers) discovered the body of a young woman, lying in his driveway. The body was unclothed and the face was smashed beyond recognition. From the waist, down, every particle of skin was gone. Even the finger nails and toe nails were missing.

The papers screamed MANIAC IN HOLLYWOOD! and lambasted the police force for allowing such things to happen. But what could the police do? They couldn't even identify the victims. Of course, every time a sex criminal was picked up, they beat the hell out of him and tried to get a confession—but they had no luck that way.

*November 19th.*—A third horror. The body of a young woman found in Griffith Park. Her head was crushed as if by blows of a large hammer and her eyes were missing. Her skin, however, was intact.

*November 23rd.*—Gray Lawson, formerly an international detective, but now a motion picture executive, was called into consultation by Chief of Police Harry Welch.

Gray was about forty and looked it. He was rather gaunt in appearance and his tan skin seemed tightly drawn over a frame of big bones and nervous, hard muscles.

When the Chief had explained what he wanted, Gray shook his head, smiling. "No, Harry," he said. "I don't want to seem unfriendly—but when I married Linda, I promised her I'd quit the Sherlock Holmes business forever. Anyhow, you and your men are capable of handling this, yourselves."

Welch was pacing up and down in front of his desk. He paused and said, "I know how you feel, Gray—and I wouldn't ask it of you if things weren't desperate. But the papers are crucifying us! We'll all be right out on our ears if we don't find this fiend."

"You'll do it."

Welch sighed disgustedly. "Okay. If

you won't help us with the case, I guess there's nothing I can do to make you. But will you do me just one favor?"

"If I can."

Come with me and have a look at the girls in the morgue."

*November 23rd. 7:30 P. M.*—Gray Lawson was dining with his beautiful young wife, Linda. She was well aware of the fact that he was not quite himself and finally she asked, "What's the matter, Gray? Is something wrong at the studio?"

He answered evasively, but after considerable urging, he told her. "Harry Welch asked me to take charge of that case you've been reading about—the girl whose eyes had been gouged out—and the other two. He insisted I look at their bodies—"

"Oh my darling!" Linda gasped. "I'm so sorry—"

Gray's mouth was grim. "It's pretty nasty. If I hadn't married you, dear, I'd be working on the thing, now. It would be a great satisfaction to get my hands on the throat of the man who killed those girls."

"But you said you wouldn't help him?"

"I did."

SHE smiled her gratitude. Then the morbid curiosity that is in everyone, prompted her to ask, "Is it as bad as the papers report?"

"Worse. The doctors say the girls were—disfigured—while they were still alive."

"How ghastly! And there's still no clue?"

"No clue—exactly," Gray answered slowly. "But at least they have some hope of identifying the last victim. She has a curious scar just above her hip—in the form of the letter Z—"

Instantly, Linda asked, "Which side?"

"The right side. But why do you ask?"

"Because when I was a fashion model in New York, I knew a girl who had a scar like that. She was a model, too. In fact, she was one of my best friends. You've heard me speak of May Delany."

*November 23rd. 9:00 P. M.*—Linda Lawson looked at the corpse on the slab. Gray had covered the face with a cloth, since nobody could have recognized any single detail in that gory mess. But the scar made it possible for Linda to identify the body, beyond any doubt. Tears were in her eyes as she said, "That's May Delany, Gray—she was so nice—so pretty—"

Ten minutes later, police throughout the nation began a check up of every friend and acquaintance that the girl was known to have had.

On the way home, Linda said quietly, "Gray—I want you to find the man who killed her—and those other girls—"

"But I promised—"

"I release you from that promise. If you can help to bring that monster to justice—it's your duty to do so. Don't let me, or the studio, or anything else stand in your way!"

Gray pressed her arm to his side in mute thanks.

*November 23rd. 11:30 P. M.*—A party at the large and beautiful studio of Henri Graven. Graven was famous on two continents as one of the greatest painters of the generation. His portraits and nudes hung in the principal galleries of Paris, London and New York. In search of fresh fields to conquer, he had come to Hollywood, where women are rich, lovely—and vain. The occasion of the party was to show his first Hollywood painting.

Covered by a black velvet cloth, the painting stood on an easel at the end of the room. Graven was a big man with closely clipped black hair, rather magnetic dark eyes and full lips that were usually set in a mocking smile.

When the last of his illustrious guests had arrived, Graven addressed the gathering. "My friends—as you know, I invited you here tonight because I wished you to see my latest painting. If you are familiar with my work, you will find it somewhat different from anything I have done before. I leave it to you to decide whether it is better—"

He drew the velvet cover off the easel and stepped aside. The picture was a life size nude in a graceful, reclining pose—a subject which, in itself, is perfectly ordinary. But the effect upon Graven's guests was electric—first, a moment of silent amazement—then awed exclamations of wonder and admiration. "It's so life-like, you can almost see it breathe? . . . The color is absolutely perfect! . . . More beautiful than life! . . ."

Two hours later, Henri Graven accepted a commission to do a portrait of one of Hollywood's loveliest and most successful glamour girls. The price agreed upon was \$20,000.

*November 24th. Noon.*—Police had unearthed most of the history of May Delany. After graduating from high school, she had become a fashion model, working in New York for several years. Upon the failure of the firm that had employed her, she had become a professional artists' model. At this, she had been successful and had posed for a long list of artist on the Atlantic coast. Six months before her death, she came to Hollywood and enrolled herself in an agency for models. Work was scarce, however, and it was thought that at the time of her murder she was probably very low in funds.

Gray Lawson and Chief Harry Welch read the report together. Gray said, "Of course you'll check everybody she worked for out here?"

"Of course. It's being done now."

GRAY nodded thoughtfully. "About the identity of the other girls—I

know it's a pretty remote possibility, but I think it might be worth while to go on the theory that they were models, also. Let's try to find a dentist who had a model for a client. Their faces are useless for identification, but perhaps their teeth might be recognized."

*November 24th. 5 P. M.*—Linda called for Gray at Police Headquarters and drove him home. On the way, he told her that it had been possible to establish the identity of one of the other victims—the first. The body was that of Julia Conover, an artists' model.

Linda exclaimed, "But—doesn't that mean something? I mean—the fact that they were both models—"

"It may mean a great deal—or it may be nothing more than a peculiar coincidence. The trouble is that there's no record of what artist either girl was posing for. As a matter of fact, it seems that neither girl was working at the time of the murders."

"But aren't you going to follow up the lead—even if it's a slim one?"

"Certainly." Gray patted her as if she were a small child. "We'll interview every artist in the country—just on the chance. However, I doubt if it will do the slightest good. How would we know the guilty man, even if we found him?"

Linda was silent while she drove perhaps a mile. Then she said, "You mean you'll have to get some definite evidence—"

"That's about it. Just suspicion of artists in general, or even of one artist in particular, wouldn't be good enough. Maybe, if I were a model, myself, I'd visit all the local artists and pose for them while I tried to pick up something." He laughed. "But I'm the wrong sex and about twenty years too old."

*November 25th.*—At Gray's suggestion X rays had been made of victim number two—the girl who had been flayed below the waist. In the morn-

ing, the finished pictures were delivered to Chief Welch. They showed that the girl had once had a compound fracture of the left fore arm. In the middle of the afternoon, a physician was found who recognized the pictures. He had set the arm several years before. His files showed that the patient was Irene Nayland. Quick investigation revealed that Miss Nayland had been a chorus girl and that she had occasionally done some posing.

"Now we're getting somewhere!" said Gray. "All we have to do is find out which artist all three girls knew. If we should be lucky enough to discover that there's just one whom all three knew—I'll lay you dollars to peanuts, he's our man."

"If," Welch amended,—“if an artist did this. It looks more to me like a madman. The way the murders were done is crazy as hell.”

"Perhaps," said Gray. "We'll know more about that before we're through."

*November 26th.*—A thorough check failed to reveal the name of any one artist whom all the girls knew or worked for. Apparently each had posed for an entirely separate list of painters.

At twelve, noon, came the flash that another body had been found—in a clump of cactus on the edge of the San Fernando Valley. Gray and Welch rushed to the scene. Perhaps the girl had once been beautiful. Now she was a sickening lump of raw meat. From head to foot, her skin had been neatly peeled from her entire left side.

Welch groaned, "I might as well resign before I'm fired. Somebody's got to be the goat in a case like this—and this time, I guess it will have to be me."

GRAY said, "If only we knew the reason for these mutilations! I don't believe your lunatic theory—but why would anyone go to so much trouble? It must have taken hours to remove this girl's skin so carefully—"

it's almost as though the skin, itself were precious in some way. . . ."

*November 26th. 7:15 P. M.*—When, tired and discouraged, Gray arrived at his home, the maid told him that Mrs. Lawson was not there.

"Did she leave a message?" Gray asked. "Did she say when she would be back?"

"No, sir." The maid only knew that Mrs. Lawson had left sometime before lunch, saying that she would probably be back by 5:00. "Shall I serve dinner, sir?"

"No. I'll wait."

*8:30 P. M.*—No word from Linda. Gray wandered around the house like a lost soul. Linda didn't do this sort of thing. She might have known how much worry she was causing. . . .

*9:25 P. M.*—Still no word. Gray called up all her friends. None of them had seen or spoken to her. He called the police, the hospitals, the morgue—without result. He tried not to think of the possibility that she had met the same fate as those other girls—that her glorious body was lying, lacerated and defiled, beside some lonely road. But the thought gnawed at his brain like a devouring cancer.

*9:50 P. M.*—Gray rang for the maid and said, "I want you to tell me exactly what my wife was doing just before she left."

"Why, nothing, sir. I believe she was just reading the newspaper."

"What paper? Where is it?"

"I think it's still here, sir—"

"Bring it to me! Hurry!"

It was grasping at straws, but anything was better than just waiting.

Gray skimmed through the paper without finding anything that might have interested Linda. He went through it again—and this time it occurred to him that there was an item that might be significant—merely that an artist named Henri Graven was painting a portrait of Ann Allison for a

sum that was reported to be \$50,000. Was it possible that Linda might have decided to try a little investigating by herself? Cursing himself, Gray remembered that he had told her that if he had been a girl, he would have offered to pose for all the artists in Hollywood. He picked up the telephone book and thumbed his way to G.

*10:20 P. M.*—Gray slammed on his brakes and skidded to a stop in the dark driveway. Graven's studio was a large, imposing building that was set in the middle of a grove of eucalyptus trees that hid it from view on every side. Gray pushed the bell button and waited for what seemed an eternity before the door swung open. The figure of a big, black haired man filled the doorway.

"Is Mr. Graven in?"

"I am Henri Graven."

Gray forced himself to laugh as if he were slightly embarrassed. "I suppose you'll think it's strange of me to call at this time of night—but you know how things are done in Hollywood—on the spur of the moment. You see, I'm a producer at the R. G. M. Studio, and today I was talking to Ann Allison. She suggested that I persuade you to paint a portrait of my wife—and here I am."

"Come in!" said Graven, heartily. "I'm always delighted to meet a new patron."

On an easel in the large room, stood a preparatory sketch for the portrait of Ann Allison and Gray pretended to look at it admiringly. Actually, though, his keen eyes were registering every visible detail—searching for some sign that Linda either was or had been there. While Graven talked technicalities, Gray walked toward the fireplace. There, on the hearth, was something that made his heart jump a beat—a very mild Turkish cigarette of the type that Linda preferred. Turning his back on Graven, he stooped to pick it up.

Without warning, something slammed against the back of his head. For a fraction of a second the world was a blinding blaze of light—then black extinction.

10:55 P. M.—Like a light seeking to pierce an eddying fog, consciousness fought through layers of stupefying pain. The room was small, achingly white. A woman was moaning. Gray felt the ropes that cut into the muscles of his arms and legs. Then, suddenly all the pieces of the ghastly pattern fell into place—and his brain was clear.

ON a low, wooden platform, Linda stood completely nude, against a heavy, roughly fashioned cross. Iron chains bound her slender ankles and wrists. The strained position of her body—the upraised arms, the thrusting breasts, flat stomach and graciously curving thighs—left no secret beauty undiscovered.

At a distance of about five feet, Graven worked at an easel—a brush in one hand, a palette in the other. At his side was an enormous bench on which lay stretched and fastened the body of a young woman whom Gray had never seen before. Several long strips of skin had been removed from her body, but she was alive and struggling pathetically. A gag prevented any intelligible sounds from passing her lips. In addition to surgical knives, a large number of strange utensils were scattered around her—bottles of reagents, mortars, pestles. . . .

“So you’re awake again,” said Graven. “Don’t bother to strain at those ropes—they’ll hold. And don’t waste time talking to your wife, because I doped her and she won’t hear you. The little fool came to me and said she was a professional model—and then she wouldn’t pose for me in the nude. Silly sort of prudery, isn’t it? So I had a sudden inspiration—I’d paint her whether she liked it or not—as an Early

Christian Martyr! It will make a beautiful picture, don’t you think? I’ve been working on it ever since early afternoon and I think it will be finished pretty soon. Would you like to have a look at it now?”

He swung the easel around. Raging as he was, Gray could not suppress a gasp of surprise. It was perfect—almost too perfect. It almost seemed that the hot blood of life was pulsing beneath the pigment on the canvas. In many details the painting was not finished, but even now, it was so close to reality that the illusion was frightening.

Graven turned the easel and started talking again. Gray had the self-control to say nothing. What could he say?

“I know all about you, of course—having examined both your wife’s handbag and your pockets. You guessed that I killed those girls. Well, I had to—it was for Art’s sake. You see, I discovered a process by which I can use the actual color pigment of the skin, the hair, the eyes of the human being—like this—”

He put down his palette and brush, picked up a scalpel from the bench at his side, and carefully stripped a piece of skin from the breast of the writhing girl. He dropped the skin into a mortar, added a few drops of liquid from several bottles, a little white powder and a few drops of linseed oil. He ground the mixture together and transferred the resulting lump of flesh colored paint to his palette.

Gray said, “For God’s sake—why don’t you kill the girl first instead of flaying her alive?”

“The reason’s simple enough. A corpse doesn’t have the same color as a living body. When they die, they’re useless, so I keep them alive as long as I can. . . . Incidentally, your wife’s color is specially fine. I’ll use her for the Allison portrait.”

Trying to sound convincing, Gray

said, "Don't you realize it will be just a matter of hours before the police pick you up?"

Graven laughed. "I doubt it. As a matter of fact, they've already been here and have looked around. But there's nothing to connect me with those girls. I didn't know them, any more than I knew you or your wife. They came to me, wanting to pose—and when I asked them whether anybody knew they had come to me, the stupid fools said No." While he talked and chuckled over his cleverness, he continued to paint—occasionally adding to the colors on his palette pale ivory tinged with pink . . . delicate coral. . .

**T**HERE was a noticeable change in Linda's slow, heavy breathing. The injected dope was wearing off and soon she would return to the full consciousness of the horror that, in reality, was a million times worse than any nightmare she could have dreamed in her stupor.

*11:35 P. M.*—Detective Arthur Hansen burst into the office of the Chief of Police. "Chief!" he shouted, "We've got something! The girl's sweetheart has just identified her and we've gone through her rooms. Look what we found!"

On the desk he laid a small, black book—a diary. The last entry read, "I think that this morning I'll go and try to get work posing for Henri Gra-

ven. Bad luck like mine can't last forever. . . ."

*11:57 P. M.*—The door bell rang.

"Damn!" said Graven, putting down his brush and palette. "I wonder who that is? Well—never mind—I'll get rid of them." At the door, he turned back. "Shout if you want to. This room is sound proof."

*Midnight.*—Chief Welch was the first to come into the room.

Gray said, "Put your coat around Linda, before you let the rest of them in—and keep your eyes closed while you're doing it!"

Welch smilingly obeyed, but when he came to untie Gray, his fingers fumbled clumsily with the knots. That was because his eyes were fascinated by a painting—a portrait of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Welch may not have known anything about Art, but he knew what he liked.

*1:15 A. M.*—Graven's last victim died in the General Hospital.

*April 14th.*—Having been tried and convicted by a jury of his peers, Henri Graven was duly executed, thus paying at least a part of his debt to society and the State of California. According to observers, his last words were, "You can take my life, but my paintings will live forever."

*April 15th.*—The Court ordered the destruction by fire of those paintings which had been held as evidence in the case of the State vs. Graven.



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# MY LIFE BELONGS TO LUST

by Allan K. Echols

Author of "Horror's Hallowed Housewives," etc.

---

*I saw cold lust in the eyes of this man I loved, and then I saw his face go white with terror, for he, more than I, would know the torture of the blood-taint of my kin!*

---

A DISMAL rain dribbled down on the black pavement under the Elevated, fogging the night so that the street light seemed blanketed in a cold, sickly shroud. I had the fur collar of my coat pulled up around my face, for although this was a strange neighborhood to me, I had the guilty feeling that the few loiterers on the dismal street could read my secret.

It was as though each sharp face that turned to me as I hurried along, read my thoughts—that I was running away from my husband, keeping an appointment with a lover.

Then I saw *the man* again!

He stood on a darkened corner, his strange face turned toward me, his strong eyes boring into my very brain, his whole queer, stern personality haunting me like a curse! It was getting so that I saw him everywhere now, following me in his slow, deliberate way, never speaking to me! Just looking *through me!*

Even the strange clothes he wore were frightening. For they did not fit these times. He wore such garb as I had seen in old pictures in Godey's Ladies' Book, the fashion of three generations ago. Remotely, he reminded me of Abe Lincoln, with his high beaver hat and his long frock coat of homespun. And when he stood with his hands in the pockets set crossways in his tight-fitting trousers, the front of his coat was open, and I saw that an old-fashioned pistol was stuck in his belt!

Somehow, in the last two weeks I had come to believe that gun had been carefully loaded with cap and ball—for one purpose. To kill me!

For this strange old man, like a person out of a dream, had followed me constantly ever since I first met Tony DeMarco in the "Fifty-three" cocktail bar and spent the afternoon dancing with him. When I left Tony with the promise to meet him there again the next afternoon I saw this queer creature lounging on the outside. That had been the first time.

But it had not been the last. He had haunted me ever since! As I had seen more and more of Tony and as I had come to love him and had listened seriously to

his pleading that I leave Alden, my husband, and go with him, as these things happened to me, a respectable, if bored young married woman I had become more frightened of this man who trailed me. There was something unreal but vaguely familiar about his ancient face.

Yesterday afternoon I had come to the cocktail lounge and Tony had met me. I dashed into his arms thoroughly frightened. Tony led me to a booth and held me in his arms tightly and asked:

"What is it, sweet—the husband getting suspicious?"

"No," I answered. "Alden goes to his stuffy law office and plugs away all day writing briefs, and comes home and does the same thing at night. Getting ahead, he calls it. He doesn't even know I'm alive."

"And *how* alive! But what's the worry?"

"That man. He followed me again," I confessed. "He doesn't speak but merely stares at me. I'm sure I've seen him before this, but I can't remember where."

Tony took me in his arms. "Don't give it a second thought," he said. "This town is full of queer, sex-crazed old men. And I've got news! You're going to elope with me—tomorrow! We're going to South America!"

"Surprised," I asked. "Why? And why tomorrow, so suddenly?"

"I've told you that I represent certain South American firms on confidential business. Duty calls, so we'll mix business and a honeymoon. My connections down there will arrange your divorce pronto, as they say."

My heart pounded. "I don't know. I couldn't—"

"Listen," Tony interrupted sharply. "You and I are in love in a serious way. We're not children, and you know what that means. So far you haven't really been mine."

"But later—"

"No. Tomorrow! Your husband is going to Washington for a week, as you told me. So, tomorrow night you're coming to see me at my hotel—and you're going to be my true wife—do you understand? You wouldn't want to put it off if you really

loved me. The next day we'll be headed for South America. That's settled."

Terrified as I was, I promised. He would get my divorce for me and marry me. No more dull, stodgy nights sitting at home listening to quiz programs on the radio while my husband worked and others lived. . . .

So, as I scurried through the rain under the El, keeping my promise, I ran squarely into that old man again. He stood on the corner, his stern eyes fastened on me! Sickened with fear, I pulled my collar higher around my face and ran, listening for his footsteps behind me. It was not until I turned the corner into the street I wanted that I dared look back.

I did not see him!

I slowed down to a walk and went into the dismal entrance of the hotel. I stuttered with embarrassment when the clerk gave me Tony's room number.

"1847. He's expecting you."

A COLD sensation of dread enveloped me as I hastened through the lobby and up to the floor I wanted. I felt somehow as though I were going to my doom. It was that pistol in the old man's belt—I couldn't rid my mind of the picture of it!

I followed the hallway, searching for the room. As I turned off into a side hall I stopped suddenly. One hand flew to my mouth to stifle the scream that arose in my throat. Strength drained from my legs and I leaned against the wall, weak with terror.

For the old man stood in the hallway. He was leaning against the wall and in the dim light I saw those horrible eyes on me! And the gun in his belt.

Frantically I looked about like a trapped animal, and saw the door I was seeking.

1847!

For a fleeting instant that number seemed vaguely familiar, like the old man, but I was too terrified to think of it. I pounded on the door, crying out Tony's name.

I was babbling hysterically when the door opened and Tony peered out. There was a look of fright on his face as he stared strangely out at me. He took my arm and pulled me into the room and locked the door behind me.

I slumped down in a chair, crying like a child. And fear completely possessed my body.

Tony was wearing a maroon dressing gown, and an open hand bag was lying on a chair. He quickly brought out a bottle and poured me half a tumblerful of whis-

# BACKACHE

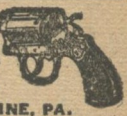


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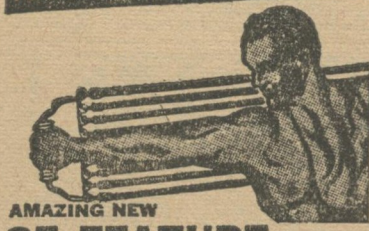
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key, but I refused it.

"What's the matter, baby?" he asked. His face had that careless smile I had known so long, but I saw something new in his eyes. Desire? Greed? I don't know, but I do know it was a light that frightened me.

"That—" I hesitated. Should I tell him about that man again? He might go out and start trouble—and my name would be mixed up in a terrible scandal. "That—I hedged. "That trip down here. It upset me."

There was relief on Tony's face, and in its place I saw the new fire burn more brightly in his eyes, and that frightened me.

He took me in his arms and kissed me, and for the first time since his first kiss, I did not relish it. It was too hot, too passionate, and I was too upset. Something was stirring in my mind.

I didn't know what it was that took possession of me, but it was connected with that old man. I feared him, dreaded him, and I couldn't place him. I seemed to know him, but I couldn't remember who he was. I only knew that he had complete control of my mind. I hardly heard Tony's endearing words.

"At last," he was saying. "You're mine for all time. Darling, isn't it wonderful to be alone together?"

His eyes were burning, and what I saw there I finally recognized. It was pure lust!

Lust! Without one iota of love in it. It was nothing but bestial passion that burned in his hot face, and seeing it I knew that there had never been any other feeling. My blood turned to ice. I was trapped, between this man here and the fate that the old creature had in store for me.

Tony's arms were around me and his hot breath was smothering me with moist kisses that chilled my spine. Terror gripped my heart as I pushed him away, trying to get control of myself so that I could find some means of escape.

"Tony," I said with as much calmness as I could muster, "please listen to me and believe me. I have made a terrible mistake. I can't go through with this thing. I thought I loved you, but I don't. And so—"

Tony's face broke into that cynical smile. "Don't let a little thing like that worry you," he said. "You will love me—after you see my brand of love. It's different, something your stodgy old lawyer husband wouldn't know anything about!"

"No, Tony. I could never—"

"Yes you could—and will!" There was a new, impatient tone in his voice which I had never heard before, and now his face was livid with passion. He caught my arm.

"Listen here," he said in a voice that sounded like the hiss of a snake to me. "We've gone too far for you to back out. You're going through with it now, whether you want to or not. You're not going to make a monkey out of me, see?"

I turned suddenly and jerked out of his grasp. In two steps I had my hand on the door knob. The door was locked and I had to turn the key. Tony's two hands were on my shoulders before I could get the door open.

I felt a sudden jerk, and heard the rending of cloth, and my black dress came off in his hands, a torn rag. "Now," he grinned, "just run out and make your complaint. And to make sure—" he caught my slip with one hand, jerked it into ribbons, and with another stroke he had ripped off my brassiere and panties. "Just run out and tell them you're a respectable married woman who was attacked while making an innocent call on a man in a hotel while your husband was away. Tell 'em that, huh?" He laughed coldly.

He grabbed me to him and his hot breath was in my face, his damp, lecherous lips on my neck. I went limp with horror, knowing the end had come.

**B**UT more horror was in store for me. In this crisis in my life, my mind seemed unusually clear. I knew I had this coming to me. It was a blood taint. My great-grandmother, so the story went, had deserted her husband and run away with a lover. And her husband had followed and shot her dead, in a hotel right here in New York. That was in 1847, as I remembered hearing it.

1847! That was the number of this room!

I was limp in Tony's arm, resigned to him having his way with me. It was Fate that I should end my marriage thus. Life was repeating itself.

Then I screamed!

For I saw the *old man* standing with arms folded, his stern face screwed up with righteous indignation. *And I recognized the old man now!*

It was my great-grandfather, he who had killed his faithless wife! I had seen his picture in the old family album, the tall hat and the frock coat and strange whiskers.

I knew he had been dead nearly a hun-

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dred years.

Now I saw him watching with wordless scorn as Tony mauled me. I saw the rage in the old man's face as one of his massive hands dropped to his belt and came out lifting the ancient pistol.

My hypnotized gaze was on the muzzle of that pistol, where Death was ready to claim me. The gun came up.

With my last remaining strength I cried out, pleading for my life.

*"Don't shoot. In God's name, don't shoot!"*

I saw Tony look at me and his face turn white with terror. He saw my gaze directed over his shoulder and he whirled like a man knocked cold. In that same instant the strength of desperation rose in me and I pushed hard at Tony's face in my mad flight.

Tony fell, bringing down the telephone table with him and lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. I jumped over him and grabbed my coat, and threw it around me. Then, wild-eyed, I searched for a means of escape from the man with the gun—from that room—and from Tony.

The man with the gun was not in the room! He had disappeared without having fired that retributive shot into my body.

I stood trembling for a moment while I heard the muffled voice of the clerk in the telephone receiver asking for the order. I knew someone would be up to investigate when there was no answer.

I picked up the torn rags of my clothes and crawled out onto the fire escape. It was eighteen stories down the side of the building. I started climbing downward, naked except for the coat covering me.

At home the next day I read the paper in an agony of fear. Then I found a tiny story on the last page. It said in part:

"The body of Anthony Gatti, alias, Tony DeMarco, was found in his room at the Empire Hotel last night. Police said Gatti had met an unknown woman there a short time previous to his death. Murder was first suspected, but a report of the Medical Examiner's office states that the man died of heart disease, probably brought on by excitement or sudden shock of some kind. Gatti, or DeMarco, was identified by police from fingerprints, and was said to have been connected with a white slave ring transporting women to South America. Police consider the case closed."

I dropped my paper then, for something on the radio, on Dr. Brandon's "Do You Believe It?" program had caught my ear.

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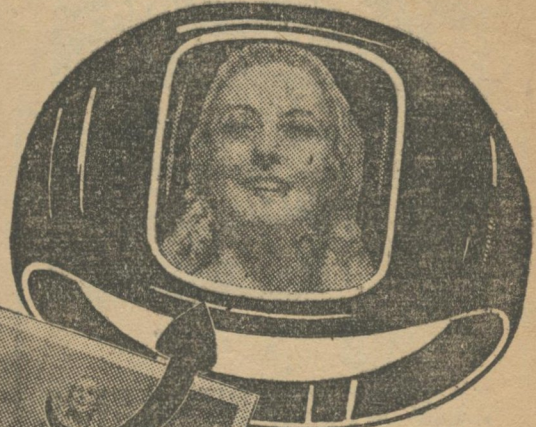
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I looked at the old picture I had taken out of the family album, the picture of my great-grandfather, the story of whose tragedy I had heard as a child. The stern old face looked back at me from the photograph.

Did I see a knowing wink, or was it the dim light?

Anyway, I settled down gratefully to try to finish knitting the muffler for Alden before his return from Washington. . . .

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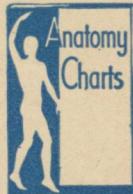
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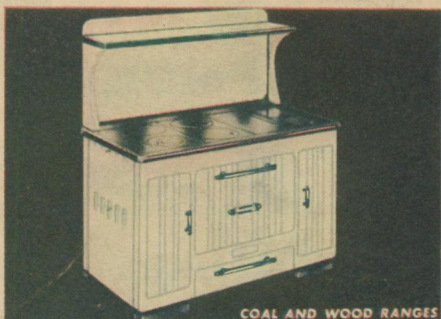
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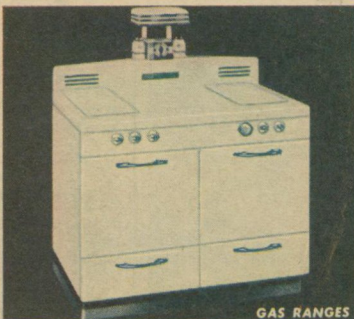
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