

APRIL

15¢



TERROR TALES

PRIESTESS OF MURDER

BLOOD-CHILLING
MYSTERY-TERROR NOVEL
by ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

LAUGH AND DIE!

TERROR NOVELETTE
by RAY CUMMINGS

ARTHUR J. BURKS

F.B. MIDDLETON

FRANKLIN H. MARTIN

H.M. APPEL

THE MAGAZINE
OF EERIE FICTION!



NIX ON PARTIES —with my crop of PIMPLES!

BUT
THERE
IS
HOPE FOR
BILL

DOGEONE IT! I DID WANT TO GO TO DOT'S BIRTHDAY PARTY TONIGHT! A FINE SIGHT I'D BE!



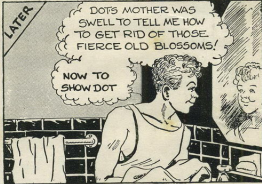
SAY, WHAT'S EATING YOU? GOING TO DOT'S PARTY TONIGHT?

OF COURSE NOT, DAN. LOOK AT THESE LIFE-SIZED PIMPLES AND SEE WHY!!



WHY BILL, YOU OLD SILLY! DAN TOLD ME THE REAL REASON WHY YOU DIDN'T COME TO MY PARTY LAST NIGHT—AND MOTHER TOLD ME TO TELL YOU TO EAT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST!

I'LL SOCK DAN! BUT I GUESS I'D BETTER TRY THAT YEAST



DOT'S MOTHER WAS SWELL TO TELL ME HOW TO GET RID OF THOSE FIERCE OLD BLOSSOMS!

NOW TO SHOW DOT



WHY, BILL — IT WORKED! NOT A PIMPLE LEFT! WE'LL HAVE TO HAVE ANOTHER PARTY — TO CELEBRATE

MY IDEA, TOO! DOT, YOU'RE WONDERFUL

Don't let Adolescent Pimples kill YOUR dates

DURING THE YEARS following the beginning of adolescence—from about 13 to 25, or even longer—many young people have to fight pimples.

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Many doctors prescribe Fleischmann's Yeast for the correction of these adolescent pimples. It clears the skin irritants out of your blood. Then pimples disappear!

Eat Fleischmann's Yeast 3 times a day, before meals—plain, or in a little water—until your skin is entirely clear. Start today.



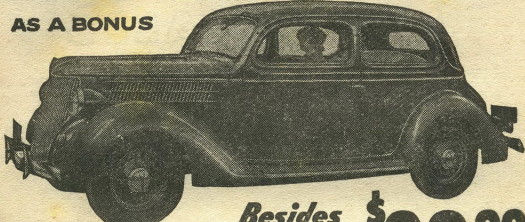
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—clears the skin
by clearing skin irritants
out of the blood

I'll Give You FORD TUDOR SEDAN

THIS BIG
POWERFUL

AS A BONUS



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TERROR TALES



Volume Five

April, 1936

Number Four

TWO FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVELS

Priestess of Murder.....By Arthur Leo Zagat 8

A thing of horror and death stalked the countryside—but a greater, more personal terror haunted lovely Leila Monroy. Could it be she herself who in a moment of forgetful, bestial madness had brought soul-searing anguish—and death—to those she loved?

The Girl Who Loved Pain.....By Franklin H. Martin 40

What mad spirit born of the devil drove slant-eyed Nancy Gannon to dance naked in the moonlight with unholy companions—to laugh with ghoulish glee when men died with horrible suffering? The Irish miners and their wives shuddered and whispered of banshees, little dreaming of greater horrors to come—when hell flamed underground!

TWO GRIPPING MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

Laugh and Die.....By Ray Cummings 76

It was to a house of horrid evil that Jack Baker brought his dark-eyed sister, not guessing what awful doom was in store for her till the hell-spawned monster had her helpless in his lecherous grasp.

A Bride for Death.....By Arthur J. Burks 106

No brain not born in the nethermost pit of darkness could have conceived the sacrifice demanded of beautiful Liu Mei, trapped in a Chinatown labyrinth by lust-mad coolies who laughed as they tortured the men who came to rescue her.

BLOOD-CHILLING SHORT TERROR TALES

The Devil's Emissary.....Francis Bragg Middleton 32

Whence had the handsome stranger come? To what dark place would he return, bringing his victim?

Her Suitor from Hell.....By H. M. Appel 65

Only an unspeakable bargain could save her husband's strong thewed body from shrinking like that of a ghastly corpse.

Embrace of the Python.....By Robert C. Blackmon 95

Was John Bellam turning into an awful human replica of an anaconda? Did he know why horrible crushed bodies were found in the woods at every dawn?

— AND —

Thumb Nail Sketches of Terror Tales Authors..... 4

Black Chapel.....A Department 124

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Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell and David Berger

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THUMB-NAIL SKETCHES OF TERROR TALES AUTHORS

No. 1: ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

TO BE in character, I presume, I
should be a weazened ancient,
stooped and long-bearded and wild-
eyed. Robed in black, I should pen weird
tales of terror and despair by the mid-
night luminance of a wick woven from a
murdered maiden's hair, molded in a
candle pressed from the fat of long-dead
cadavers. A bat should soar on silent
wings about my head and an owl perched
on my shoulder should hoot each time I
lay down my quill to quaff a gory draught
from a grinning skull.

Unfortunately, I am not like that. Children
do not run shrieking from the sight of my grisly
visage, of my eyes of evil. Dogs do not howl as
I prowling lightless graveyards on silent, ghoul-
ish feet.

I am really quite human. . . .

My scribbles first saw print in New York's
City College. I was—of all things—the con-
ductor of a *humorous* column in the Weekly!
Yes, that humor was weird. And horror crept
into my life there too. Horror! I wrote verse
for the *Literary Monthly*!

Then the World War. I became buck private
in a hush, hush outfit in France. I am not per-
mitted, even now, to tell the nature of what we
did, but there are certain age-slimed subter-
anean tunnels in that strife-torn land, certain
groves ringed around by gloomy arborage—
No! Perhaps you may decipher in my tales, like
kernels in thick nutshells of fiction, the incred-
ible things I saw.

The Captains and the Kings departed but I
stayed on, immersing myself in the lore of an-
cient mysteries at the University of Bordeaux.
Home at last. Marriage. A degree in Law at
Fordham University. Business. Drygoods. Drugs.
The advent of a daughter.

And the Depression!

Came the grey dawn of a day when there
was exactly Two Dollars and Forty-one Cents
between the Zagat family and starvation. No
job. Nothing. Try something! Try anything!
But what?

"You used to write pretty well." The wife,
keeping a stiff upper lip. "I hear the magazines
pay for stories. There's paper around, and pen-
cils, and I can borrow a typewriter."

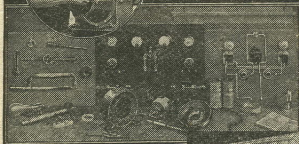
The story sold! And the next one. And the
next . . .

New York suddenly became a mine of ma-
terial, a microcosmos of the World. I heard
whispered hints of Voodooism in Harlem, of
werewolves in the East Side Fifties, of vam-
pires in German Yorkville, of fox-women in
Oriental Pell Street. They were all, are still all,
grist to my mill. In brooding, veiled eyes I read
the mysteries I bring to you. From halting lips,

(Continued on page 6)

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(Continued from page 4)

in uncounted accents, the folktales of an elder world drip slowly, one by one, and one by one I pass on to you the chili prickles that scamper my spine as I hear them, the bristling neck-hairs of ancestral fear.

How much of truth is there in these ancient myths? Frankly, I do not know. But I do know that those who tell me of them believe in them utterly. I know by the dread in their eyes, by the grey film of fear that underlies the brown or yellow or swarthy tan of their alien countenances. For the moment, at least, I share that dread, that fear. . . .

Once, not long ago, I saw Death. I saw him stalk—a misty shimmer of grey, half-senescence—down a long, dim hospital ward. I saw the deep, dark sockets in his skull, where there were no eyes, search the rows of white, moaning beds—for me! I saw his bony hand reach out to take me. . . .

But, minutes before, my bed had been exchanged for that of another, across the aisle. And so it was another whom Death took. It was another's corpse about which the nurses drew the white screens that have one meaning only, in a hospital ward.

I wonder if Death has yet discovered his mistake. When he does, will he come for me—to-night perhaps? Is that scraping I hear really a mouse gnawing in the wall, or the rasp of Death's skeleton fingers on my door panel. . . ?

Or have I been stricken off Death's books forever?

Arthur Leo Zagat

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Priestess of Murder

By Arthur Leo Zagat

(Author of "Death Lives at Our House," etc.)

A thing of terror lurked in hiding—waiting to work its ghastly evil upon beautiful Leila Monroy! . . . Was her lover in truth the monster who sought her? Was it lovely Eve, her best friend? Or were Leila's darkest suspicions correct—could it be that she, herself, changed periodically into the thing of horror and death that haunted that stricken countryside?



THE house was full of whispers. Leila Monroy, pathetically small in the huge, wing-sided easy chair, fumbled at her throat. A sob was trying to rise there, knotting her muscles with a sort of physical pain.

The house was full of whispers. The

ancient farmhouse that always had been her home was an abode of brooding dread, a place of dark despair. The groaning of the old timbers' drying fibers seemed terribly loud in the oppressive silence. They came from the very walls about Leila; from the age-darkened rafters overhead; from the ominous gloom of the entrance hallway that somehow repelled the living-room light; from the broad staircase



*A Daringly Different Long Novel
of Eerie Mystery and Weird,
Unholy Passion*

twisting upward out of that foyer to ap-
pallingly empty obscurity above.

The house was full of whispers, shredd-
ing Leila's frayed nerves with terrible
reminders of her day's long agony. Just
such a place of muted, ominous sounds
had the courtroom been. Unshed tears,
through the anguished hours, had blurred
its crowded benches; and the only reality
had been the gaunt, suffering figure of her
grey-faced father in the prisoner's dock.
But the whispers had been inescapable.
All day they had hissed at her, as they
were hissing now: mutterings of horror
as witness after witness had damned Jus-
tin Monroy with husked tales of brutal,
unutterably savage killing; gasps of out-
rage when Leila herself gave halting testi-
mony that she had been with her father,
here in this room, all the fatal hour be-
tween the time when Shean Rourke had
last been seen alive and the time when
Foster Corbett had found his hacked and
mangled corpse beneath the poplars divid-
ing the two farms.

Whispers had met the exhausted girl—
whispers of tight-lipped condemnation—
when at last she had stumbled down from
the witness chair; and the farmer-women's
Sunday silks had rustled, self-righteously,
drawing away from the defiling touch of
the girl who, hostile eyes said, had lied
desperately to save a blood-guilty slayer.

Whispers, whispers, whispers—seething
out of the pulsating silence as the stony-
faced jury marched back into their box.

And then the whispers had become a
soundless scream searing Leila's breast
as the dreadful verdict souged from the
foreman's tight throat.

"Murder! While insane!"

Insane! The recollection flung Leila
Monroy up out of her chair, held her
rigid in distress. Insane! The word hissed
within her skull, hissed from the stark
vacancy in which she was so utterly alone
with terror and despair. Slithering foli-

age, stirred by a swiftly rising wind, hissed
it at her from the terrible outer night.
Insane!

Insane! The kindly, tender old man to
whose gnarled hand she had clung as the
brown clods thudded on the drab wood of
her mother's coffin; the hard-working,
weatherbeaten oldster who had been father
and mother to her through so many
years—a madman! Her father! From
whose veins came the blood surging now
so darkly in her veins.

Leila quivered. Tremors ran through
the long, delicate curves of her slim form.
The tiny oval of her small-featured coun-
tenance blanched with a new dismay. *His
blood in her veins!* What if that blood
were tainted with a foul lust to kill, with
an stavistic urge to tear with fang and
claw, to rend human flesh and taste the
warm, salt-sweet tang of human life-fluid
on smacking, gory lips? What if she had
not really drowned that half-hour whose
lapse fatally had invalidated her testi-
mony? Had she run, instead, ravening
by his side while a fearful heritage of
homicidal madness blotted memory from
her soul as the alienists said it had blot-
ted recollection from Justin Monroy's?

ABRUPTLY the light within was paled
by a blue blaze glaring in through the
window on which her unseeing stare was
fixed, by lightning that split the sky's
black vault with a jagged and blazing frac-
ture. Thunder blast became to the shocked
girl the devastating roar of an enormous
beast that leaped on the house, that bat-
tered it, that shook it in huge jaws whose
slaver was driving rain. Storm tumult
howled about the old walls, crashed
through the empty rooms, drowned out
the whispers that had tortured Leila,
drowned out the whispers in her harried
brain. Almost, after the first terrific on-
slaught, she was grateful for the fury

that would no longer let her hear those whispers.

But it could not drown her dreadful thoughts.

"No," she moaned. "Merciful Lord, no!" as she had moaned when Justin Monroy's suave attorney had elicited from the bald-pated alienist glib testimony that had saved his client from the death-chair—and condemned him to a living hell. "No! It can't be true."

"I could have done nothing else," the lawyer had answered her reproaches afterward. "It was your father's ax Foster Corbett found buried in the dead man's chest. Your father's footprints were traced out of the trampled mess around the corpse and across the meadow to your back porch. There was the old boundary line feud between your father and his neighbor, his threats that if Foster Corbett or his son Stanley or his farm hand, Shean Rourke, stepped on Monroy land they would regret it. Against that we had only your word that he was seated in the room with you all evening. And on cross-examination you admitted that you had fallen asleep."

The wind pounded against the door as their fists had pounded, coming to accuse Dad of the awful deed. Foster Corbett, triumphant at last over his ancient adversary. Stan Corbett—

Leila's pale lips writhed. Stan! In his arms she had known happiness, against her lips his lips had thrilled. Defiant of the enmity between their fathers they had loved. If State Trooper Stanley Corbett had fired his gun into her heart, he could no more cruelly have slain that love than he had by saying to her father, "You're under arrest, Mr. Monroy."

Rain lashed against the window in a spasm of new fury. The world was ablaze with a flickering electric flare that spilled bluely on the tossing poplars marching along the tree-marked boundary between

the two farms. It was just there that Shean Rourke's corpse— Something moved stealthily—vague and black—among the wind-bent trunks!

Darkness smashed down again! Who was it? Who prowled the storm-drenched night. The demoniac slayer who had made a ghastly horror of what once had been a man? The real killer, stalking a new prey? Stalking her? Icy fingers clutched Leila Monroy's throat, chill prickles tickled her spine. His blood-thirst still unslaked, inflamed by his terrible crime for which Dad unjustly had been condemned to terrible expiation, the murderer was creeping up on her. On her!

An ancient legend of whispered terror trailed a slimy speculation across her fear. A name breathed with shudders of apprehension by the gaffers clustering around the cherry-bellied stove in the village. The Monster of West Cliff! The traditional phantom that was reputed to haunt the stony precipice whose sheer rampart rose behind the fertile plain along which, from north to south, lay the three neighboring farms of the Corbetts, the Monroys and the Stars! Often of late he had been seen stalking the dark belt of primeval forest cloaking the base of that cliff, the elusive, appalling wraith, it was said, of an Indian chief whose tribe had been massacred by the plain's first settlers. Stalking the ages, waiting for a chance at gruesome revenge. Every accident, every unexplained disaster of the countryside was ascribed to him. Was it he who—

STORM-BLAZE arched the heavens once more, exploding into momentary existence the tempest-tormented trees, the downpour-beaten pasture between. They were deserted, vacant as the house itself. Nothing—no one was anywhere in sight. The prowling shadow had been an illusion, a figment of her anguished brain.

Wait! Wait! The imagined sight had

recalled something to Leila. An incident of the fateful night that she had utterly forgotten till now, till it was too late. The girl groaned, beat her breast in bitter self-condemnation.

Stepping to this very window, that evening, to pull down its shade, she had seen, or thought she had seen, Foster Corbett dodging behind the tool shed just visible left of the house. She had said nothing to her father, fearing to excite him, fearing to jeopardize the reconciliation for which she and Stan plotted. The terrible events following had obliterated the matter from her memory. Utterly, till now. How could she have forgotten it, its astounding implication? The murder-axe, whose blood-smear had shown no fingerprints, had come from that very shed!

Perhaps it was not yet too late. Perhaps if she told her story—

Shrill sound sliced across the thought. It stopped, spurted again. *Rrrring—rrrring—rrring*. It whirled Leila around to it. *Rrrring—rrring—rrring*. The telephone! Three rings, the Monroy signal! Who could be phoning her. Stan? Incredible! Eve Starr, perhaps? Eve, her neighbor and closest female friend, calling to extend sympathy, consolation. Like Eve to remain loyal when every one else shunned her.

Rrrring—rrring—Leila, flinging across the room, into the hallway's dimness, jerked the receiver from its hook.

"Hello."

"Lock your doors," a hoarse, unrecognizable voice grated without preamble. "Lock your windows." A voice choked, coarsened by some inexplicable terror. "Don't let any one in. Not any—"

The telephone was suddenly dead, with the flat, inanimate deadness of a line from which the humming life of its current has gone. Dead! Had the storm blown down

a frail wire or had some human hand cut it? Some human hand, just too late to stop the husked warning?

Some human hand! Icy terror once more struck at Leila Monroy. The hand of some one who even now crept up on the house. Then she was moving, had flung herself to the great front door, was thrusting into its socket the heavy bolt clamped to its sturdy oak.

The back door was already locked, she remembered. The windows! Old-fashioned shutters creaked out of recesses in their embrasured sides to the frantic pull of her trembling hands, were also bolted. She rushed in frenzied haste through dining room, through kitchen, clicking on light as she went, light from which shadows fled that were black, sinister silhouettes waiting around corners, behind doors, to spring upon her. The lower floor was at last a blaze of light, was a locked and barred fortress against whatever menace threatened. The lower floor—

But there was the upstairs yet, the upstairs that was blacker, as Leila's dilated pupils stared up into its mystery, because of the luminescence about her. No longer was it the warm, familiar bedroom floor of the old house but a precinct of stygian gloom haunted by some darkness-shrouded threat.

The girl's small fingers tightened on the newel post to which she clung, tightened till the blood was driven from them and they were grey, trembling splotches against the lustrous patina of the wood. It was only the dark, up there, of which she was afraid. Over and over she told it to herself. It was only because of the dark that she had that hint of evil lurking just beyond the stairhead, of monstrous evil crouched just beyond the range of her vision, haunched and waiting to pounce upon her. There was nothing more in the corridor above, Leila assured herself, than shadows like the eerie phantoms that

had fled from the lights she had turned on.

Nothing? A shriek sliced down to her, the high, shrill scream of a woman in deadly terror.

It checked off, faded into vague thumpings as of a fierce struggle, into the thud of a storm-tossed branch against the building wall. *It came again!*

TINY muscles twitched in Leila's cheeks. Insensate, humorless laughter sounded in her fluttering throat. It was the wind that had screamed from up there, tightening her scalp with fear. It must have been the wind. No one could possibly be up there.

But she was afraid. Afraid to go up there and look. Afraid of the storm and the dark.

A sharp crackle jerked her around. She stared wide-eyed at the entrance door. Fool! That had been only the splintering of a gale-riven branch— It came again. Unmistakable this time. The crunch of a heel on the gravel pathway outside!

A foot thudded on the porch just beyond the door and unseen fingers rattled the door knob. Through a crashing peal of thunder the terrified girl heard a threatening, hoarse bellow. Someone was just the other side of the sturdy portal. Some one— The killer! The mad killer, seeking her!

He bellowed again, pounded wild fists on the wood. The great panel shuddered under the berserk attack. Its hinges creaked. The furious pounding piled a frenzied terror on her fear of the storm and the dark. Realization pierced her that only five feet of air, two inches of wood, separated her from the monstrous creature that had made of Shean Rourke a mangled horror. It twisted her about, sent her hurtling headlong up the stairs that a moment before dread had barred to her, sent her dashing through the light-

less corridor in instinctive flight to the fancied sanctuary of her own bedroom.

Her hand clutched the knob of its door, swung her to it. Frantically she thrust open the panel, slammed it shut behind her, leaned back against it, gasping, quivering.

Rain lashed against the window pane, threshed on the roof above her. Dulled by distance, the savage pounding on the door below beat about Leila as though tangible blows buffeted her. Momentarily the lightning had ceased. The chamber was obliterated by tar-barrel darkness. A feeling grew on Leila that she was not alone here.

Leila Monroy whimpered, stabbed blindly at the light-switch she knew jutted from the wall to her right. The small room sprang into sight. A dishevelled apparition stared at her from her dresser mirror, russet wealth of hair tumbling about her now pallid face, mouth twisting and livid, grey eyes dark with the frenzy of her terror. She pulled her gaze from it, saw the bed—

Crumpled on its scarlet-flecked counterpane lay the contorted body of a girl. Blue-black hair veiled her face, but where a pink frock had been cruelly torn away, lurid fingermarks on a white throat showed the manner of her death. Her death—there was no motion, no movement at all in the awful stillness of the pathetic figure. The exposed, blanched breast stirred with not the slightest breath.

"Eve," Leila whimpered, unable to do no more than stare and whimper. "Eve . . ."

Forgotten the tumult of the storm, the battering at the entrance door. Forgotten everything but the horror that burst within her skull. But she had no memory of Eve's arrival. No memory . . .

Time must have dropped out of her consciousness. Time enough for her to

have summoned the girl, to have lured her up here! Time enough—for her own hands to have clenched on her friend's throat, to have pressed, pressed, until life no longer throbbed beneath her throttling fingers!

CHAPTER TWO

The Phantom in the Trees

IT SEEMED to Leila Monroy that she could feel, in her icy palms, memory of the soft flesh's slow crumple beneath their lethal construction. Once she had hated Eve, when the girl quite openly had tried to win Stan Corbett away from her. That jealous hatred had passed away with her own triumph and they had been friends again. Had it passed? Had it not rather sprung to sinister existence with the blood madness inherited from the father they had led away to a padded cell?

Darkness smashed down as the light went out. The window was momentarily a blue oblong, flickering with the electric radiance of lightning.

"Leila!" A voice came up to her. "Open up. It's Stan, Leila. Stan!"

Stan! He had come for her as he had come for her father. He had come to drag her, shrieking, to the same chamber of horrors where Justin Moore had agonized.

He would have to catch her first! If she were mad she would avail herself of a lunatic's cunning. From a window at the end of the passage rain-spout clamps made an easy ladder to the ground. The storm would hide her, she would bury herself in the woods— Leila got the door open behind her, flung out into the hall.

Thunderous crash of the portal below met her, and the tempest's howl, blasting in through the house. The sound whirled

her startled glance in its direction. The stairs were in darkness.

Stan's feet thudded on the steps, coming up.

Lightning glimmer threw Stan's climbing shadow against the wall, made visible the face of a crouching figure. It was the grizzled, distorted face of Foster Corbett! Of Stan's own father! Waiting for his son with a revolver uplifted in his hand!

"Stan!" Leila screamed. "Look out. He's—"

A shout drowned her out, a blast of bestial fury. Somewhere a shot blazed, and then the world crashed in on her. She fell headlong into a limbo of whirling, coruscating sparks. She felt herself lifted in powerful arms, felt herself thrown over a heaving shoulder. Shouts, shots, echoed about her, a gibbering chatter of apelike defiance. Rain drenched her, an icy gale pounded at her. Oblivion claimed her.

AT LAST Leila dared to lift her lids, bit by slow bit. She blinked. Darkness was about her, strangely mottled with glancing fragments of silvery light. Darkness, and glistening, dank rock above her. The earthy smell of a tomb in her nostrils.

She was, it dawned on her, in a shallow cave. The luminous flecks dancing about her were splotches of moonlight shifting through the leaves of high trees. A cave! Trees! This must be West Cliff, then.

Leila thrust herself up to a sitting posture as terror sliced her. Was this the cave of the Monster? But there wasn't any Monster, she thought. There was only the crazed slayer who had hacked Shean Rourke with an ax, who had throttled Eve Starr, who had crouched with lethal gun to shoot down Stan Corbett. Not any phantom Monster! Not Justin Mon-

roy either, nor Leila herself. Foster Corbett!

For a moment Leila forgot her pain, her danger, in the jubilation of that revelation. Dad was no maniac killer, nor was she. It was Foster Corbett who had schemed with the cunning of the insane to slay and place the blame for his crime on the man he hated. Foster Corbett who had dragged a second victim to Leila Monroy's bed so that the daughter should be doomed to the same terrible fate to which he had condemned the father. Foster Corbett who, losing all hold on reason, had haunched in the storm-battered corridor, waiting to kill his own son!

Had he? Had he added filicide to the role of his crimes? A shot had blazed across her scream of warning just before the madman had whirled to attack her!

If Stan had fired ed th, tmaniac could not have moved so sw schiff! It had been fired at Stan, then, h, b hided itself in his breast? In the ie area of the man she loved?

Loved. Leila la hrom springing to her feet knew terréril! thath aer love for Stan was no nót de A sob tore at her throat. She me nro to him. Reckless of the arang, uay that at atired through, her shea, rto ad, f-- ward to the cave's entrance.

Then she froze as a rattle of rolling pebbles came up to her from below the cavern mouth! Of stones dislodged by some one climbing the face of the cliff.

He was coming for her. He had borne her here, left her here while he pursued some other dreadful mission of his murder-lusting brain, and now he was returning to work his mad will upon her.



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A GOOD GUIDE



TO GOOD WHISKEY

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Helpless? Leila Monroy's lip snarled up from her tiny teeth. She was suddenly a creature of the wilds. The desperate courage of hopelessness entered into her, the feral cunning of wilderness's small beasts who will fight, must fight, when escape from their persecutors has become no longer possible. She stooped, snatched handfuls of jagged stones from the cave floor, flitted to its entrance, silent as a cloud.

LEILA peered out and down, slyly cautious. There he was! Like a huge, black spider clinging to the splattered, bare precipice. Working his way up, indomitably, slowly by the necessity of finding handholds, footholds, in the bare, sheer rock face. Hidden now by a pool of stygian shadow, revealed now by fragments of leaf-splintered moonlight. Inexorably climbing to add her to the dreadful list of his victims.

Distorted by the eerie light he was somehow unhuman, somehow a monster of primitive evil, spewed out of the past. And Leila Monroy, the weak thing he hunted, was primitive, too. Primitive and pitiless. Her hand flew back, arced forward. A stone left it—and struck fair on the skull of the maniac! The crunch of its landing came up to her, sickened her, but she flung another stone and another. A dark splotch appeared on his forehead, and then the man let go his holds, plunged down, a black, sprawling figure, crashed terribly in the underbrush below.

A thrill of triumph ran through Leila, a hot thrill of triumph that was a torrid flame boiling in her blood. Her laugh, bubbled up in the dark silence of the forest. A shrill, thin cacchination of black laughter, spilling from her gaping throat, rioting out in the rain-washed night.

It was horrifying! Her throat clamped

on it. She checked it, icy with loathing of the savagery that had inspired it, quivering with revulsion at the thing she had become. She had killed a man and laughed with joy at the deed. She, Leila Monroy! Cliff and forest, whirled about her in a sudden vertigo. The hot flush of joy at Corbett's thumping fall, the jubilant laughter, were these the reactions of sanity? Soaring glee at killing—only a lunatic could feel it, only a homicidal maniac.

"Murder! While insane!" What if the incredible acts she had ascribed to Foster Corbett were fetid illusions of her own darkened mind? What if she were, indeed, the lunatic slayer and he a good neighbor trying to save her from herself, the victim of her mania? What if her hand, that had slain him, was gory already with the blood of Eve Starr and of Stan!

No! Not Stan! That, at least, was clear to her even in her bewilderment. If Stan were slain she could not have slain him. There was the test. Only a madman would kill his own son. Corbett or she. She or Corbett. If Stan were alive, she was the maniac. If he were dead—

If he were dead—the thought slashed at her like a sword. That she should hope for his death—her Stan! Broad-shouldered, upstanding, frank-eyed. No! Rather that she be condemned to the eternal perdition of raving madness, rather that she take a knife and slice it across her own throat. . . . Bullets do not always kill! Was he lying there, wounded, desperately wounded, suffering? Not dead but bleeding to death while she dallied here, delaying the aid that might save him?

Leila licked dry lips with a trembling tongue. She was down on her knees on the narrow ledge that made a sort of porch to the cave. She swung over it, was scrambling for footing against the sheer wall of the rock, was inching down that perilous descent, while weakness was

like water in her limbs, while pain was a network of agony meshing her frail form.

"Stan!"

His name was a prayer on her lips as she attained the cliff's foot at last, as she sent one shuddering glance at the still mound, blacker against black, that her missles had flung there. "Stan!"

She plunged into the thicket.

A TWISTED root caught Leila's foot, pounded her headlong into the mire. She lay as she fell, heaving in great breaths of the dank air to her tortured lungs, fighting for strength to rise, to go on. The forest silence closed in on her, a black pall of soundlessness.

Not altogether soundless. A vague, ominous slither threaded it. It lifted Leila's head with a jerk, despite the darts of agony shooting through her at even that slight effort. It pulled her burning stare through the tree-boles that were grotesque giants reaching writhing arms down to pluck her from her miry bed.

And then her scalp suddenly tightened.

It drifted almost silently toward her; wraithlike, phantasmal. . . . A vagrant beam caught it full—and a scream formed in Leila's breast, tore her constricted throat, died at her lips.

The phantom of Eve Starr was gliding toward her between the ebony trees. Eve Starr, whose corpse Leila had seen conformed in awful death on the gore-stained counterpane of her own bed!

CHAPTER THREE

A Dreamland of Dread

LEILA MONROY'S blood jelled within her veins. Supernal terror squeezed her heart as the apparition's ghastly approach held her eyes with the appalled but helpless stare of a reptile-fascinated bird.

And a twig snapped beneath Eve Starr's feet!

The sharp crackle of dried wood breaking beneath the pressure of a careless foot, so little a thing to save one from blithering madness! It forced reason into Leila's shuddering terror, stung her to sanity with the realization that this was not a disembodied ghost advancing toward her through the obscurity of the fear-filled wood, that it was flesh and blood, that it was—

"Eve!" Leila moaned, finding strength somehow to stand up. "Eve!"

Startled, the dusky-haired girl swung around to her, fright distorting her bloodless countenance.

"Who's there?" she gasped. "Who is it?" Her eyes were burned-out coals, dark horror pitting the blanched whiteness of her visage. "Who—?"

"It's Leila, hon. Leila Monroy."

"Leila!" Stark terror in that gusted exclamation. "Leila!"

Her hand went up to her throat—to the blue bruises that splotted its whiteness, the marks of throttling fingers. Of whose fingers? Leila Monroy knew that she must ask the terrible question, though she was terrified of what the answer might be.

"Eve," she blurted. "Eve! Who did that to you? Who? Was it I? Was it I, Eve?"

"Leila!" Eve hadn't heard her. "Don't touch me." Or had she heard and was this the awful answer to the momentous question? "Keep away."

The girl whirled, dashed away.

Started to dash away. She stumbled, went to her knees, snatched for support at the rattling withes of a low bush, swayed there in pitiful weakness. She was feeble, so feeble. The cold and the damp of the woods would kill her before morning if she were left here alone.

"Eve," Leila said, not moving, not daring to move. "I won't hurt you." Al-

most without volition her arms went out, appealing, to her friend. "Let me help you. Let me help you get home."

Eve's free hand fumbled at the grisly marks above the pallid round of her voluptuous breasts as though the very sight of Leila reawakened their agony.

"No," she whimpered. "Haven't you done enough to me already?"

She pulled herself to her feet, staggeringly, painfully, started to fall again.

Leila jumped forward to catch her. Eve screamed, somehow found footing, lurched away from her grasp. Leila stopped, tried again.

"Listen to me, Eve. I may have—I may have been mad before, but I'm sane now. You'll have to believe that I'm sane. Because you can't get home alone. You can't. You'll die out here in the woods. Please believe me. Please let me help you." And all the time and inner voice was saying, "If she dies, you have killed her."

"Help me!" Eve's husked tones were bitter, accusing. "You help me! Murderess!"

She screamed that last expletive, and then she had whirled and was running, stumbling, dazedly, impelled only by the false strength of a terrible fear.

"Eve!" She couldn't last long. "Eve!" She would drop far in the tangled depths of the woods. "Eve!" Leila reeled after her.

STRANGELY enough, Eve managed to keep just ahead of her, just beyond reach. She was a flitting, staggering form just ahead of Leila, always just ahead, always just about to drop, but somehow keeping on her feet, somehow maintaining a little space between them. The reason for her chase slid away from Leila. She knew only that she must catch the luminous wraith she pursued, knew only that she must keep going through the nightmare blackness of the impeding for-

est. Knew only that the uncanny compulsion was upon her—

A denser grouping of stygian tree-trunks swallowed Eve for an instant. Leila plunged through them—stopped. Eve had disappeared. She wasn't anywhere in sight, and there was no sound to tell where she had gone.

Had she, after, been pursuing a phantom created by her own mad brain? Was she doomed forever to wander in a dream-land of dread in which she would be unable to distinguish the real from the unreal? Doomed forever—see, these very trees seemed instinct with a baleful life. They seemed to be closing in on her.

One of them *was* moving, was coming toward her with a slow, infinitely evil deliberation. It couldn't be moving! She was imagining it. How could a tree move?

It wasn't a tree. It was a bent, massive figure of a man; huge, browless head set neckless on gargantuan shoulders; bronzed, naked torso gleaming eerily in the moonlight; little, pig-like eyes glowing redly out of an imbecilic, drooling countenance. It was the Monster of the Cliff!

But she had killed the Monster. No, that was Foster Corbett she had killed. This Monster didn't exist. It was a figment of her imagination, this bestial thing that crept inexorably toward her. It wasn't there at all and she wouldn't run from it. If she didn't run from it it would vanish and she would be sane again. She must not be afraid of it. She must not be afraid of the big-muscled arms that seemed to reach out for her, of the stubbed and fearful talons.

That closed on her arms with a sudden, fearful pain that told her the thing was real. That told her too late that it was real.

Leila screamed, but the shrill cry of her terror and her agony was drowned by the ferocious, overwhelming roar of the Mon-

ster. Towering over her, he slammed her against the shaggy, unyielding bark of a giant tree behind her, trying to crush her, it seemed, into the very heart of the quivering timber, driving breath from her so that she could scream no longer.

She could not scream, but she could flail desperate fists against the steel-hard thews of his giant arms. The beast laughed at her puny efforts—chatteringly, gibberingly. His black-lipped mouth opened to display yellow, rotted fangs, a cavity in which the flesh was not red but a hideous black.

Leila writhed, jerked free. Almost jerked free. The Monster's knee came up, thrust excruciatingly into the softness of her abdomen, pinned her helpless against the rough tree-bark behind that cut through her flimsy dress and stabbed her with countless tiny points. Pinned her helpless, so that one of his bestial paws released its grip and flew to the neckline of her frock. It tore downward, as the seamed, hairless countenance mowed with insensate, obscene glee.

"Pretty," the thing chattered. "Pretty," and his leathery palm fumbled at Leila's breast, rasped it with a lewd caress. "Calban likes."

THE girl's hand spat against the indurated cheek, her toes banged at the Monster's shins. He squealed like a stuck pig and his fingers flew to her throat, clutched it, constricted.

Leila's lungs pumped unavailingly, fighting for air they could not find. The brutal digits tightened still more, till the girl thought they must cut right through the flesh, must squeeze clear through her neck. Knives stabbed and twisted within her chest, invisible fingers gouged at her eyes. The glaring, ferocious visage of her tormentor vanished in a great, roaring blackness.

Through which she seemed to hear a

high, piercing whistle. The roaring in her skull was drowned in the blast of Calban's feral roar. The whistle came again, and Leila crashed to the ground as the terrible grip on her throat, the pinning thrust of the bestial knee, were released.

Leila wallowed in her distress, while somewhere above her a tumultuous sound crashed momentarily and died away. She pulled air into the sore agony of her lungs.

"Leila," Stan cried, somewhere above her.

It wasn't Stan. It couldn't be Stan. Stan was lying dead in the old house that had suddenly become an abode of horror. Stan had bled to death there because she had not been able to get to him in time to save him.

"Leila, darling!"

Hands were tugging at her, were rolling her over. Stan's hands. His dear face was looking down at her, anxiety clouding his eyes. Stan's face . . .

"Leila! Speak to me. Leila!"

The girl sat up. He was dishevelled. His trooper's uniform was gashed, torn by the tearing brambles of the forest, and there was a livid weal across his tanned cheek that a lashing tendril had made. But he was alive. It was Stan who had saved her, at the last possible moment, from an awful death.

"Stan! What—how did you get here? How . . . ?"

"I was knocked out, there in your house, I came to, heard the back door close. I rushed out there and saw you vanishing into the woods. I've been hunting for you . . ."

"Then wasn't . . ."

"Don't talk now," Stan silenced her. "You're hurt, exhausted. When I get you home, get you warm, you can tell me all about it."

He was tender, solicitous. He loved her still. Leila nestled in his arms, thrilling

to his strength, thrilling to the feel of his heart beating against her own. She would obey him, she would keep quiet for a few minutes. If she started to talk, if she told him that it had been Eve he had seen, not her, she would have to tell him the rest.

She would have to tell him that the girl in his arms had killed his father. How could she tell him that? How could she?

The black trees of the forest slid by, rustling in the night. Leila whimpered. "Hush, darling," Stan murmured. "We'll soon be out of this. We'll soon be where it's warm and light."

Light. Would there ever be light again in her dark soul? Darker than ever now. Thought burred through Leila's aching brain. Stan had been attacked in the house, had been knocked unconscious. That was evident. Foster Corbett must have done that, lying in ambush. Then Leila must be sane.

But Eve Starr's actions had confirmed the awful speculation that it was Leila who had attacked her. Leila, in whose mind no memory remained of the terrible deed. That proved her insane.

There wasn't any answer. There couldn't be any answer, because she didn't know how much of her experiences was real, how much she had forgotten, how much she had imagined. The Monster, for instance. Stan's coming had saved her from him, but Stan didn't seem to know anything about him. Had that lecherous attack been only her own madness? Had her own maniac fingers torn the clothes from her shoulders; clamped, tightening, about her own throat?

Or had Stan's call, his threshing approach, frightened the brute away before the trooper could see him?

Over Stan's shoulder Leila saw a shadow move, high up on the bough of a tree. It haunched, came sprawling down;

great arms flailing; spread, spatulate talons clawing for Stan's throat!

CHAPTER FOUR

Master of the Monster

"STAN!" Leila Monroy shrieked and contorted in his arms, driving her forehead against his chest. This instantaneous inspiration of her terror was the only thing that could have saved her lover. It unbalanced him, sent him reeling backward, and the downdropping monster missed his mark.

The brute crashed down into the underbrush, was momentarily tangled in the whipping leaves. In that instant Leila slipped from Stan's hold as the trooper recovered his footing and reached for his holstered gun. Calban bellowed, soared from the ground. His shaggy arm lashed ahead of him with a cobra's lightning-like lash, struck Stan's gun-wrist, pounded the weapon from it. Its metallic gleam sliced into the underbrush and the antagonists came together with a thud of flesh against flesh that was thunderous to the terrified girl.

Stan's fists pumped, two flashing pistons, into Calban's taut belly. The monster's muscle-bulging arms clamped around the trooper in a rib-cracking clinch. They swayed, black and gigantic in the eerie forest light and from the taut, straining agony of that clinch burst an appalling cacaphony of bestial sounds, of growls and vicious snarls.

A shrill, piercing squeal forced by unendurable pain from a strong man's lips galvanized Leila into action. She dropped to her knees, searching frantically in the meshed, baffling underbrush for Stan's gun. The tumult of that eerie battle increased, behind her. A chattering, mindless scream signalled that Stan had got home a telling blow.

"Run, Leila," the man yelled. "Get away. I can't—hold him."

The girl twisted, saw Calban, momentarily driven away from Stan, closing in again. Her lover met the renewed attack by a ferocious uppercut exploding from a crouch. His fist landed on the monster's jaw with the blast of a rifle shot, his other fist crashed against the brute's chest. The devastating blows might have been flicks of a fly's wings for all the effect they had. Calban was not even staggered. His huge paw closed on Corbett's neck, engulfing it with its vast span. His swarthy other hand drove for the man's groin.

Somehow a thick stick was in Leila's hand and she was hurling herself, shrilling primitive fury, at the monster. Her improvised club pounded against Calban's forehead. He roared, with anger rather than pain, and the hand that was reaching for Stan's groin flicked sidewise instead.

It struck Leila in midair, catapulted her backward, crashing her into the threshing cushion of a bush. Jarred and half-stunned, she saw Calban's attack focus again on Stan, saw her lover swept from his feet, saw him lifted high above the grisly creature's head by straining arms shaggy with a beast's black hair.

The terrible tableau etched itself on Leila's mind. The gorilla-like brute; his bestial ferocity the more horrible for the fact that he was no beast but a man degraded, obscenely decadent; poised momentarily motionless as he gathered his forces for the throw that would smash Stan to a pulp. Above his head Stan was as motionless—rigid and helpless in the gigantic grip of Calban's leathery hands at armpit and crotch, his face contorted and pallid, his eyes staring in agony.

FOR an eternal moment that awful pause persisted. And then the lurid gleam of Calban's beady, savage eyes flared more redly and the muscles in his

huge arms writhed snakelike beneath their hairy skin, and Leila knew that in the next instant they would sweep downward.

From somewhere a whistle shrilled, high and piercing, through the quivering terror of the woods. It came again, the strange high sound that once before Leila had heard through black clouds of death swirling about herself. It froze Calban to an astounding paralysis, leashed him as though it were a chain writhing about his savage limbs. Leila could almost see the death-thought seep unwilling from the black and terrible frame.

Calban's protest was a grisly roar blasting through the black forest aisles. The huge arms bent, slowly, reluctantly, letting Stan down.

The trooper twisted abruptly, freed himself from Calban's loosening grip. He thudded to the ground, sprang erect, snarling . . .

But the monster was gone, had plunged away into the veiling thickets. For minutes the lovers heard the threshing of his huge, evil body moving away, and then a sinister silence close about them. A silence sinister because it cloaked not only the ravening man-beast, but another mysterious entity, a lurking, invisible being who was master of the Monster, whose whistling command the brute obeyed even in the height of his frenzy. Twice Leila had heard the weird whistle, twice it had saved her.

Not her, but Stan! It had been at Stan's approach that the ravening human hound had been called away that first time, it had been Stan whose deadly peril had just now been averted. If it were not for Stan—

"God!" the youth groaned. "Who is he? Where did he come from?" He pulled a trembling hand across his glazed, unseen eyes, awayed with exhaustion. "Why did he quit, just when he was about to slam me

down and break every bone in my body?"

Leila struggled out of the tangling bush into which Calban had flung her.

"I don't know, Stan." She was cold, icy cold with foreboding, with realization of a terrible enmity focused upon herself. "I—"

Her throat clamped as Stan pitched forward, pounded limply down, lay sodden and unconscious in spongy, water-soaked loam.

Leila lurched to him. Her hand flew to a dark, spreading stain on his shirt, found warm, viscid wetness. It was blood! His blood! But Calban had no knife . . .

Moaning, the girl tore the shirt-stuff away with trembling fingers. The angling wound across his ribs from which the gory, angry fluid gushed was no knife-slash. It was the jagged-edged path of a bullet, and under the fresh, scarlet pour was the mass of an old clot.

Leila ripped a hasty bandage from the tatters to which her own frock had been reduced, worked frantically to staunch that grisly flow. And as she worked a vague explanation of what had happened formed in her mind.

His mad father's bullet had ploughed across Stan's ribs, had flung him down, unconscious at the foot of the stairs. The slow seepage had stopped itself. He had come awake. Hearing what he thought was Leila running out of the house he had followed. His exertions, the battle with the ape-faced monster, had opened the wound afresh. Weakened by the new loss of blood he had fainted once more.

Now he lay here, unconscious, in the black depths of the forest. He lay here, and she with him, and somewhere in the glimmering, ominous shadows Calban still roved and . . .

Leila's neck prickled abruptly, with the sense of eyes upon her, of glaring, hostile eyes. Leaves rustled, stealthily.

She crouched low over Stan's senseless form, throwing the frail protection of her slight body athwart him, and quivered with the knowledge that out of the murk her enemy was creeping silently to leap upon her and destroy her.

TO leap upon her! It was she, Leila Monroy, the unseen adversary threatened, not Stan! Stan's danger lay only in that she was with him. Twice that had been proved. If she could lead the chase away from Stan . . .

She leaped from her lover's recumbent form.

"Come and get me," she cried, and was hurtling once more through the lashing, tearing brambles of the woods. Was running headlong and blindly through the shadowed aisles, not knowing where she ran, not caring so long as it was away from Stan, so long as she led the destroyer away from the man she loved.

The forest crashed into sudden life behind her. Some one was following her, was flinging after her a hollow, echoing shout. Its threat spurred her to renewed efforts.

Despairing, frantic, the gasping, fear-goaded girl catapulted through the tearing brambles, crashed into stunning tree-trunks, caromed off and ran on.

And then, quite suddenly, Leila was out of the forest. She was running down a wet but grass-soft slope, and before her, across the familiar pasture, was the yellow-windowed bulk of her own house, black against a sky tinted by the haunting gray of false dawn.

Almost at once she was in her own back yard, was leaping up the back-porch steps, was tugging at the knob of a friendly kitchen door. It resisted her efforts. It would not open. She gasped, remembering that she had herself locked it from the inside.

Unhoped for safety, tantalizingly offered at the last moment, was snatched away. Leila whirled to meet the fate from which she had fled.

Silver of the setting moon sluiced an empty field. No one, nothing, was there. She had outdistanced her invisible pursuer, had left him behind in the forest.

Or had he fooled her as she had thought to fool him? Had he left her fleeing blindly through the woods while he turned back to pounce upon and destroy the lover she had planned to save by her rejected sacrifice?

Something moved, there in the ribbon of darkness that was the forest-edge across the fields. Something moved and came lumbering out into the brooding lunar luminance. A two-headed, grotesque monster, it came slowly, inexorably out of the shadows. Gelid fingers clutched Leila's throat. What nightmare thing was this, what awful spawn of the dark forest?

The porch floor heaved beneath her feet, threw her back against the paint-peeled door. It wasn't there! She fell backward through it, fell against a warm, feminine figure.

"What's the matter?" Eve Starr exclaimed. "Where have you been?"

"Close the door," Leila screamed. "Close it." Somehow she was on her feet again, had her hand on the wood of the portal. She threw a single terrified glance through the opening—

And checked the closing panel. Nearer and distinct now in the silvery light, she saw what it was that had come out of the woods. Saw Stan's lolling, pallid face. Saw that he was leaning heavily on the shoulder of another man. Of—her blood was a black flood in her veins—of Foster Corbett! Of his grizzled father who she thought lay dead at the foot of West Cliff's high parapet!

She knew now who was Calban's master. She knew now whose high, shrill

whistle it was that had twice driven the monster from his prey—to save Stan Corbett—

CHAPTER FIVE

Into the Grisly Night

"LEILA," Eve cried, "Why is your door broken down and the place upset? What's scared you so?"

Leila Monroy twisted to her, fell back in astonishment. The girl whom last she had seen with a few shreds of torn clothing fluttering from her lacerated, almost naked form was fully dressed, her hair carefully arranged, no signs of the wild night about her.

"I saw your lights come on, after the storm and I came over to see if anything was the matter. I found—"

Eve cut off as stumbling feet pounded on the boards outside the door, as Foster Corbett staggered in with his grey-faced, limp burden.

"Stan! Mr. Corbett! In the name of all that's holy what's been going on here?"

"Never—mind—now," the older man grunted. "Help me."

Leila jumped to his side. Eve. Together the three lifted Stan from his wavering legs, carried him in to the living room where, hours ago, Leila had cringed from the whispered lash of fancied voices and laid the youth on the couch there. Stan groaned, his lids flickered open.

"Where—where—Dad!" His eyes lighted up. "Leila! You—you're both here. Both all right?"

"Fairly all right, son," the old man answered.

There was a black bruise on his brow, another on his cheek. His clothing was smeared with the brown loam into which he had fallen, his shoes were packed with it. Otherwise he seemed unhurt. His

bleared, brooding gaze fastened on Leila, slid to Eve, went back to Stan.

"We'll do. But you need a doctor. I'll call—"

"No." Stan shoved himself up to a sitting position and Leila winced as his face twitched with the pain of the effort. "No. I'm kind of frayed at the edges, but I'll last. I'm like Eve. I want to know what this is all about."

Leila started to speak, but the old man beat her to it.

"We'd all like to know that, Stan. Suppose you give us your story first."

He was starting wrong end to, Leila thought. There was a reason for that. He was concealing something. Of course he was concealing something. He was Calban's master. He was the moving force behind all the terrible events of the night and he wanted first to hear how much the others knew before he concocted his own story to fit. She wouldn't interfere. She'd keep quiet and give him rope enough to hang himself, and then . . .

But Stan was talking. "I tried to get to Leila, after the trial, but she was gone by the time I managed to shove through the crowd. I saw Eve though, told her to tell Leila I'd come to her as soon as my tour of duty was over.

"The storm caught me as I came up the road. Leila's lights were all on. I heard a scream from the house, and she didn't answer when I knocked on the door. That scared me. I went frantic started to batter down the door. The lights went out just as it gave way. I ploughed in, yelling for her. The lightning showed me she wasn't on the lower floor. I started up the stairs. I heard her scream again. A shot jabbed me. It scared across my ribs, jolted me off balance.

"I guess I must have gone down on my head and knocked myself out, because the next thing I knew, it seemed a long time

after, I heard the door close and saw her running into the woods."

Leila's eyes flicked to Eve. The girl was listening open-mouthed, did not interrupt to correct Stan's misapprehension. That was queer. Queer as her evident ignorance of all that had happened to her, or had *seemed* to have happened to her. If she had lain, apparently dead, on the bed above, if she had run, screaming in terror of Leila herself, through the woods, how could she be so neatly dressed, so undisturbed? The awful doubt of her own reason closed in once more on Leila with its nameless fear.

"Unaccountably the brute dropped me, and—and I fainted again from loss of blood," Stan finished. "Then you were bending over me, Dad, were helping me up."

"How about you, Leila?" Foster Corbett turned to her. "What's your end of the story?"

HIS eyes bored into her, and in their rheumy depths she saw little lights of triumph crawl. If she answered, she must convict herself—of sheer, incredible madness. Of madness! How could she tell of finding Eve apparently dead, of the strange scene of her terror in the woods, when the girl herself was so calm, so unperturbed, so evidently ignorant of it all that? How could she confess to the attack on Stan's father?

Her mouth opened, closed again. She swayed, put out a groping hand to the arm of a chair to keep herself from falling. And Eve came to her rescue!

"Can't you see how weak she is, Mr. Corbett," the dark-haired girl indignantly exclaimed as she jumped to Leila's side and helped her into the chair. "She can't talk!"

"But we've got to get at the bottom of this thing," Corbett insisted. "There's something damned queer going on!"

"Seems to me you've got a story, too," Eve countered. "Why don't you tell it?" Had the same thought occurred to her, too, Leila wondered, that the old man had taken charge of the situation in order to cover up his own guilt? "How come you were out there in the woods at this time of the morning?"

"Yes, Dad," Stan put in. "That's puzzling me, too."

Corbett made a peculiar little gesture with his gnarled hands, as of defeat.

"I can't help much," he said. "But I'll tell what I know. When the storm broke I thought of Leila and looked out of my window to try and see if she were alone over here. The lightning struck into that line of poplars between our farms. I saw some one among them just at the spot where we found Shean Rourke, a dark, crouching figure watching the Monroy house. There was something indescribably menacing in his pose, and it flashed on me that perhaps we had been all wrong about Justin's being Rourke's murderer, that perhaps this was the real killer, and that now he was after Leila.

"He started moving in the moment I glimpsed him, dodging low in the high grass of the pasture. I lost sight of him. I ran to the phone to warn Leila. I just had time to tell her to lock her doors and windows when the wire went dead. I snatched up my gun, ran out to come to her aid.

"Her lights were going on, I saw her shadow going from window to window, pulling the screens across them. And then I saw the fellow I'd spotted before. He had climbed to the little roof over the kitchen porch, was sliding into a window up there.

"I knew that because of my own warning Leila would not open the door to me. By the time I got her to understand, the prowler would catch her, would kill her. My only course was to go after him the

way he had entered, try to catch him before he did any damage.

"The storm redoubled in violence and I am an old man. It took me hours, it seemed, before I managed to get to the house, before I managed to climb up to that small, slanting roof. I heard a muffled scream from inside as I got into the room up there, heard a damnable pandemonium going on. The room was pitch black and a minute passed before I found the door and got out into the hall.

"Just as I did so, the door crashed in below. I twisted to the stairway, heard some one shout down there as he came in, could not make out the words. Then I recognized Stan's voice, and in the same instant some one screamed behind me.

"Some one screamed and a black form surged at me from somewhere behind, struck me. The blow jolted my finger that was pressing the trigger of the gun and fired the shot. I whipped around, in time to see that same dark, grotesque form pounce on Leila and carry her off. I shouted, did not dare shoot for fear of hitting her.

"The invader hurtled along the corridor, dived into a room at the very end. I went after him, yelling for Stan."

"I was out, dad, and didn't hear you."

"So I know now. That room door was jammed, and by the time I opened it the chamber was empty. But the window was open and through it I saw the kidnaper vanishing into the wood, Leila still on his shoulder. I saw that he must have climbed down a rainspout that passed the window, but I didn't dare follow that way.

"The head of the back stairs, however, was at this end of the corridor. I ran down them, out through the back door again, across the fields and into the forest where I had seen the fellow vanish.

"In the storm I couldn't trail him. I shouted, fired off my gun in the hope Leila would respond. In vain. Then the

storm was over, as suddenly as it had begun. The clouds started to break. Moonlight, sifting through, showed me trampled bushes, shreds of a girl's clothing caught on briars. I followed that trail, reached the face of West Cliff. Just above where the spoor ended I saw the mouth of a cave, thought I sensed movement within it. Possibly, I thought, my shots had scared the kidnaper away and Leila was alone up there. I started to climb up to it. Suddenly rocks started to fly down at me. One struck me on the head. I felt myself falling, struck and lost consciousness."

IT FITTED, Leila thought, his story fitted. Was it the truth or a tissue of lies? Somehow it explained everything too patly, everything except who the Monster was and where he had come from, except the mystery of Eve Starr's weird part in the dreadful night. Eve's face was an expressionless mask, her unfathomable eyes fixed on Corbett's seamed, horribly tired countenance.

"When I came to I heard the sounds of struggle, far-off. A pile of dead leaves had cushioned my fall, I wasn't badly hurt. I staggered to my feet, ploughed through the woods, and found Stan, knocked out."

Or had he come on that scene just a little earlier, in time to whistle off Calban, in time to send the Monster ravening after her through the woods. Was he playing still for a chance to get her alone, to finish her? The speculation wrenched a groan from the bemused girl.

"Leila!" Eve exclaimed. "You're white. You look as though you were going to faint. I'll get you some water."

She was out of the room as her sentence ended. The kitchen door swung closed behind her.

"Leila," Foster Corbett spun to her.

"What do you know of Eve's actions tonight? Have you seen her?"

A scream sliced across her amazing question, a scream from behind the kitchen door. Corbett slewed around. Gun in hand, he hurled himself across the room, pounded that door open. The brick-walled room beyond was starkly, gruesomely vacant, but the back door was just slamming shut and from beyond it a thin, high wail of infinite terror told where Eve had vanished.

"He's got her, now," the old man yelled. "I was wrong. Come on, Stan!" And then he, too, was gone into the grisly night.

CHAPTER SIX

Monster at Play

LEILA MONROY came up out of her chair, fighting the intangible but cloying threads of her weakness, fighting a giddy nausea that whirled within her skull and tweaked at the pit of her stomach. Through that dizzy whirlpool she saw Stan's vague form dart past her, lurched to follow it. The room seemed to whirl about her as she moved, there was a wall where the door should be, a wall into which she jolted.

Half-stunned, she pawed at the partition, found the door away from which she had reeled in her vertigo, reeled through. The kitchen, a place of black, threatening shadows, danced about her. She staggered across it, stabbed at the outer door, missed it, pulled in an agonizing breath and tried again.

This time Leila contrived to grab the doorknob as it went by and steadied herself by it. Gripping the jamb with her other hand, she fought to get the portal open, succeeded.

Something lay, a black, unmoving bulk, on the porch outside. Stan! It must be

Stan, her bewildered fear jabbed at her and she went to her knees beside it. She pawed at it, her blurred vision still refusing to clear. . . .

The body came suddenly alive. Rolled over. The apelike, ferocious visage of the Monster glared at her, black lips curling away from yellow fangs in a strange, jabbering laugh of bestial triumph.

A scream sliced her throat and then Calban's gigantic arms flailed around her, crushing her to him, crushing her ribs, clamping that scream to silence in her breathless lungs. He surged to his feet, bringing her up with him as though she had no weight at all. He lurched back into the house with her.

Through the kitchen, the living room, he ploughed, chuckling lewd glee. Into the foyer hall he shouldered, the piggy little eyes under his beetling brows lurid with an obscene light, his calloused, rasping fingers writhing as though with some vile life of their own on her shrinking, quivering flesh. Leila's larynx swelled once more with a shriek, but Calban caught her intention by some unhuman second-sight and gagged her—gagged her horribly with the pressure of his slobbering, evil lips on hers in a kiss of ultimate horror.

Crushed thus in the viselike cradle of the beast-man's arms, gagged thus by his insufferable caress, Leila knew that he was carrying her up the broad stairs to the passage above. To the passage where her own room was, *her own bed*—

No doubt now, no doubt at all, of what the brute-man intended.

No doubt of what he intended or of what had happened. He had been waiting outside, had grabbed Eve and—killed her, probably. Foster Corbett had taken advantage of the girl's one cry to get out of the way himself, to get Stan out of the way—and had sent back his creature to finish off Leila. Stan's unlooked-for pres-

ence time and time again had interfered with his macabre plans, but Stan was out of the way now and Leila was in Calban's power, being carried up to the room where the night's horror had begun and now would be consummated.

Calban was in the room, thrusting the door shut with a dextrous foot as he passed through it, twisting to the bed with a swift surety that told of curious familiarity with its location. Even in that terrible moment Leila noted that, noted that her white spread was rumpled and blood-flecked, that the indentation of a contorted figure was still visible on it. Then Calban had flung her stunningly down on the bed, had pinned her to it with a digging, cruel knee as he tore avidly at what was left of her clothing.

"Pretty," he jabbered, as he had jabbered before in the forest. "Pretty. Calban likes."

He paused to gloat over the quivering beauty his violating paws had revealed. "Calban likes very much."

Leila's tortured eyes fled from the evil anticipation of his thick-lipped, drooling mouth, slid past the muscles of his terrible arms. Her hopeless gaze slid along the walls of her familiar room that now was a cell of madness and despair, reached the door. It was opening! Slowly, silently, it was opening and white fingers jogged its edge.

The girl's heart leaped.

"Please," she whimpered pulling her gaze back to her tormentor. "Please, Calban, let me go." At all costs she must distract his attention, keep him from noticing the advent of her rescuer. "I'll pay you. I'll give you lots of money, jewels. . . ."

The Monster gibbered his mindless laugh. "Calban no want money, jewels. Calban want pretty woman, white, soft flesh of pretty woman. Like this—"

And suddenly he leaped away from her,

leaped to the center of the room and whirled to the opening door. Some sixth sense had warned him of danger. . . .

STAN jumped into the room, a long carving knife in his hand that must have come from the kitchen below.

"Leila!" he yelled. "Run, jump out of the window. I can hold him long enough!"

Calban roared, plunged at him. Stan met the attack with a darting slash of the knife, caught the Monster across the knuckles. The beast-man's other fist crashed against the trooper's shoulder, slammed him against the wall. Leila screamed, started up from the bed.

Calban twisted to her. A flick of his long arm pounded her back to the creaking mattress. Stan rebounded from the wall, sliced at Calban. The giant sprang backward, avoiding the rush, dropped to the floor and rolled toward the trooper.

Leila was out of the bed, was darting once more toward the window. Black digits closed on Stan's ankles, heaved upward. The trooper was flung high into the air. He twisted lithely, came down on his feet, crouched to meet his snarling adversary's lunge. Calban's juggernaut rush swerved at the last instant and the girl felt the impact of his fists once more, blasting her headlong away from attempted escape. She sprawled, brought up thumping against the wall.

Stan ducked forward, slashed a long cut across the other's leathery cheek. Calban squealed, more in rage than pain, and exploded into a swift blur of action which Leila's eyes could not follow nor Stan avoid. Suddenly that whirling battle was static, terribly static.

Stan hung from the giant's tight clutch on his wrists, hung from arms stretched horizontally out from his shoulders in that terrific grip. Crucified on an invisible cross, the trooper's body was a taut arc of suffering, his face a fish-belly

white, sweat-wet mask of hideous torture.

A low moan squealed from his rigid throat, squealed into sound. "Get out—Leila—your chance . . ." gurgled into a nondescript gust of agony as Calban's gargantuan span of whipcord muscle widened to crack the bone-jointures in his shoulders with the gruesome power of its living torture-rack.

Leila's way to the door was clear as long as Calban held the straddle-legged pose he must to continue his grisly torment of her lover. This was her chance to escape.

She shoved away from the wall to which that last fierce buffet had flung her, came up to her feet. Came up to her feet with the light bedroom chair in her hands, leaped toward Calban and pounded the improvised weapon down on his head.

The chair splintered, smashed. Calban let Stan drop and whirled to Leila. He was laughing, actually he was laughing!

"She-devil," his twitching lips spewed. "Calban like you that way." His hands lashed out, his fingers dug into the girl's shoulder, sent fiery agony darting through her twisting, almost nude body. "Calban like woman that can fight, but can't play now. Must finish with man first. Tear arms out, legs, like fly's wings."

"No," Leila screamed. "No. Leave him alone. Do what you want with me, but leave him alone."

CALBAN'S simian visage was distorted by his yellow-toothed, imbecilic grin. "Calban do what he like with both." She was helpless, infantile in his great hands as he flung her once more on the bed, as he ripped the sheets into strips and lashed her ankles, her wrists; lashed them tightly, cruelly, pulling the knots with sadistic violence. The rough edges of the torn linen cut into her shrieking flesh, were scarlet-edged with oozing blood.

On the floor behind the savage giant a long shudder ran through Stan Corbett's crumpled frame, and he was crawling, crawling as a stepped-upon beetle might in whom life was not yet quite extinct. But unlike that beetle the man moved with a definite purpose. A yard beyond his shaking, bloodless hand lay the knife he had dropped. A yard—to his anguish enfeebled body that yard was an infinite distance. But if he could reach that knife . . .

Leila, seeing, stoppered in her throat the moans of her own agony sought to wrench from her and contrived a question to hold Calban long enough for Stan to succeed.

"What will your master say if you harm him? Your master doesn't want you to . . .

"Calban have no master," the brute roared, rage flaring into his little eyes. "No one tell Calban what must or must not do." Dismay pierced Leila as he twisted away from her, as he lurched toward Stan, whose scrabbling fingers were still inches away from the knife. "No one . . ."

The whistle shrilled in, the whistle that twice before had saved Stan. A vague figure blotted the window's dim rectangle.

"Mr. Corbett," Leila screamed. "He's killing Stan. Calban's killing . . ."

CHAPTER SEVEN

A Bargain with the Fiend

IT WASN'T Foster Corbett who came surging in through the aperture. It was Eve! Astoundingly it was Eve. "Calban!" she yelled.

The whistle hadn't stopped the monster this time. He was lifting the lacerated, almost unconscious man from the floor by one hand, and his other was at Stan's throat!

"Calban!" Eve cried again. "Stop it!"

The giant paused. Over the limp, lolling frame of his victim he glared at the dark-haired girl, his face a gargoylesque, demoniac visage.

"No," he chattered. "Calban will not be cheated any more. Calban will kill the man, and take the woman, and your lies will not stop him again."

"Calban! I did not lie to you." Grotesque, hideous, this colloquy between the slim, darkly-beautiful girl whom Leila Monroy had known all her life, and the beetle-browed, barrel-chested savage who was an atavism from the very dawn of time. "It was you who forgot our bargain and tried to force from me what I promised would be yours when you finished the task I set you. If you hadn't attacked me, choked me—"

Oh God! It was blasphemous even to think his name in the presence of that woman!

"You—you fiend," Leila burst out. "You brought him here to kill me. You—"

Eve's glance flicked to her, and it stung Leila as if the evil in it were a barbed whiplash of frozen steel.

"Shut up!" she hissed. "You don't count, now."

Then she was concentrating on the giant.

"Calban," she pleaded, "let him go. Let him live."

Lurid light-worms crawled sinisterly in the brute's small eyes. "No," he grunted, and his throttling fingers started again to close, bit by cruel bit, on Stan's throat. "No. You want him, and you'll never give yourself to Calban while he lives."

"That's it, is it?" Eve's cry was abruptly a hollow whisper of defeat. "That's what I must pay to save him? Here, then, Calban. Here!"

Her hands flew to her throat, her fingers fumbled at the high, lacy collar that veiled it. Then the flimsy silk was ripping; as those white hands tore down

through it; ripping away from her chest, the creamy, heaving rounds of her desirous breasts, the taut, quivering hollow of her abdomen. The shredded fabric slid down the long line of her thighs, reached the floor, and she threw out her arms to the beast-man in an abandon of seduction noisome as the uttermost depths of Hell, and glorious as Heaven itself. Glorious because, whatever the woman was, whatever evil had driven her, she descended now into Hades to save the man she loved!

The man she loved! In that moment the whole story was clear to Leila. Eve loved Stan and—

Calban whimpered. He let his victim fall. He lumbered; uncouth, shaken by the tempest she had aroused within him; to the naked, alluring form of the temptress, luminous-seeming in the moonlight glow. His black arms slid around that voluptuous form. . . .

By some accident of the inscrutable fates, Stan had dropped right atop the knife he so futilely had struggled to reach. His twitching, bloodless hand closed on its hilt. . . .

Eve moaned, shudderingly, as Calban's shaggy arms enfolded her— That moan seemed to explode in Stan with a sudden, spasmodic strength. He lifted to his knees, flung the knife. . . .

Point first, it was a silver flash streaking the moonlight, and then it was a black excrescence, quivering from the middle of Calban's back. Blood spurted. . . .

The monster squealed with the sudden pain. His great hands gripped the woman they had been fondling, flung her from him in a paroxysm of rage. She catapulted into the wall. The crackling thud of crushing bone sickened Leila. . . .

And then the bound girl was screaming in terror for her lover as the wounded beast-man whirled and plunged ferociously at the trooper, who was swaying on his

knees, was toppling over from the effort alone of throwing that knife. Calban's writhing fingers closed on Stan. . . .

Thunder crashed in the room. It was the thunder of Foster Corbett's gun, blazing from the doorway. Long, orange-red jets of flame seared across the room. Calban's great form jolted to the impacts of the lethal lead, once, twice. He collapsed like a ripped meal sack, rolled over near his intended victim, quivered and was still.

Foster Corbett came in. He was mud-covered, from head to foot. A blue bruise blotched the seamed gray of his face and one trouser leg flapped, grotesquely somehow in two disjointed halves.

But the man's old, tired eyes glowed with a strange satisfaction.

"You gals sure can play hell," he growled, "when you get to fighting over a boy." He picked up the knife and sliced Leila's lashings, then bent to his son's flaccid form.

"Is—is he—?" Leila dared not finish the question, but Corbett understood and answered it. "No. He's just knocked out and he's coming out of it now. He'll be all right by noon, I imagine, right enough to stand up with you in front of the parson and—"

"He wouldn't marry me, now," Leila moaned. "He wouldn't marry the daughter of a madman."

"Madman, hell," Corbett grunted, swinging around to Eve's crumpled, moaning body. His gnarled fingers probed the girl's hurts with a curious tenderness. Then, "I'm afraid you're through, Eve," he said. "Maybe things will be a little better for your soul, where it's going, if you tell Leila yourself. . . ."

White lips moved in face that was agony incarnate.

"Yes . . . I . . . swore you . . . never would have . . . Stan, Calban . . . imbecile living caves . . . West Cliff . . . everybody thought . . . monster. I . . . made friends

with him . . . got him kill . . . Rourke . . . throw blame your father . . . kill Stan's love for you. It's . . . killed me instead." A gush of blood bubbled from her lips, she writhed to a sitting position, threw out her arms. "Forgive me, Stan."

And then there wasn't an Eve Starr any more. Only a pitiful, nude corpse, slumped in a corner of the dreadful room.

THEY pieced it together afterward, the tale of that dreadful night. How, learning of Stan's message that her plot had failed, the love-maddened girl must have determined to have her mindless dupe kill Leila. How she must have sneaked into Leila's bedroom, either up the rain-spout ladder or through the same window that Calban had entered. How the imbecile must have attacked her, choked her to insensibility on the bed, been scared away by Leila's rush, by Stan's pounding on the doorway below. . . . Had been scared away, and then had attacked Foster Corbett, kidnaped Leila.

Eve had recovered, had gone out into the woods to make certain Calban had done for Leila. The frightened girl's questions had given her the clue to Leila's fear of her own madness. She had played on that to torture her, to lure her deeper into the woods, into Calban's clutches. But Stan's appearance had once more disrupted her plan.

Because she loved him she had saved him then. She had saved him again later, when the imbecile took matters into his own hands. But she had been able only at terrible cost to herself to save him the third time. . . .

"It was horrible," Leila shuddered, shrinking into Stan's arms. "It was a nightmare out of hell's vilest depths."

"But it ended happily, my darling." Stan's lips were warm, under her ear. "Like the fairy stories. 'And so they were married and lived happily ever after.'"

"Ever after," Leila murmured. "But the ending of our fairy story is even better. Look!"

Under the poplars that till now had divided the Monroy and the Corbett farms, that till now had made a line of ancient enmity, two old men stood. The taller one, Justin Monroy, pointed to the ground, made a gesture with his forefinger as though he were drawing a boundary. Foster Corbett nodded. The two shook hands gravely.

"They've got it settled at last, that old fight."

"Doesn't make much difference any more, does it, Leila? The two farms will belong to one little fellow pretty soon—"

"What do you mean?" Leila Corbett cried, blushing. But she knew. Even if they had only been wedded a short hour before, she knew what her husband meant.

THE END

*It's an out and out
Gamble*



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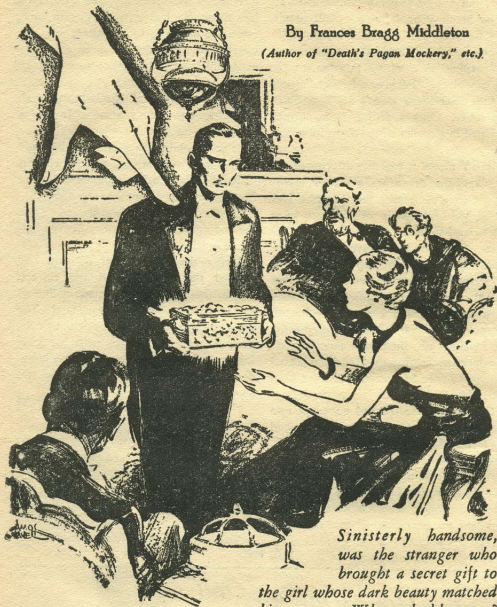


PROBAK JUNIOR

The DEVIL'S EMISSARY

By Frances Bragg Middleton

(Author of "Death's Pagan Mockery," etc.)



Sinisterly handsome, was the stranger who brought a secret gift to the girl whose dark beauty matched his own . . . Whence had he come?

To what dank place would he soon return—bringing his victim?

ALL DAY long I had been hoping against hope that young Philip Rice would reach Palo Alto Plantation House by supper time. For a full year we had heard nothing from him, had almost given up any expectation of

ever hearing from him again. So my old heart was set fluttering a bit by that peremptory knock, and I went to the door myself. But when I reached it old Jude had already opened it. I caught a glimpse of Bob Shane, the only taxi driver in the

county, as he hurried down the graveled walk toward the gate. Only a glimpse, for he was almost out of sight behind the jasmine bushes, and my old eyes had been drawn as by a magnet to the stranger who stood in the doorway, looking into the gathering shadows of the hall.

I can't describe him. He was tall and slender and dark, with a face of free, wild beauty. His eyes were black—that black which is a total absence of light, and when they looked at me I was lost in them completely, filled with that insane desire which comes to some men on the summits of high places—the desire to hurl oneself over the parapet to the ground below. For with all his beauty and grace, there was about him something dreadful, something terrifying.

"If you will pardon this intrusion—" the stranger began. And his voice matched the rest of him. It was low and vibrant. At the sound of it I felt an icy hand close hard around my heart. "I bring a—memento—from young Philip Rice," the voice was continuing. "I left him—down south there."

He made a curious gesture with his long, slender, beautiful hands. Never had I seen such hands as his, so sensitive, so capable. I am an old man and shocks are bad for me. I stood there gasping.

AND then, quite unexpectedly, he smiled, and I knew at once that my fears were foolish. I could see that he was just an extraordinarily handsome man who was asking hospitality at a door which for more than a hundred years had refused hospitality to none.

"Come in," I begged, in confusion. "The place is crowded, and I'm afraid I must put you in Sherburne Rice's room—"

I spoke hesitantly, for we never use that room at all. It has been called a haunted room ever since Sherburne Rice the Second hurled a man out of it and

down the north stairway to the death, of a broken neck in the garden. But this was All Hallow's Eve, when all of us gather to celebrate the date of the house's building. Every room but that was full, and I was unwilling to thrust so strange a guest upon any of my kin.

He smiled queerly.

"I am sure I shall be at home there," he said. "My name is Minos Dis, and I come from a strange, far country. As I said, I have brought a remembrance from your kinsman, Philip Rice."

"For me?" I asked.

I admit my voice was eager. Young Philip had occupied the limelight at the family gathering last year. He was an explorer, with an already brilliant and bewildering history in spite of his youth.

Again the stranger smiled that strange, haunting, extraordinary smile.

"I do not know yet for whom it is intended," he answered, and his voice, though low and very, very quiet, had something dreadful in it, some hint of doom unthinkable. "I have come to learn."

"And is Philip—"

He made a slight gesture with one perfect hand. It silenced me as if those slender fingers had closed around my throat.

"I shall tell you all—presently," was all he said.

I myself led the way upstairs to Sherburne Rice's room. I did it reluctantly, but I could see nothing else to do. And yet, somehow, as I opened the door into that orderly but long disused room, I felt that there was a certain significance, a certain fitness, in ushering that man into that particular room. I could not understand why I should feel so, but I did. I saw to his comfort and left him there—in that feared and haunted room.

And as I walked away, through the dim old hallway toward the stairs, the man's strange and foreign sounding name kept

echoing through my mind. It had, somehow, a faint familiarity. Minos. . . . Had that not been the name of a fabled king of Crete?

A strange name; and a strange man who laid claim to it, surely. But then, our house has long been used to strangeness and to heartbreak and to dread. It is an old house, a pioneer house, built solidly and substantially of brick. There are heavy iron bars at the windows. There is a huge pantry behind the kitchen and a deep cistern under the floor. And in its time its people have been thankful for these things. For Palo Alto has a dark and flame-shot history. They say that pirate gold built it, and that pirates and buccaneers tried to raid it in the old days. And it is certain that it withstood a siege in 'thirty-six by Santa Ana's men, and a grim and furious battle fought up and down its stairways in 'sixty-five. And, more heroic still, when one of its women was marooned there in the flood of 'ninety-nine, she fought off the hungry, drink-crazed blacks and saved herself and her two baby girls from horror indescribable. A strong, hard breed, those children of fearfully remembered Sherburne Rice, who come back, each thirty-first of October, which is the date in the cornerstone, to celebrate the building of our house.

SOMETIMES strange things happen, yet something always brings us together again, the very fascination, perhaps, of the *autre* and the unpredictable. And our very terror urges us to make of it a very festive occasion, even riotous, with all the Hallowe'en trappings, and old wine brought up from the cellar where Rodney Rice's wife was once walled up alive. . . . At least we are always glad to see each other, and we always make a valiant effort to be gay, with games and

dancing and laughter. . . . *But we were not gay this year. . . .*

It was dusk when I found Patricia Rice standing alone on the wide front gallery, watching the darkness march down the turgid river. And I knew she was thinking of that time thirty-six years ago when the high ground the house stands on was an island in a forty-mile-wide sweep of muddy, swirling water—and she stood there alone. . . . Patricia is an old woman now, a grave and sensitive and understanding woman, and, some people say, a little psychic at times.

She spoke without looking at me.

"I don't like it, Jerry. Something is going to happen, and it's always queer things that happen in this house. . . . awful things. . . ."

"You're thinking of the old days," I told her.

"It isn't that, altogether. I can—*feel*—something. I have as eerie a feeling as when I carried my babies into the burial vault out yonder to escape those mad-dened blacks. . . . Of course, I do always remember too much when I come here, Jerry. I can't forget that I stood guard beside the bones of Sherburne Rice, the Pirate, and Sherburne Rice, the Terrible, of Reconstruction days. I can't forget that it was the negroes' terror of those very bones that saved me and my babies. But I lived through horror too. . . . And I had to kill two men. . . . It does something to you, Jerry, gives you a certain power. . . . And I tell you something horrible is hovering over us, something more horrible than anything that has happened yet. . . ."

"I wish young Philip Rice was on his way," I grumbled uneasily. "It's been so long. . . ."

But I couldn't go on. And for a while we stood in silence, we who are old and who remember such strange things. As for Philip. . . .

HE HAD come to us that year for the first time. Not one of us had ever seen him before. He had just got back then from an exploring trip into the heart of South America, somewhere where white men had never been before. He had tried to fly over an inaccessible jungle, he explained, but the plane had crashed. He had come down in the outskirts of a city as yet unknown to white men, a bewilderingly lovely deserted city. His eyes grew rapt as he talked about it; he seemed to be lost in memories. His own enthusiasm fired even our earth-bound imaginations. He made us feel that place—its unimaginable splendor, its beauty, its vastness, its unthinkable antiquity. And as he talked, he seemed to me to be the very quintessence of the Rices, to be possessed of all their charm, their beauty, their love of adventure and their valor, without those darker qualities for which so many of them have been famed. I loved the boy, and I hated the way his eyes were held by Morna Lane.

A tribe of Indians—Mayas—lived near the city, he told us, but they never entered it except for religious ceremonies, and even then they barred him out. So he had to explore it by stealth, taking his life in his hands at every venture within its sacred walls. He had stumbled all by accident upon a Mayan treasure house. The natives would have killed him if they had known.

For these Mayas had a rabid dread of white men. Around their fires at night they told strange old legends of the Conquistadors, horrifying tales of pillage and torture and enslavement. There would never be another invasion of white men into their land, they swore. Yet, paradoxically, they had welcomed Philip, offered him membership in their tribe, made of him a sort of reincarnation of their Fair God. And I could understand that, looking at him down the table. He was

one of those fortunates whom people love at sight.

Certainly our whole family fell in love with him that night. And he? Well, he fell in love with Morna Lane, the step-daughter of one of our many cousins. She was one of those fair girls whose beauty seems to shine, to dazzle men's eyes. And she was captivated with Philip—or with the things he stood for. Their eyes were locked together while he told his tale. She was breathless, eager. *And she begged him to go back!*

"But you must," she cried. "Don't you see? You brought nothing out with you. You have no proof of your discovery. Go back! Get pictures and specimens, and astonish the world. . . . *Bring me a Mayan amulet, Phil!*"

Philip laughed and shook his head. He knew the danger, you see. If he, having been a sort of god among the Mayas before his escape, should now return. . . . It made me shiver even to guess at his punishment. Besides, the Mayas had been in the habit of sacrificing the incarnations of their gods. That old, puzzling, heathen idea that the essence of the human god must go back at stated times to keep the godhead strong was one of the fundamentals of their religion. No one knew that better than Philip. . . .

Yet he did return to his Mayan city. We heard about it later, and the news had made my heart sink as if under leaden weights. I am an old man, and I had loved that boy.

And now some one had come who claimed to bring us news of him. But how weird and strange a messenger! Yes, I believed with Patricia that something was going to happen. Something dreadful. Something far worse than merely strange. . . .

NOT one of the darkies would go to Sherburne Rice's room to summon

our stranger guest to supper. They made various plausible-seeming excuses, but I understood. They were afraid. So I climbed the weary stairs myself, stairs that had been tracked with human blood these many times. My hand trembled a little as I knocked on Sherburne Rice's door.

That strange, weirdly melodious voice bade me enter, but I did no more than open the door. The stranger stood bare-headed in the lamplight. The unearthly beauty of him struck me with new force. My eyes were so lost in that compelling gaze of his that I was barely conscious of the box he held between his hands—not a large box but extraordinary, like everything else about him. It had the look of having been made of a single opal; yet, impossible as that seemed, I know that I thought nothing of it at the time.

He shook his head slowly at mention of supper, begged to be excused. He would join us later, he said. And such was the spell he had me under that I could make no protest, though deep down in me was an almost paralyzing fear. A guest who would not eat our salt or break our bread with us—was not that a guest truly to be feared?

But as I turned away from that hated room, a queer choked-off cry jerked my thoughts away. Terror lent me strength. I hurried to Patricia's door and jerked it open and lunged inside. She was standing by the hearth in the full light of the tall white candles on the mantel. Her face was ghastly white, and she held both hands to her throat. Her eyes had that supernatural look they sometimes have.

As I cried out at her in terror she lowered her hands and turned to look at me. Slowly her eyes regained their sanity. She swallowed hard.

"I thought for an instant that—something—had me by the throat—was throttling me . . ." she whispered shakily. "I—

I don't know. . . . If Sherburne Rice is walking—it might be a ghastly business, Jerry. It would be like him to want to avenge his kinsman if—" Her voice died in a hoarse rattle in her throat.

I got Patricia downstairs somehow.

A DREARY business, that supper. One of our sudden northers struck the place just as the meal was served. Before the fires could be built up to give adequate warmth the house was starkly cold. We were all shivering when we came to the loaded table. And the wind was crying in a banshee's dirge through the leaves of the live oaks, keening under the eaves, around the cornices of the old house. A hound down in the quarters lifted his voice in the eerie howling that tells you death is passing. And the negroes moved on noiseless feet, their dark skins grey, their eyes wild, their hands a-quiver with terror. And I could think of nothing but young Philip Rice, whose infatuation for an empty-headed girl had sent him into what must have been unthinkable peril—and of the stranger who claimed to come from him—and of the cool-eyed, smiling Morna Lane who sat across the table from me. . . .

We old folks sat about the fire in the back parlor after supper, and listened to the shrieks of the rising wind, and told tales under our breath of the bloody deeds of Sherburne Rice the buccaneer and of his grandson, Sherburne Rice the Second.

And while we whispered of past terrors and bloody deeds, the young people danced in the big front parlor, bobbed for apples, looked in mirrors, and had their fortunes told. But their attempts at gaiety were futile. The blight of the stranger's presence was on them too.

It was midnight when the stranger came into the dim lamplight of the room where we were waiting. The box I had seen in the haunted room upstairs was in his

hands. It seemed to me that a little chilly wind, not born of the shrieking norther outside, came in with him. And the far away howling of the dog had now become an anguished, maddened whine of fright.

The music in the front room ceased. The young people crowded in with us and sank down upon stools and cushions around the fire. Morna Lane's eager, piquant face stood out startlingly in the soft light. I could not keep my old eyes away from her, she seemed so excited, so avid for the news that was coming. And suddenly I knew that I hated her. And the stranger stood in the wide doorway between the parlors and looked at us with his unfathomable eyes.

"YOU all knew Philip Rice," he stated quietly in his grave, deep, organ-toned voice. "He was kin to you?"

Some few of us murmured in assent. Philip had been kin to all of us, except to Morna Lane.

"He went back to the village in the jungle," the sonorous voiced rolled on. "He must have known that death awaited him there, yet he was driven by a force he could not resist."

He paused, and the silence was absolute except for the soft crackle of the fire, and the wind, and the howling dog.

"He went back. Even then he might have escaped his doom if he had been careful, for he had friends among the Mayas. They are a remnant of a once highly civilized and mighty race, as yet uncontaminated by intermarriage with other breeds. Their great stone city is an amazing place. You would marvel at it if I could make you see it. Where did the stones in its walls come from? They are huge and expertly cut. But what force brought them from their distant quarry, what force lifted them to their destined places in the towering walls? No man knows. Unthinkable wisdom, those long

dead Mayas must have had, unthinkable riches. Their ancient treasure house would make the richest treasury in your world look like a beggar's pittance. Gold and strangely wrought ornaments and glowing gems. Why did Philip Rice persuade the Mayan girl who loved him to take him there? That place was holy. He knew it. What untunable force could have sent him there?"

His black eyes moved from face to face, and I saw men and women sway backward as his eyes moved over them even as a field of grain sways when a wind blows over it.

"He took something exceedingly precious from that treasure house," the stranger said, very quietly. And his eyes came to rest on the opalescent box between his hands.

I saw Morna Lane lean forward, just a trifle, as if to see it better. But her face was inscrutable. I could make nothing of it. Could she have cared for Philip and still betray no sign, now that he must be dead?

"The Mayan girl loved him with a selfless, undemanding love. She helped him do the thing that he desired to do. She showed him a secret pass through the hills. Because she loved him. Savage women are like that sometimes . . . women to whom love is everything, even though the loved one has no thought for them—as Philip certainly had none for her. His thought was all for the white girl who had sent him back. He was mad to get for her the bauble she demanded. And it was only through the native girl that he could get it—so he took it and started home—alone. And he might have escaped, for the Mayas made no attempt to pursue him. They but sent a messenger after him with the severed hand of the girl who had helped him. 'Come back and burn,' their message said, 'or we burn the woman instead.' He did

not hesitate. He went back. And they gave his body to their gods."

PATRICIA screamed. I think the rest did too. I couldn't. My breath stuck in my throat. I was beyond the relief of any outcry. I was stunned.

The stranger watched us with his relentless eyes, those eyes that were black with the blackness that is total absence of light. He lifted the priceless box that was neither large nor small, the box that seemed to be made of a single fire-tinted opal, in his perfect hands.

"This I bring back from the jungle," he cried, a pulse throbbing in his voice as the sacrificial drums must have throbbed in the jungle while Philip died. "It is meant for some one here. To whom does it belong?"

It was beautiful, that box. It glowed in unbelievable glory in the light of the leaping fire. No rainbow in the world could ever have shown such colors, colors that withered and burned and faded and burned again.

But we drew back from it in horror. It was accursed. For all its beauty it was stained with another color that did not show. The color of Philip's blood.

"It belongs to one of you," the stranger said, inexorably.

I saw Morna Lane lean forward suddenly. She gasped, as a swimmer might gasp on the brink of an icy plunge. Her hand reached out, drew back, reached out again. She tried to speak, and could not. The stranger gave her a long, still look from his fathomless eyes.

"It is yours then?" he asked, and his voice was husky and filled with deep vibrations like the music that comes from the strings of a bass viol.

Still she could not speak. But she nodded, jerkily, and swallowed hard; and her outstretched fingers clenched and un-

clenched and clenched again in a spasm of desire.

He laid that lovely, priceless thing within their grasp. He turned, slowly, and walked away, his head bent, like a man who was very tired, into the front parlor and across it into the hall. I watched him climb the stair slowly and sadly and yet with an air of duty done. When he had passed from sight, my eyes came back to that room of silence. Only one of the group had moved. Morna Lane was gone. The rest sat still, white-faced, silent—stricken. . . .

IN the morning I went with weary plodding feet to call our stranger guest to breakfast. It was late in the morning then, but only a few of the kin had come downstairs, and they looked as if they had not slept. The wind still howled. The hound was silent. Old Jude had whispered to me with tangled, stammering tongue that during the night the dog had died of terror.

My old hand shook as I knocked on the door of Sherburne Rice's room. There was no answer, and, shaking as in a chill, I pushed the door open. There was no one in that haunted room. There was no sign that any one had ever been in it. Nothing seemed to have been touched. Even the bed was undisturbed. Even as he had refused to eat at our table, so, it seemed, he had refused to sleep beneath our roof.

Slowly, painfully, I stumbled down the stair. Never had I felt so old and helpless and dismayed. Patricia took my arm in the lower hall, and for the first time in my life I was glad of a woman's help. Somehow she got me to the telephone. After what seemed hours of fumbling I got Bob Shane, the taxi driver, on the wire. When had he taken the stranger back to town?

"But I never brought nobody out to Palo Alto," he bawled in exasperation. "Nobody at all. Old Jude must've gone plum' loco. I brought out a small package that come by express, an' I left it with that old dumb nigger at the door. What's the matter with the old hellion—anyhow?"

I couldn't answer him. The receiver dropped from my nerveless hand. I was sick, but there was something I had to do.

"That box—" I gasped to Patricia. "Quick! We've got to find out what was in that box—"

"Morna isn't down yet," Patricia objected. "Most of the young folks aren't. Up late last night, you know—"

"It makes no difference," I mumbled. "We've got to find out, Patricia. I tell you, we've got to find out!"

I saw her own face whiten. I don't know whether her thought was the same as mine. I never did know, for we never talked about it afterward. But she helped me back upstairs and down the hall to the room that was Morna Lane's.

She didn't answer when we knocked, and her door was locked. I had to send for some of the men to break it down. And then I wished I could have left it

locked till judgment day. I can never get that picture from before my eyes.

The opaline box lay on the night table by the bed. It was open and empty. Morna lay cold and quiet in her bed. Her white hands still gripped the wrist of a severed brown hand that clutched her throat, in a desperate, futile effort to wrench it away—a brown hand that had once been part of a Mayan maid who had loved and aided Philip Rice. And Morna's face That is what I would almost be willing to give my immortal soul to forget. But forget I cannot.

And even as we stared, spellbound with horror, the brown fingers relaxed their grip, the hand fell to the pillow and lay still, its work well done. . . .

"Sherburne Rice—" Patricia was babbling hysterically, over and over. "The vengeance of Sherburne Rice—"

But I was not so sure. I stood there thinking of the strange man who called himself Minos Dis, the man who ate not and slept not in our house—the man whom Bob Shane had not been able to see. And I remembered then that Dis is another name for Pluto, the god of the nether world, and that Minos was one of the judges who rendered judgments there. Perhaps But how could it be otherwise? *The man was Death.*



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FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

The Girl Who

By Franklin H. Martin

(Author of "Corpses for Witches Mountain," etc.)

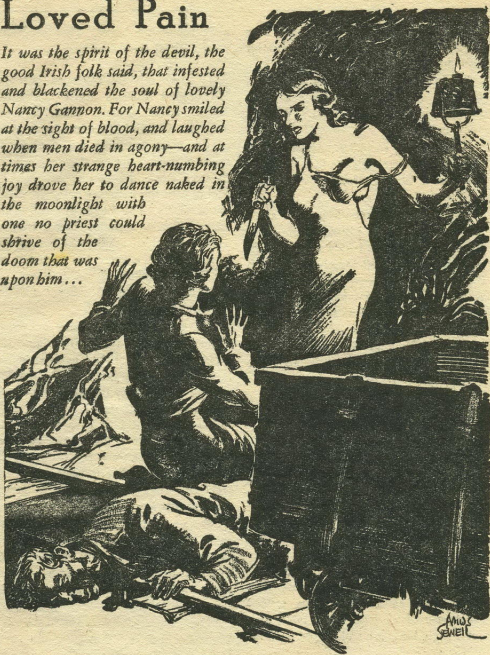
EILEEN GANNON was just hanging up the dish towel on the rack beside the kitchen sink when she heard John O'Marra's car as it came into the driveway, and stopped by the Gannon's back door. A slightly annoyed look settled across the girl's pretty face. John O'Marra always made her feel strangely uneasy—even more so of late. John with his heavy black brows and his habit of scowling at nothing. He insisted he was



*An Eerie, Full-Length Novel
of Haunting Mystery
and Terror*

Loved Pain

It was the spirit of the devil, the good Irish folk said, that infested and blackened the soul of lovely Nancy Gannon. For Nancy smiled at the sight of blood, and laughed when men died in agony—and at times her strange heart-numbing joy drove her to dance naked in the moonlight with one no priest could strive of the doom that was upon him...



in love with Eileen; but when he came to see her he would often just sit there, staring at Nancy, Eileen's eighteen year old sister. Eileen couldn't understand him, but for some reason she was afraid of offending him by showing her uneasiness.

She looked at the clock. It was just

seven o'clock in the evening—early for callers, even in Blairfield.

Quick footsteps sounded on the back porch and the kitchen door banged open. John O'Marra stood there for a moment, breathing quickly.

"Hello, John." The girl's hands went

to her hair, then smoothed the apron over her slim hips. "I wasn't expecting you this evening."

"Didn't come to see you this time, Eileen." John O'Marra made a quick nervous jerk with his head. "Where's your dad?"

"In the living room." A look of sudden alarm spread over the girl's face. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"Plenty!"

John O'Marra went through the small dining room of the Gannon home with Eileen at his heels. Paddy Gannon, Eileen's father, big and barrel-chested with black hair that showed no sign of grey, was sitting beside a table lamp reading his paper. His wife, frail but bright-looking, was knitting at the other side of the table. Mr. Gannon raised his eyes, looked at John O'Marra's face and let his paper drop to the floor.

"Trouble, eh, Johnny?"

"Yes, sir. A cave-in. Eddie Dwyer is trapped."

"A cave-in." Paddy Gannon's voice became a growl. "How could that happen? I looked that tunnel over just before sundown. There's something very dirty going on, Johnny."

He stamped out into the hall and got his hat.

Eileen went over and stood close to her mother. The two women watched with fearful eyes as Paddy Gannon opened the drawer of the living room table, took out a white brassard, and slipped it on his left arm.

As they started out John O'Marra said, "I've got to get Father Doyle, Mr. Gannon. I'll see you at the shaft."

"Is there a doctor there?"

"Yes, sir. One of the boys got Dr. Akers."

The noise of Paddy Gannon's small car joined that of John O'Marra's for a mo-

ment behind the house. Then they both roared out of the driveway.

MRS. GANNON tightened her arm around Eileen's waist. "Trouble, Eileen, darlin', trouble. Black days are upon us. Working the mines in the dead of the night, sneaking the coal out in trucks that don't turn on their engines until they reach the bottom of the hill. Fights with the company men. Now this secret society. The Silents they call themselves. Secret societies breed trouble. This is the third accident in two weeks. It seems as if a curse has been put on the Blairfield mines—"

Eileen interrupted her mother. "Where's Nancy?"

Her mother blinked once or twice. "Nancy went out right after dinner. I suppose she's over at the Crowley's house. . . . Eileen, have you noticed anything strange about Nancy of late? Sometimes the child frightens me."

Eileen's bright blue eyes looked into her mother's tired grey ones and she caught her lip between her teeth. "Well, you know how girls are when they reach eighteen. They're always hard to understand at that age."

"But you're twenty-one," Mrs. Gannon said. "You didn't behave so strangely at her age. Sometimes—" the woman's voice dropped to almost a whisper—"sometimes I feel that she's not my own daughter at all."

"Hush, mother." Eileen patted the older woman's shoulder. "I'm going out for a little while. Do you mind?"

"Out?" Her mother glanced toward the window. "But it's starting to rain. Where are you going?"

"Up to the mine."

"Now, Eileen—don't go up there. You know your father wouldn't like it. They don't want the women up there, especially when there's trouble. There will be a

rough crowd up there—and besides you'll get drenched."

"I'll wear my slicker and rubbers and mind my own business," Eileen said. "I'll keep out of their way. If you want anything before I come back Neil is upstairs doing his home work, isn't he?"

"Yes, like a good boy. But I wish you wouldn't go."

"I won't be long," Eileen was pulling on her raincoat, adjusting a soft felt hat so it would deflect the rain from her face and neck. She opened the door on a night that was black with a wind-driven rain. . .

There was a group of a score or so of men gathered around the mouth of the shaft in the Blairfield coal mines. Coal oil torches flared and sent out fitful, down-thrust flames in the storm wind. The ring of faces around the entrance to the shaft was picked out in red and black lights and shadows. Mostly men, because the women had been forbidden to come. Eddie Dwyer's mother and sisters were there, for it was Eddie who was trapped in the tunnel. Their faces were no less grimly expectant than those of the other watchers. Paddy Gannon and the doctor and priest were in the shaft with the shift that was trying to dig through to Eddie Dwyer. No word was spoken in the waiting huddle.

Off to one side, on a slight rise made by a dump pile, two figures stood alone. The man was straight as a pine tree, dressed in rags, and his long snow-white beard was spread out on his chest by the wind so that it looked like a white jacket. The girl was slender, and she wore neither hat nor coat. Her black hair curled in the rain, and her thin dress was so wet it clung to her every contour, revealing a figure beautifully and youthfully feminine. She had a lovely elfin face with large eyes that seemed to tilt up gently at the outer corners, and her hair was blown back, showing tiny ears that came

to points at the edges. There was a strange expression on her face as she stood there beside the old man, heedless of the elements, watching the group around the shaft. She looked like a person who is witnessing a pageant of rare beauty. Her lovely lips were half parted, like a child's in front of a Christmas tree. The old man just stood beside her, still and without expression. Standing there together they looked, in the weird light of the torches, like the study of an inspired sculptor.

EILEEN GANNON came up the hill, skirted the group at the mouth of the mine shaft, and climbed the little rise to where the girl and the old man were standing. She seized the girl's arm. "Nancy. What are you doing here? Standing in the rain without hat or coat! You'd better come home."

The white-bearded man turned his head once to look at Eileen, then looked away again. Nancy Gannon turned her lovely young face toward her sister. "Oh, Eileen! Isn't that a beautiful picture? Those people huddled in the rain and torchlight, with their faces hard with worry and sharp with pain—waiting, waiting. It is so beautiful it fills me with delight, makes me want to run and leap and sing . . ."

"Nancy!" Her sister's voice was brisk. "Eddie Dwyer is trapped in there. Daddy is one of the men trying to get him out. He and the others might get caught in a cave-in before they can reach Eddie. You're talking nonsense and you'll catch your death of cold. Come. Come home with me at once."

"All right, Eileen," Nancy said slowly. "But I hate to leave such a lovely sight. . . Good night, Seamus O'Callahan. . . Lovely, like the little folk gathered around their fire, waiting for one of their mates who has been trapped in the world, and is late in coming."

Eileen twitched her sister's arm. "Keep

still, and hurry." They had gone a dozen paces or so when Eileen said, "Why do you talk to that old hermit, Seamus O'Callahan? Everyone knows he's crazy. People will talk if they see you with him like that. You've been told before."

"Seamus O'Callahan is not crazy," Nancy said. "He is a gentle and kind man with a sensitive soul. He sees beauty with eyes that others lack. He talks to me until I, too, can see, beauty."

"If I tell Dad you've been talking to Seamus O'Callahan, and calling it beautiful that Eddie Dwyer got trapped in the cave-in, he'll take a strap to you, even if you are eighteen."

Nancy shivered and started to walk faster. Her voice had a quieter, more normal pitch when she spoke this time. "I'm wet through. Let's hurry."

The two sisters were lying side by side in bed when they heard their father's car come into the yard. They heard him stamp up the back steps into the kitchen. Mrs. Gannon was up, waiting for her husband, with a pot of coffee on the stove. The girls could hear them talking in the kitchen right below the bedroom.

"Did you get him out?" Mrs. Gannon asked.

"Yes," Paddy Gannon rumbled. "We got him out—too late. Dead, he was, when we got to him. Too late for priest or doctor. . . . I tell you, Mary, there is something very dirty about it all. It's not natural. It's like the place was bewitched. Three accidents without any reason or cause, one after the other. For all the world as if there was a black spell put on the place."

CHAPTER TWO

Black Clouds

EILEEN GANNON dropped off to sleep to dream of the grim tableau at the mine. Again she saw the huddle of anxious, fear-ridden figures at the mouth

of the shaft. No word or cry had been uttered at the shaft, but Eileen dreamed that somebody cried out—sharply. The cry came again, cut through the veil of sleep. It seemed still to echo in the quiet house when Eileen sat up in bed, fully awake.

Nancy moved restlessly by her side, but did not answer when Eileen spoke to her. Eileen leaned close and saw her sister's eyes were shut, and that she breathed like a person in a deep sleep. This time the noise was a frightened whimper, and it came from the next room. Eileen slipped out of bed and pulled on her robe. As she went through the door to her young brother's room she switched on the light.

Neil, her ten year old brother, was sitting up in bed, his eyes round discs of fright. He was still whimpering.

"What is it, Neil?"

Eileen approached the boy's bed. He looked at her without answering.

Paddy Gannon came thumping into the room in his bare feet, wearing an old fashioned flannel night shirt. "What's this? Was that you screaming, son?"

"I don't know," the boy said slowly. "I don't know if I screamed, but I was asleep and it was like as if somebody was holding a light over me. Then somebody slapped my face, hard, three or four times. Then the light seemed to go out and I woke up."

"Bad dreams!" Mr. Gannon scoffed. "Too much sweet stuff on your stomach."

"No," the boy protested. "Somebody was really slapping me. I can still feel my face sting."

Eileen leaned over the boy's bed. "Yes, dad. His face is red, just as if he had been slapped. Red and white welts."

"Wrinkles in the pillow," Mr. Gannon rumbled. "Go back to sleep, Neil, and don't let me hear any more out of you."

You frightened your mother out of a sound sleep."

The boy put his hand gingerly to the side of his face, then slowly lay back. "Yes, sir."

EILEEN turned and went back to her room. She switched on the small bed lamp for a second. The faint smell of hot wax came to her nostrils. There was a candle in a pewter stick on the bedside table—purely an ornament. But there was a little pool of melted wax around the wick. The wick, when she touched it, was still warm. The candle was on Nancy's side, within easy reach of her hand. Eileen stood there looking down at her sister with a strange, half-frightened expression. But Nancy's lovely faunlike face was wreathed in an innocent sleep smile. The neck of her nightdress was awry, showing the white throat and the swell of her breast. Half child, half woman—all lovely.

Slowly, shaking her head, Eileen crawled back into her side of their bed. "No, no. It couldn't have been Nancy. She wouldn't have done that. . . . But his face was streaked. And that candle was lighted only a short while ago. Oh, no. Not my sister Nancy. It's unthinkable . . ."

The next evening Nancy was not home for dinner and the Gannons sat down without her. From time to time Paddy Gannon looked at the clock and demanded sourly, "Where's Nancy? What's keeping her?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Gannon said at length. "She must be over at the Crowley's. I can't think of where else she could be."

Paddy Gannon finished his second cup of coffee and thumped his napkin down on the table. "I'm going after her. What kind of conduct does she call that? Not coming home to meals, staying out by herself after dark, wandering around. It

seems you haven't taught your second daughter the things she should know, Mary. It's time I took a hand." He filled his pipe, put on his hat and coat and stamped out.

"Oh, dear," Mrs. Gannon breathed fearfully. "I hope she is at Crowley's. I do hope she is."

Eileen patted her mother's shoulders reassuringly but there was a serious cast to her pretty face as she carried the dishes into the kitchen. Mr. Gannon had not yet returned when Paul Savage came to see Eileen. He was a slim, good-looking young man with a rather solemn expression. He dressed much better than most of the young men of Blairfield. He was in the living room talking to Mrs. Gannon when Neil came out to the kitchen where his sister Eileen was putting away the silver.

"That Paul Savage is out in the parlor waiting for you," Neil said.

"You don't like him, do you, Neil?" Eileen smiled.

"Aw, he's a dude. I like John O'Marra. Why don't you marry Johnny O'Marra, Sis? He's regular, and he's a big shot in the Silents."

"Ssh!" Eileen put her finger to her lips. "You shouldn't talk about that. You know it."

"Huh," Neil muttered. "Everybody knows who the Silents are. Pop's one of them. That's why he don't like a company man like Paul Savage coming around to see you. He likes Johnny O'Marra, too."

"You keep still," Eileen warned him. "Or you'll get yourself in trouble."

She took off her apron and went into the living room. Paul Savage rose from his chair. When he smiled he looked much younger.

"Would you and your mother like to go to the movies?" he asked.

"No," Mrs. Gannon said quickly, then

added. "Thank you, Paul, but I want to wait for Mr. Gannon. You and Eileen go."

"Come out in the kitchen, Paul," Eileen said. "I want to show you something."

ONCE in the kitchen Eileen closed the door and faced the young man. "Paul, I'm terribly worried about Nancy. That's where Dad is now, out looking for her. I want to wait until he gets back. She's been acting awfully strange of late."

Paul took her hand. "Eileen, why don't you stop worrying about your silly sister, and listen to me? I want to marry you, Eileen."

"Don't call her silly, please," Eileen begged. "I'm really worried."

"As long as you must talk about her," Paul said, "All right. People are beginning to notice that she's—well—different. She's the prettiest girl around, not counting you, of course. Yet she scares the fellows away because she never wants to do the ordinary things. She wants them to go out and run in the rain with her instead of going to the movies. She doesn't talk like anybody in Blairfield. She could have any young man in town if she stopped being like that."

"What are people saying about her?" Eileen asked.

Paul Savage shrugged. "Oh, I don't listen to gossip. It's you I'm interested in."

"You're sweet, Paul. But I'm worried. . . . Oh, here's Dad now."

Gannon's car came into the yard and stopped at the side of the house. The front door opened and Eileen and Paul could hear Mr. Gannon's voice. "Well, I found her!"

Mrs. Gannon said mildly, "Where have you been, Nancy dear?"

"I drove all over town looking for her," Paddy Gannon growled. "And where do

you think I found her? In the grave yard—that's where! I was driving past slow, thinking and worrying, and I heard Nancy's laugh. I hopped the fence and there she was, sitting on a tombstone in the dark by the side of a newly filled grave, talking to crazy old Seamus O'Callahan. The two of them perched there on a headstone, for all the world like two ghouls. And crazy old Seamus telling her mad stories about the Little Folk and the banshee and the leprechauns—fairy stories!"

"Well, now," Mrs. Gannon said placatingly. "There's a great many people around here who still believe those things, and you'd not call them crazy. You said yourself there was a black curse on the Blairfield mines. If there are evil spirits, why can't there be—"

"Hold your tongue, woman!"

Paddy Gannon made a threatening gesture toward his wife. Nancy stood there, watching and listening with a sort of pleased smile on her lovely young face. Mrs. Gannon made a helpless little gesture and stopped talking.

"Haven't I troubles enough?" Gannon demanded. "Trouble getting the coal out. Trouble with accidents that don't look like accidents at all. Trouble with the company and the men. And then my fine young daughter spends her time in the evening in the graveyard talking to a mad hermit. You're old enough to have done with that childish stuff, Nancy. Look at you. Why, you're—you're a woman!"

"Old Seamus tells such lovely stories," Nancy said sweetly.

"If I catch you talking to him again I'll take the strap to you!" Gannon thundered. "I'll take the back of my hand to you in the public street, grown and all as you are."

"No," Nancy said softly. "Don't beat me. You would be very unlucky the rest of your days if you were to strike me."

"WHAT kind of talk is this?" Gannon bellowed. He took three quick strides to pass between the table and his wife's chair to reach his daughter. His foot caught in the electric lamp cord, swept the lamp off the table to crash heavily on the floor. In falling it had missed Mrs. Gannon by bare inches.

Gannon stood there with the wrecked lamp at his feet and, for a second, his face was purple. Then the anger seemed to go out of him.

"That almost hit you, Mary," he told his wife. "I'm sorry for my clumsiness."

Nancy looked from her father to her mother and her face was calm and sweet.

"I'm going upstairs to bed."

In the kitchen Eileen Gannon turned to Paul Savage. "You heard it. Sitting on a headstone in the graveyard, listening to a crazy hermit tell stories. Paul, I'm so worried about her. It isn't that she herself is crazy, I'm sure. It's just that some times she isn't Nancy at all. Mother and Dad don't know how to handle her. I'm afraid it's up to me."

"I wish I could help," Paul said. "But she's your sister. I wouldn't be much use, I'm afraid."

Mr. Gannon came into the kitchen, stopped dead when he saw Paul Savage.

"Hah! So you're here, are you?"

"Good evening, Mr. Gannon."

"I suppose you company men," Gannon said deliberately, "are all pleased to hear that Eddie Dwyer died in a cave-in."

"You don't understand, Mr. Gannon," Paul explained. "I only work for the Company, but I know how they feel. They know you go in there and take out coal and ship it out quietly by trucks. They know you have armed guards stand there while the men work. They could call in other armed guards and cause bloodshed. They don't, because all of the men in Blairfield worked in the mines for years—and will work there again when things

open up. But you work those shafts at your own risk. You know that, Mr. Gannon."

"There has been a lot of mysterious trouble lately," Gannon said. "I suppose the company doesn't know about that, either?"

"The company doesn't want trouble," Paul insisted. "When hot-heads like John O'Marra get excited they blame everything on the company."

"Johnny O'Marra is loyal to his own kind," Gannon said sharply.

"He's a trouble maker," Paul answered firmly. "Things are bad enough without men like O'Marra keeping things stirred up."

"If you're interested to know," Gannon said slowly. "I look with more favor on Johnny O'Marra than on another who was raised in Blairfield, and went away and got a fine education, and came back to work for the company—against his own kind."

"I know you mean me," Paul said. "I do work for the company. So did you, for years, as a mine foreman. And when things pick up you'll be working for them again—unless there is serious trouble."

"That's not so!" Gannon exploded. "The company never intends to work Blairfield again, and they hate to see us scrape a few dollars out of it to keep from starving."

Paul Savage shrugged. "I'd keep a check on Johnny O'Marra, Mr. Gannon. He's getting too big for his pants. Don't let him get you into anything you'll be sorry for."

From outside came the rattle of a noisy car coming into the driveway.

"I think that's John now," Eileen said. "Please don't start any unpleasantness."

John O'Marra came in the back door, said good evening to Mr. Gannon and Eileen, and nodded curtly to Paul Savage. He stood there awkwardly for a moment.

Then his heavy black brows drew down and he said, "Mr. Gannon, could I speak to you alone? What I have to say is not for the ears of company spies."

"Come with me," Gannon invited. They left the kitchen and went into the living room.

"Johnny was just one of the boys, working in the mine, when things were good," Paul said meditatively. "Now, with all this trouble, he's getting to be a person of consequence. The men defer to him and your father alike. If your father doesn't watch out he'll be taking orders from Johnny O'Marra, yet."

"Trouble!" Eileen put her hands to her temples. "The air is heavy with it. It's like watching a black cloud come rolling over the horizon." She shivered.

CHAPTER THREE

Who Walks at Night?

NANCY was sound asleep when Eileen retired. The older sister stood looking at the younger girl for several moments before putting out the light. Nancy's face was so sweet and childishly free from lines. The black hair clustered around her temples, and the lashes curled, smudge-black, against the warm whiteness of her cheek. Eileen bent and kissed her sister's forehead, very gently. In sleep, Nancy's lips curved.

Eileen stretched out beside her sister but sleep was reluctant to come. She shifted position constantly, but did it gently so as not to disturb Nancy. Eventually she dozed off, a fitful, tense sort of half-oblivion instead of a sound relaxed slumber.

Suddenly she snapped out of her half-conscious state and sat bolt upright in bed. She reached over and tried to touch Nancy. The other half of the bed was empty!

Smothering a frightened exclamation

Eileen switched on the bed light. Her sister Nancy was gone!

Eileen sat there, hands to her temples, trying to think coherently. The house was silent as a tomb. If she started to look for Nancy it would wake her father and mother. Then, if Nancy had left the house, there would be a terrific scene. Paddy Gannon would go looking for his daughter, and when he found her he'd give her a horrible beating. Not since they were children had their father struck either of them. But Eileen knew if her father discovered Nancy had left the house, a black rage would get the best of him.

Eileen covered her own face with her hands. "No, no. I won't wake them. I'll—I'll just wait, and pray. She'll come back. She must come back. . . ."

AN HOUR that dragged like a prison sentence—then the clatter of a car, a thumping on the front door. Eileen bounded from bed, snatched her robe and ran down the stairs, her heart pounding.

"Something has happened. Something has happened to Nancy."

Her fingers groped for the light switch and then fumbled with the front door latch. She had to cling to the door jamb to keep from surrendering to her trembling knees and folding up on the floor.

John O'Marra pushed in, his dark face pale and his eyes bright with a strange frightened look. "Where's your dad?"

"In bed," Eileen stammered. "Is something wrong? Did something happen to—?"

"Get him up."

John O'Marra's facial muscles jerked as he said each word.

"What goes on down there?" Paddy Gannon bellowed from the stair head.

"It's John O'Marra."

"Come down, for God's sake," John shouted. "The shaft is haunted! I saw

it with my own eyes. Joe Dixon and I were on the second level, waiting for the bucket, when all of a sudden Joe says in a scared voice, 'Look!' I looked and saw something white gliding toward us from the tunnel. Joe let a yell out of him and stepped back—and fell down the shaft. He's killed. I fired a shot right at the ghost but it just disappeared."

"You must be drunk—or crazy!"

"No. I saw it. Joe saw it too—and that's what made him fall. While we were getting Joe's body out another one of the boys saw it. A white thing that seemed to float along in the dark tunnel. None of the boys will go back in the shaft."

"I'll get dressed and be right with you," Paddy Gannon said.

Eileen stood downstairs in the hall, clutching her robe around her. "What did it look like—this thing you saw? Could it have been a woman, or a girl?"

"No. It was nothing human, I tell you. I fired right at it."

"You shot it?" Eileen's voice was unsteady. "And it disappeared—where?"

"Just disappeared," John repeated. "Into the blackness of the shaft."

Mr. Gannon came clumping down the stairs, his shoes not yet laced. He grabbed his hat and coat. "Haunted!" His voice was scornful. "You'd think you were back in the dark ages in Ireland."

After they had gone Eileen crept back upstairs to bed. She was trembling so she had to grasp the banister with both hands as she made the ascent. Once in her room she threw herself face down on the bed.

Once more, the house was very still. The pounding of her own heart boomed in her ears. Nancy gone. . . . A white figure in the mine—a ghost. . . . Joe Dixon hurtling to his death. . . . John O'Marra shooting point blank at the white figure. . . . Nancy gone. The words and thoughts flooded her mind in a confused

and terrible jumble. She was afraid as she had never before known fear. Not fear of a known thing—something tangible you see and understand and fight off—but a heart-chilling terror of some unknown menace. . . .

WHEN she awoke the sun was streaming in her window and the little clock on the bedside table said six. She turned quickly. Nancy was lying there beside her, breathing regularly, sleeping like a child. *Maybe it was all a horrible dream!*

Then she saw a red smear on the bed sheet that covered Nancy's shoulders. She drew back the covers. Nancy's white nightgown was torn at the right shoulder, and under the tear a crimson groove marred the flawless skin. Not deep, but raw and angry looking. It might have been made by the branch of a tree run into in the dark. It might have been made by the lash of a whip—or the sting of a speeding bullet as it grazed its mark. Eileen went quietly into the bathroom and got the iodine bottle.

Nancy's eyes opened as the strong antiseptic seared the red flesh of the wound. She looked up at her sister and smiled sweetly.

"It doesn't hurt much."

"Nancy!" Eileen leaned over her. "Where have you been darling? What happened to your shoulder?"

"I have been asleep, right here beside you," Nancy murmured drowsily. "And I had lovely dreams. Red lights in the dark underground, and yellow lights and men's faces reflected. And one face so frightened the man's soul was stamped on it, like the brand of a white-hot iron. It was lovely. . . ." Then she closed her eyes again and slept.

Eileen threw back the covers. Nancy's bare feet were bruised, and soiled with a thick black dirt. Like coal dust. . . .

Gently, Eileen covered her sister and

tip-toed from the room. She had to get out into the air, out and walk in the sunshine. She couldn't talk to her mother or father or little brother about this ever-increasing fear that was seeping into her bones. She left the house and walked quickly, taking deep breaths. As she reached Blairfield's main street she saw little groups of people standing about, talking excitedly. Only one or two of the stores had opened as yet, but there were more people on the sidewalks than was usual at noon. They nodded a good morning to Eileen as she passed, then turned to resume their fevered discussion.

In front of the drug store there was a larger group. Eileen stopped and edged into the fringe around an old woman who was talking in a high thin cackle, and holding her listeners spell-bound. The first sentence Eileen heard made her heart stand still.

"Bewitched! Yes! You don't believe it, heh? But you must believe now. I remember, sixty years ago, when Leadville was bewitched. Strange things happened and men dropped dead at their work. The whole town soon felt the curse. Men were afraid to work and they couldn't get any money. When they found the witch they burned her. Then they could work again. Blairfield is bewitched. No man will set foot in that haunted shaft. Blairfield is doomed!"

"Doomed?" A bystander echoed the word stupidly.

"Yes, doomed—to waste and die. Doomed, unless you find the witch."

Eileen caught her lip between her teeth to stifle a cry, and walked quickly away. As she walked the words kept echoing in her mind. "Find the witch. . . Find the witch!"

The people of Blairfield were simple, close to the soil. Many of them were only one generation removed from the peas-

ants of an old country whose lore was woven around strange tales of Little Folk and fairies and leprechauns, handed down from the time of the Druids—and so strongly a part of their consciousness that centuries of Christianity could not eradicate it. None among them would deny in his own heart that certain families had a banshee, an evil spirit that wailed outside the house three nights running when a member of that family was marked for death. They prayed to God, but over their shoulders their eyes were peeled and their ears attuned to another groups of spirits that recognized neither God nor man. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Dancers in the Forest

THE family was seated at the dinner table that night waiting for the head of the house to come home. Eileen's eyes kept straying across the table to study the face of her sister Nancy. Mrs. Gannon looked tired and nervous, and little ten year old Neil was chattering about the topic that was the paramount subject of conversation in every home in Blairfield.

"Haunted!" little Neil piped, his eyes round. "The mine's haunted and nobody dasn't go near it. The ghost will strike them down dead."

"Neil!" Eileen's voice was not quite steady. "Don't go around repeating such nonsense. Cackling old women try to explain everything by blaming it on the spirits. You wait until Dad comes home and ask him."

"But they do say that, all over town," Mrs. Gannon offered. "It's not just the old women. It's the men, too. The young men. Johnny O'Marra was one who saw the apparition and he's not a lad to be easily frightened."

"Boy!" Neil exploded. "Johnny O'Marra yanks out his gun and—bang! The old ghost—"

"Neil, stop, please," Eileen cut him short. Her eyes probed Nancy's face for the barest sign of a reaction. She even engaged Nancy's glance, switched to look at Nancy's right shoulder, then back meaningfully to her sister's face. But the play of glances seemed to mean nothing to Nancy. She just sat there, her small face in repose, her large eyes, that slanted up a bit at the outer edges, dark blue pools of innocence.

Paddy Gannon came into the house with a bang of the door and a noisy clump of his big boots. He marched through the diningroom to wash at the kitchen sink. Through the splash of the water his voice carried through to the family in the next room.

"Mary, you get ready and get Neil ready to take the eight o'clock train for Reading in the morning. You're going to stay with your sister for a few days."

"What's that, Paddy?" Mary Gannon asked in a startled voice.

"Aw, gee, Dad," Neil protested. "I wanna stay here and see what happens about the ghost—"

"Oh, you do!" Mr. Gannon stamped in and took his place at the head of the table. "You're going to Reading with your mother, young one. And I'll hear no more of your lip." He turned to his wife. "You get ready. This is no place for kids or women with weak hearts. Do you know what the whole town's talking about? They're saying the mine is haunted. It's the spirits who are to blame for the trouble. I'll show them who's to blame! They won't go near the shaft—and you know what that means. Starvation that will come so quick we won't have the strength to pull ourselves out of the way to die. Haunted it may be, by all the evil spirits in hell, but we'll work it just the same. And there will be bad days. . . . So you and Neil go stay with your sister."

"Why can't we all go?" Mrs. Gannon

asked plaintively. "There's nothing here now but a bare living, made by sneaking out coal in the dead of night. Trouble, all the time. Secret societies and wearing white bands on your arms so you won't shoot down your neighbor. It's not ever coming back, Paddy. Blairfield is—"

"Cackling like the old wives in the village, eh?" Gannon barked. "Do as I say. Eileen and Nancy can look after me and the house, and I'll look after the mine, haunted or not. . . . Serve the food, Mary."

THERE was a tension, a harsh discordant note that seemed to vibrate in the air, unlike the usual harmonious home life of the Gannon's. Mrs. Gannon looked scared, and her hands trembled visibly. Even little Neil appeared to sense the change—the sinister feeling of foreboding that hung in the room like a fog. His strident young voice was dropped to a hushed whisper.

As Eileen studied the guileless smile on her younger sister's face a cold chill raced down her spine, and the small hair prickled on the back of her neck. It was Nancy, not the talk of the haunted mine, who had by some strange means deliberately charged the air with an ominous portent—and she was enjoying the result. Her smile said so.

"Nancy!" Eileen called sharply. "Don't look like that. Stop it!"

Nancy looked at her sister and smiled even more sweetly.

Eileen clenched her hands until the fingers were numb, and shut her mouth tight. She mustn't let this wild spirit of discord that suddenly permeated the house draw her into its whirlpool. Why did Nancy delight in making people afraid? Eileen excused herself and went into the kitchen. It seemed that Nancy's smile had a slightly derisive quality as she watched her sister leave the room.

That evening Paul Savage came to call. Mrs. Gannon was upstairs with Neil, getting ready for their visit to Reading. Mr. Gannon had gone out, wearing the white brassard of the Silents on his arm. Nancy was sitting on the front steps, watching a full moon come up to paint the countryside with quicksilver.

Paul and Eileen sat side by side in the living room. Paul covered the girl's hand with his.

"Eileen, why do you keep putting me off? Is it because of O'Marra?"

"My mind is filled with other things, Paul. Terrible, disturbing things. Some baleful influence seems to have settled over all of us."

"I know," Paul said. "I've heard the talk that's going on around town. That the mine is haunted, and all that rot. But it's dangerous talk, more powerful than any sensible propaganda. We know there aren't any ghosts in that shaft, but as long as people think so you'll get no sense out of them. Anything is apt to result from a wild story like that. I even went down the shaft myself, looking for the ghost."

"But nobody can prove it *isn't* haunted," Eileen said. "I know I shouldn't believe those fantastic stories, but there are a number of things I don't want to believe. I've been fighting them off, rejecting them as impossible, but they persist—and I'm terribly worried. I can't even tell you, Paul, what they are."

"It would be better if you did," Paul coaxed gently.

Eileen shook her head and they sat for a moment or two in silence, holding hands. The girl started suddenly, and a chill tremor ran through her frame. From somewhere outside came a weird half human cry, a wail that lingered like the echo of a soul in torment. Eileen's fingers locked around Paul's hand.

"What—what was that?"

"Some dog baying at the full moon," Paul smiled.

"No." Eileen turned a tense face toward Paul. "No. I heard it last night, too. Just like that. Paul, I've got to tell somebody—" She jumped to her feet. "Where's Nancy?"

"She was outside, sitting on the front steps admiring the full moon," Paul said. "I guess she's still there."

Eileen ran for the front door and flung it open. The moon drenched the countryside with a wan mysterious light. The front steps were carpeted in its glow but they were empty. Nancy was not out there. Eileen stood by the door and called several times. Paul came out and stood by her side. Suddenly she turned to him.

"Paul, we must find her!" She seized his lapels with both hands. "We must find Nancy."

"But where did she go?" Paul asked. "Where will we look?"

Eileen started down the steps, dragging Paul after her by the hand. "Come, quickly. We've got to find her. . . . Paul, where does old Seamus O'Calahan live? You know, the strange hermit?"

"Up in the woods, beyond the ridge some place," Paul said. "But you don't think Nancy would be there, do you?"

"Oh, I don't know—but let's try. If you only knew what I'm afraid of. . . ."

THEY stumbled through the woods, climbing the slope to the ridge where old Seamus O'Calahan was believed to live in a cave. The bright moon made their path easy to find, but Eileen's haste made her feet unsteady. At the end of twenty minutes she paused to get her breath and leaned weakly against Paul Savage.

"It's Nancy, Paul, dear. I can't even think of you until I find out what's wrong with her."

Paul patted her shoulder understandingly. "I'll help all I can, darling."

A little farther on they came to a clearing, the grass silvered like the surface of a lake by the moonlight. Paul seized Eileen's hand, held her fast.

"Look!"

Eileen stood there by Paul's side in the shadow of the rim of trees, and blinked her eyes unbelievably at what she saw in the clearing. Old Seamus O'Calahan was standing straight as a graven image in the center of the clearing, the moon making his long white beard a cascade of silver. Two figures danced around him in a wide circle, one following the motions and gyrations of the other. Both figures were snow white. One was a beautiful young girl, nude as a nymph of the forest. The other was a great white goat. The goat was dancing on its hind legs, pawing with its front legs as a dancer keeps the rhythm with his hands and arms.

"Nancy!" Eileen's voice was a choked whisper.

"Yes," Paul said slowly. "Nancy."

Eileen started forward but he held her back. "Wait," he said. "That's marvelous, barbaric—beautiful!"

Eileen tried to break away from him. "Paul, are you crazy, too? That's my sister Nancy dancing out there naked in the moonlight—dancing with a goat in front of a crazy old man. Paul, I've got to stop her."

"Wait." Paul held her, his eyes gripped by the strange sight. Graceful as birds on the wing, smooth and supple as fish gliding in water, the goat and the girl danced in a smaller circle each time, closing in around the still, erect figure of the old man with the silver hair and beard.

As they watched a strange music seemed to come from nowhere, a lovely pulsing rhythm that was part of the dance and the moonlight, barely audible. Faint but clearly defined.

"Paul!" Eileen begged. "Let me stop

her. Don't let her do that mad pagan dance there—without any clothes—in the moonlight."

Reluctantly Paul walked by Eileen's side as they left the fringe of trees and started across the clearing. Old Seamus O'Calahan unfolded his arms and clapped his hands once. The faint music stopped. The great white goat dropped to all fours and trotted off into the woods. Nancy stood there, unashamed in her natural state, and watched them approach.

Eileen stood before her sister, probing her face. Nancy smiled. "It was beautiful," she said. "Wasn't it beautiful?"

"Where are your clothes?" Eileen demanded.

"Clothes? Oh, yes." Nancy walked, straight and poised as a young goddess, to the edge of the wood where her clothes lay in a heap.

Paul Savage, his eyes still filled with the wonder and beauty of it, touched old Seamus O'Calahan on the arm. "The music—where was it coming from?"

The old white-bearded man spread his arms. "It is always there, all around us. It only grows louder when we need it."

Eileen, holding her sister by the hand, was calling, "Paul, hurry. Let's go home, please."

Paul joined the two sisters and they started off through the woods in the direction of home. Eileen was sobbing audibly. Nancy was walking proudly, gracefully. Once, at a tight corner of the path, Nancy turned her head and looked up at Paul. She smiled sweetly, the moonlight showing every contour of her lovely young face. It was like a child's, no more self-conscious than when he had seen her doing the naked pagan dance a short time back. Paul looked back over his shoulder. The clearing was still there, like a pool in the moonlight. But the old man with the silver hair and beard was gone. Gone, too, was the great white dancing goat.

But a dark figure appeared at the far edge of the clearing. A man was cutting across the edge of the clearing toward the dense woods. The moon was so bright Paul had no difficulty recognizing John O'Marra's burly figure with its characteristic truculent stride.

"Now where did that bird come from?" Paul asked himself. "Was he hiding at the far side of the clearing all the time Nancy was dancing? He must have been. Why should he hide, and sneak away after? I think it's about time I told Eileen a few things I know about that lad."

"Hurry, Paul, please," Eileen called from down the path. "I'm frightened."

PAUL turned and hurried to catch up with the two sisters. They were almost home when a noise on the path behind them made Paul turn to look. Coming toward them, plainly visible in the light of the moon, was an old woman. She moved quickly despite her hunched shoulders and bent frame. A grey shawl with long fringe covered her head and the upper half of her body. As she approached she made a cackling noise and struck the ground before her with her cane.

As the path was narrow and the old woman evidently in a hurry Paul stood aside to let her pass. The old woman passed him without a glance and stamped up even with Nancy and Eileen.

"Ha!" Her shrill cackle awoke echoes in the wood. "*The changeling!*" Her bony finger was extended toward Nancy, almost touching the girl's face with its hooked nail.

Nancy stopped walking and looked at the crone with a half-pitying expression. Eileen pushed the old woman away. "Go away, you crazy old idiot. Don't ever call my sister that name!"

"She is. She is!" The old woman beat the ground with her stick. "I was there

at her birth. Your mother knows she is a changeling. I have seen her with Old Seamus O'Calahan, laughing at tragedy, sitting on headstones in the graveyard. I saw her tonight when she danced with the goat in front of that old he-witch, Seamus O'Calahan. She's no child born of woman. And she'll bring bad luck and sudden death to them as lives with her and are close to her."

Paul Savage took some money from his pocket and pressed it into the old woman's hand. "You didn't see a thing. Take this and get good and drunk and have yourself some more hallucinations."

She closed her bony talons over the money, held it close to her face to look, then shuffled off, bobbing her head. Paul turned to the two girls. "Let's wait a little while and let her get a start. Half crazy, half drunk. You mustn't feel hurt at what she said, Nancy."

"I was just thinking," Nancy said softly. "How odd and thrilling it would be to find out one was a changeling. Not the child of mortal woman, but an ageless spirit that comes back to the earth every century or so."

"Stop it, Nancy!" Eileen's voice was hoarse. "Don't talk like that. You're being silly. You're the natural daughter of your mother and mine. You're my very own sister and I won't have any crazy old hag calling you things like that."

From far up the path, as if she had heard, came the old crone's voice, crying out in a brittle cackle, "*Changeling—Changeling!*"

CHAPTER FIVE

Call of the Banshee

THE residents of Blairfield were frightened. Something had happened to call a curse down upon them; that was unanimously agreed. The mine that put food in their mouths and clothes on their

backs was haunted—bewitched. The curse was reaching out to envelop them all. Soon the pinch of want would be added to the vague apprehension of the curse of the mine. No more trucks rolled at night.

Paddy Gannon talked himself hoarse at a meeting of the Silents but not one man among them would join him to enter the shaft. Not even Johnny O'Marra. For Johnny had seen the specter with his own eyes. The women folk backed their men. "Don't go near that shaft. 'Tis cursed, and be sure of that!"

And an old crone, leaning on a crooked stick and holding her fringed shawl around her bent shoulders with taloned hands, shuffled up and down the street, stopped at stores and houses. Everywhere she cackled the same awesome story.

There was a changeling in their midst!

A thing in human form, not a child of woman, but a creature of the spirit world, walked among them daily. Posing as Paddy Gannon's own daughter, it was. But no natural daughter at all, at all. A changeling!

Paddy Gannon heard the gossip and took his pretty daughter by the hand. He brought Nancy around to Father Doyle's house and held his broad thumb on the priest's bell until an aged housekeeper opened the door.

"Is His Reverence in?" Gannon demanded. "I'd like to see him, if he is."

"Yes." The old housekeeper was hesitant. "I don't know—"

"He'll see me, I'm sure."

Gannon pushed in, still holding Nancy by the hand. He walked into the hall and a gentle voice called from the front room.

"In here, Paddy Gannon." The shades were drawn and the room was in darkness. Gannon halted on the threshold.

"Are you in the dark, Father?"

"I'm afraid I am, Paddy Gannon," Father Doyle said gently. "A few hours ago I lost the sight of my eyes. Dr.

Akers was here and will be back. There seems to be no reason for it. But I am blind. Enough of that, then. Can I do something for you?"

"Blind?" Paddy Gannon's booming voice dropped to a whisper. "God preserve your eyes, Father. But I've brought my daughter, Nancy. There's a cruel rumor going around. The people are saying my daughter here is a changeling. What can we do to stop this terrible talk?"

"Come here, my child," Father Doyle said. "Can you see me in the dark? Give me your hand. There. You aren't going to let this cruel talk make you bitter or envious—are you? Because we know there is no such thing. There is only one Spirit, and that a benevolent One. Only man is cruel and wicked."

"Oh, I don't mind, Father," Nancy said sweetly. "I think it would be thrilling to be a spirit, not bound by the shackles of this earth."

"All youth feels that way, my child," the priest said. "Now go outside, please. I want a word with your father."

After a moment the priest asked, "Has she left the room, Paddy Gannon?"

"Yes, Father."

"She moves so lightly one might well believe her to be a spirit," Father Doyle said with a smile in his voice. "Send her away, Paddy Gannon, to a good convent some place in the country where live and growing things abound. The good Sisters will know what to do to shape that nimble mind without breaking her spirit. But send her away, because these good people of Blairfield can be very cruel."

THE word went around that Paddy Gannon had taken his daughter Nancy to see the priest, to have Father Doyle drive out the devil that possessed her. But before he got there Father Doyle had gone blind!

The Devil had closed the eyes of God!

Even on the street now, people talked in awed whispers. Nancy Gannon walked down the main street and people stopped, as if turned to stone, at her approach. Mothers pulled their little children out of the way as if the devil himself was abroad. Even the dogs seemed to sense the fearful isolation, and slunk out of her way. In the old days, they told each other, she would have been driven out of town as a witch. Maybe even burned!

All of it had no effect on Nancy. She walked as if in a world of her own, and her very manner of going whipped the people into a frenzy of hate. She was no real daughter of Paddy and Mary Gannon. She was a child of the devil—and the curse that held Blairfield in its grasp was her doing. Nancy went her way, smiling sweetly, a faraway look on her lovely elfin face.

Eileen Gannon was tearful and more than a little frightened as she talked to Paul Savage. "What can I do, Paul? The whole town is calling Nancy a spawn of some evil spirit."

"Vicious, stupid peasants!" Paul growled.

"But, Paul," Eileen stammered. "She does such strange things you can hardly blame them. She sneaks out at night and meets Seamus O'Calahan. She was there when the cave-in killed Eddie Dwyer. The night the ghost was seen in the shaft and Joe Dixon fell to his death, she was gone all night—and in the morning her feet were bruised and black and she had a strange wound in her shoulder. Maybe this crazy old man has something to do with these awful events. Maybe he is influencing Nancy to do things that are connected in some way with these tragedies."

"Seamus O'Calahan is a bit cracked," Paul told her. "But he's not the one to bring the trouble that holds this commu-

nity in its grip right now. I've a theory of my own. And don't worry about Nancy. She's a rare and lovely creature. Such grace and beauty—to be born and reared in Blairfield—"

"Stop it!" Eileen screamed. "Ever since you saw her dancing, naked in the moonlight, you've done nothing but stare at her and follow her with your eyes. Isn't it bad enough that my own sister is bewitched, but you have to fall under her spell!"

"Eileen, you're hysterical. I'll show you—"

"Please go!" Eileen begged. "I can't stand any more. Don't come back, ever. You—you too, are coming under the spell. I can see it, feel it. Go, for keeps and forever. First she bewitched John O'Marra—now it's you!"

"You need a little rest," Paul said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"No!" Eileen slammed the door behind him and leaned weeping against the wall. "Never come back. There won't be any tomorrow."

Paddy Gannon was talking to a group of grim-faced men at a meeting of the Silents. He was using strong words in a strong voice. Were they going to sit down and wait for starvation? Were they going to let their wives and kids starve with good coal ready for the pick, because some old crones had said there was a curse on the mine?

"I'm going in there tonight!" he shouted. "And I'm going to get coal. And if there's a man among you with the guts of a louse, he'll go with me—and the rest of you can stay home and tell your beads and starve like rats!"

When he climbed the hill a little later fifteen men were behind him. Others were getting the trucks; still others carried rifles and side-arms to stand guard while the shift worked. . . .

EILEEN GANNON stood in her room with her back to the door and watched her sister Nancy get ready for bed. When the younger girl had retired Eileen turned the key in the door and began to undress.

"You're going to sleep beside me, aren't you, Eileen?" Nancy asked.

"Yes, of course." Eileen tried to keep her voice steady. "Why not?"

"Because everyone else is afraid of me. Everyone in the world. Mother took Neil away and father won't stay in the house. The people in town draw away from me—but you aren't the least bit frightened, are you?"

"Of course not." Eileen was trembling. She got into bed and reached out to extinguish the bed light, but halted her hand.

"It is strange, to see fear on people's faces," Nancy said. "It gives one an exultant thrill. . . . What would make you twist your face in fear, Eileen?" The younger sister moved close and looked into Eileen's eyes.

Eileen steeled herself against showing any emotion. She tried to smile at her sister. Suddenly there came the weird, half-human cry she had heard on the two previous nights. It seemed to come from the yard, outside the house. Its ghastly timbre seemed to run up and down her spine like needles as it climbed the register to a wail of torment.

She sat bolt upright in bed. "What's that?"

Nancy laughed gleefully. "Your eyes showed fear, stark uncontrollable fear. Your naked terrified soul was in your eyes, the way a person looks when death stares them in the face. It is marvelous, thrilling." She edged close to Eileen. "Soon I shall see that look in your eyes again. I know it—soon."

"But that noise," Eileen muttered. "That dreadful sound!"

"That's the banshee," Nancy shrieked. "Three nights it has wailed. . . . And

that means death!" She bounded out of bed and stood on her bare toes as if poised for flight. Her head was thrown back, her eyes alight with rapture. "The banshee!"

Eileen covered her face with her hands, then by sheer force of will pulled them away and looked at the weird tableau of her sister standing with outstretched arms, head thrown back. For a split second it looked to Eileen as if a huge white bat, wings spread, stood there instead of Nancy. Resolutely she got out of bed and approached Nancy.

"Go back to bed, Nancy. You're hysterical." But she couldn't keep her voice level and the nerves in her body tingled so that she walked jerkily.

Nancy lowered her head and stared at her sister, then, as Eileen drew close Nancy's arms came out toward her, went around Eileen's shoulders. Tense and shaken, Eileen went a little limp. As she sagged she felt Nancy's fingers slide up and close around her throat.

Through a haze she heard Nancy's voice. "I have heard the banshee call. I must go. . . ."

When Eileen recovered from her faint Nancy was gone.

CHAPTER SIX

Death is a Nymph

PAUL SAVAGE responded at once to Eileen's frantic telephone call. As he drew up to the front of the house in his small car Eileen was standing on the porch. She ran down the steps and seized Paul's arm in her two hands. "Nancy has gone again. We must find her!"

"Do you know where she went?"

"No. But let's try the mine. Paul, she acted like a mad person. We must find her and bring her back."

"All right." Paul started the car. "But it's dangerous to be sneaking around the

mine at this hour of the night. The men are working up there and they'll shoot on sight."

"I know it," Eileen said in hushed tones. "She only had her nightgown on. If she goes up there they might think it has something to do with the ghost that is supposed to be haunting it. They might kill her in the darkness before they see who it is. Hurry, please. You know how excited they all are."

"Right." Paul Savage guided his car out of the village and up the hill to the dark shaft of the Blairfield mine. He took a short cut over a bumpy road as they neared the top of the rise. As they bounced around a curve his headlights picked out something that flashed white in the darkness. He stood on his brakes. "What was that?"

"It was Nancy," Eileen gasped. "I'm sure it was. Over there by that wooden shack."

Paul Savage took a flashlight from the pocket of the car and got out. "Come on," he told Eileen. "That shack is an air vent to number one tunnel. We'll soon see if that was Nancy."

The two left the car and ran across the field to the little wooden shack. It was unlocked and Paul directed the beam of his flashlight inside as he swung the door open. The grating that covered the hole inside was leaning against the wooden side of the little shanty.

"Don't tell me," Paul said slowly. "She couldn't have gone down that vent!"

"She must have!" Eileen insisted. "I saw her come in here."

Paul knelt and played his light down the vent, a hole about four feet in diameter, roughly shored with heavy planking. "There are footholds in this thing," he said. "But I still can't imagine—"

"She went down there!" Eileen insisted. "She's gone down there where the men are working. They'll see her white

nightgown in the dark and shoot her. Paul, we've got to go down and find her."

"I'm another one they don't want around here," Paul said ruefully. "They'd think I was spying for the company and give me the business—but here goes. I'll go down first and give you a light."

He switched the light off and let himself down the vent, feeling with hands and feet for the iron footholds that had been driven into the shoring. The vent sloped off around hard rock and was narrower at that point. Then it widened again. Eventually his feet struck hard surface. He flashed his light again and saw that he was near the end of a tunnel. Above him he could hear Eileen's progress down the vent shaft. He played the light for her and the two of them stood in the tunnel, black as the coal it sired, except for Paul's flashlight.

"She must have gone this way," Paul said. "Come on."

THERE was a narrow gauge track along the floor of the tunnel and the footing was uncertain so Paul kept the light on the ground before them. They approached a bay and Paul stopped suddenly. "Did you hear that noise?"

"Yes. What was it?" Eileen's voice was a hushed whisper.

"The men are working number three vein, the next below on this shaft," Paul told her. "It's about one hundred and fifty feet down. The vein below that is flooded because the pump hasn't been kept going. They must have stopped working, because the lift bucket isn't moving."

"But that noise," Eileen repeated. "It seemed to come from right ahead in the tunnel."

"I know," Paul said. "And nobody is working up on this level. Maybe it's Nancy. Come on." He led her out to the bay and around the shaft. There was no indication that a score of men were

working right below them. The vein ran off at a tangent on the other side of the bay. Eileen stuck close to Paul and walked with one hand extended, touching his back.

"It smells very unpleasantly," she said. "Almost gagging."

"They are working without the exhaust blowers to clean out the foul air," Paul told her. "Clean air comes down the shaft but even at best it's hard to exhaust the bad air. These men are taking chances—but it's that or starve, that's why my sympathies—" He stopped talking and his frame stiffened. Standing behind him with her hand touching his back, Eileen knew from his abrupt tenseness that they had suddenly come upon something in that dark underground tunnel. He stood there with the light directed straight in front of him. Eileen moved so she could see around him. He tried to stop her by an upflung arm, but she had already seen.

Propped up against the wall of the vein in a half sitting posture was big Paddy Gannon, Eileen's father. He was still as the black-hewn wall behind him and his eyes were wide open and staring—staring up at them. Paul held the light on the man, sitting there so limp and still, like a collapsed figure in a wax museum.

"Dad!" Eileen was on her knees before him. "What's happened? What's wrong?"

"Hold the light." Paul gave the girl the flashlight and moved her gently to one side. He knelt beside the slumped form of big Paddy Gannon, and felt for a pulse. Then he placed his ear against Gannon's chest and listened for a heartbeat. But he knew from the touch of him that Paddy Gannon was dead. His flesh was already cold clay, although *rigor mortis* had not yet set in. He put his hand behind Gannon's shoulders in an effort to straighten the grotesque figure. His hand felt something wet and sticky. As he pulled it away and looked at it in

the flashlight's beam he saw it was covered with blood. Eileen saw it too. She let out a pitiful little cry and dropped the light.

Paul turned quickly and reached for her in the dark to catch her as she fell. She went limp in his arms. Gently, he lowered her to the ground and began to fumble around for the flashlight, but it eluded his groping fingers.

Paul straightened up and his fingers were unsteady as he probed his pockets for matches. There was no warning sound, but suddenly a light seemed to flash at the back of his head. The darkness spun before him in a dizzy cone. He could feel himself falling, losing consciousness. It was as if the roof of the vein had fallen in on him. As he slipped into oblivion his last thought was, "So this is what a cave-in is like. . . ."

EILEEN regained her senses slowly. She was coughing and gagging and the darkness was around her like a thick black blanket. She began to struggle to her feet as she remembered the events just before she had fainted. She was in the coal vein with Paul, looking for Nancy—and they had found her father, dead. And there had been blood on Paul's hand as he pulled it away from her father's body. She snapped alert. Utter and complete silence except for the regular drip of water somewhere.

"Paul!" She called quietly at first. Then, as the only response was the choked-off echo of her own frightened voice, she called again, louder. Still no response and she screamed his name again and again, only to have it beat back at her like the mocking taunt of a hundred fiends hidden in the blackness. Her head turned, first one way, then another, trying to make out some object. In one direction she thought she caught the flicker of a light.

She stumbled over the rough floor of the tunnel toward the gleam of light. The narrow-gauge track tore one shoe off but she stumbled on, unheeding. The tunnel made a turn and her hands fumbled along the rocky wall, following it. Then she came upon the light. And she stood, frozen with horror, her senses refusing to accept the scene.

Standing in the middle of the tunnel was her sister Nancy, still clad only in her white nightgown. Nancy was holding a coal oil torch in her left hand, holding it aloft so its yellowish flame licked at the roof of the vein. And in her right hand Nancy gripped a long knife—and its bright blade was smeared red with blood! “Nancy!”

Nancy came toward her sister slowly, holding the torch out before her. In its dancing light Eileen could see Nancy's face plainly. It had a strange expression, one of almost childish delight. And her voice, when she spoke, was like the pleased gurgle of a little girl.

“Ah, you are afraid. I can see it now. Your face is all knotted and your eyes—they stare so. They stare like my father's eyes stared when he knew he was dying. All life is dull until the moment of death. Then comes the thrill—the only real thrill in the world. The thrill of meeting death!”

Eileen tried to speak but her tongue was numb. She tried to pray, but her mind was in the throes of a terrible agony that blotted out all reason. “Nancy is mad!” Voices shrieking inside her said. “She is not your sister. She is a fiend incarnate. She killed your father with that awful gleaming, red-smeared knife. She can kill because she has no soul. She is a fiend—and now she is going to kill you. She is going to plunge that knife, still smeared with your father's blood, into you. . . . Just so she can see your eyes when you die!”

Her knees gave way and she knelt helplessly before the slim young girl who smiled like a child but held a murderous knife upraised.

“Don't pray, Eileen,” Nancy said softly. “It will do no good. I do not like prayers. They are the moanings of weak mortals. Maybe, when you die, you will become a spirit, as I am a spirit. You will be happier.”

Nancy's face took on the reddish glow of the torch and the crimson smear on the bright knife seemed reflected in her eyes. She moved closer. Eileen tried to shut her eyes but a strange fascination held them wide and staring. Before their terrified stare Nancy's figure appeared to float toward her like a wraith—a murderous specter, red-stained with human gore.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Hell Underground

PAUL SAVAGE struggled back to consciousness with the strange feeling that somebody was calling his name, far off. His head vibrated with pain and when he touched the back of it with his fingers he felt a large swelling, cut across the top. He remembered thinking he had been struck by a cave-in, but he was not hemmed in by rock or soil. He felt about him in the pitch blackness, then called Eileen's name. There was no answer. His head spun and breathing was difficult. Standing erect Paul braced himself and took a deep breath.

Smoke!

The unmistakable pungent smell of smoke permeated the foul air of the vein tunnel. In the blackness it was even more terrifying. It rolled about him until he thought he could see it in the dark; he could taste its oily yellow stench and feel his aching eyes smart with it.

Eileen was somewhere in that tunnel.

She had been lying there in a faint when the blow he believed to be a cave-in had felled him. Scrambling, holding small paper matches in his fingers, he found the flashlight.

Eileen was gone. The crumpled form of Paddy Gannon was there, eyes still wide and staring, but the girl was gone. The flashlight showed drifting, slow coiling clouds of smoke. Somewhere in the ill-fated shaft there was a fire.

Calling the girl's name Paul hurried toward the far end of the vein tunnel. Ahead was a curve and beyond it voices. He rounded the curve and came upon a scene like a picture of an ancient human sacrifice.

Eileen knelt, head bowed on the floor of the tunnel. Before her, holding the torch and the uplifted knife, was Nancy. The expression on Nancy's face was sheer rapture. She was staring at Eileen's face with a gleeful concentration. She did not look up at Paul's arrival. He started to shout, then checked himself. Nancy in this mood was dangerous. The knife in her hand was red with blood.

"Put down the knife, Nancy," he said quietly. "We must go. The shaft is on fire. It is burning and we must go."

Nancy took a backward step. "Fire! Beautiful red flames, lighting the frightened faces of men—men trapped by fire!"

"Fire is more beautiful than the knife," Paul stalled, inching close. "Give me the knife, Nancy. We will go and watch the fire." The yellow smoke was getting dense in the close tunnel, seeping in, closing around them like fog. Nancy started to hand Paul the knife. A voice behind him snarled:

"Give it to him point first! Plunge it in his throat, Nancy. Watch his eyes as he dies!" Paul whirled to see John O'Marra, standing in the tunnel right behind him, a flashlight in his left hand and a club in his right. By the light of Nancy's

torch Paul could see the murderous light in John's dark eyes. Paul swung his arm quickly and threw his own flashlight. John O'Marra was too close to duck, but his right hand swung the club just as the flashlight struck him between the eyes. Paul dived and locked both hands around John O'Marra's right wrist.

EILEEN was trying weakly to get to her feet. The smoke was blinding and gagging her. The torch Nancy held was losing its glare in a pall of creeping smoke. Paul hunched his shoulders and held O'Marra with both arms while John hammered his face and head with his free hand. Paul's head came down and he closed his jaws on O'Marra's right wrist. He bit down until he felt O'Marra's flesh give, felt the bone in his teeth. John O'Marra gave a scream of agony and tried to free his arm. He let go of the club and thrashed around like a wounded tiger. Paul could taste warm blood in his mouth. Suddenly he unclenched his jaws and smashed with both hands at the face writhing before him in the smoke. As John O'Marra went down, Paul drove his heel in his face, kicked him savagely, ruthlessly until the man went limp on the ground.

"Eileen!"

"Yes." The girl's answer was a choked sob.

"The fire is in the shaft. We must go through it to reach the vent we came in by. Give me your hand."

Nancy suddenly came to life at the word fire. She darted past them, holding the torch aloft. She disappeared down the tunnel and around the curve. Paul tied his handkerchief around Eileen's nose and mouth and began to lead her back along the tunnel.

Near the bay where the main shaft went down, the smoke was thickest. The fire was down below, where the men were

working, but the lift bucket seemed out of order. Its cable was silent. Only blackness and the oily smoke showed in the beam of Paul's light. A down draft at the main shaft forced the smoke out in smothering billows and drove it along the vein. Paul held his breath, gripped Eileen's hand and pulled her after him.

Paul's eyes were almost blinded and his lungs were bursting when the opening of the vent showed in his flashlight's beam. He pushed Eileen up the crude ascent. She was so weak he had to support her weight on his shoulders at each step. The air became clearer. He could breathe. Climbing, fighting for breath, they made the surface, toppled out of the little wooden shack and fell forward on the ground, side by side.

CHAPTER EIGHT

"Burn the Witch!"

LIKE a flash of lightning word hit Blairfield. Lights went on in houses as the awful news was shouted from one to the other. "Trouble at the mine!"

The curse had struck again at the little band of men who had defied it to scratch a little coal from the bowels of the earth. On foot and in tinny old cars, the frantic parade wound up the hill to the mine. Torches flared and the crowd gathered. They could not go too close, for foul black smoke rolled in great billows from the mouth of the shaft.

Fire!

Some of the men who had been working on the shift gasped out the story. Without warning the first stench of smoke had smitten them. Without the usual precautions, it was every man for himself, with no facilities for fighting the fire or even determining the source. The men on the second level were suffocated before they could claw their way to freedom. Some got up in the bucket, but the vengeful

yellow and black smoke drove back all who tried to reach the others. Ten men, trapped in that veritable hell, while their friends and families wailed and prayed and screamed outside the mouth of the shaft.

Somebody raised an agonized cry, "Look!"

Nancy Gannon and old Seamus O'Calahan stood on the rise to one side of the shaft. Their forms and faces were plainly visible in the dancing torchlight. The old man's face was devoid of expression but the girl's was registering sheer ecstasy.

"The changeling!"

"Her standing there, bubbling with joy, while her own father is in that pit of hell!"

"He's not her own father. She's no child of the world. She's the devil's spawn and the cause of our grief!"

"She's a witch!"

The grief-maddened mob poured its emotion toward this fresh target. The men and women began to call insults and threats. Nancy turned toward them and smiled.

Somebody called. "If we'd driven her out of town we'd have been spared this curse."

"Drive her out now!"

"Burn her. Burn the witch!"

Old Seamus O'Calahan stood between the girl and the onrushing mob, his arms outspread. "No. Don't harm the child. She's done no wrong!"

The old man was trampled underfoot and great red stains showed on his silver beard in the jumping light of the torches as they swept him down to the ground. The girl backed away, slowly at first, then she turned and began to run, throwing over her shoulder a look like a young doe in the forest being harried by a pack of dogs.

The part of the crowd that held back at first leaped in, their emotions whipped

by the chase. They spread out, their torches making crazy jumping flares as they ran. They called blood-curdling threats and goaded themselves by shrieking words of abuse. The blood lust of the hunt was upon them. The pent-up fear and anger of days was finding its vent. They closed in behind the running girl, snarling like mad dogs

PAUL SAVAGE and Eileen Gannon lay about two hundred yards from the mouth of the main shaft. For some minutes their labored and tortured breathing was the only sound either uttered. Then Paul said, "You all right, Eileen?"

"Yes," she answered. "I'm feeling a little sick and my eyes burn. Paul, I can't understand it all."

"I've been working on all this trouble at the mine," Paul told her in gasping breaths. "Old Seamus O'Calahan had nothing to do with it, any more than Nancy did. I can explain it all to you if want to listen."

"Yes, yes. But not now. What are they doing around the mouth of the shaft? Why are they all running like that?"

"It must be the fire," Paul said. "There must be men trapped down there."

Nancy was running with mouth open now, her eyes staring wildly. The mob snarling at her heels shrieked insane exultation as her gait faltered. Her fleet young legs were trembling, near exhaustion. Ahead was a small clump of woods. She ran, stumbling toward it. The pursuing mob fanned and scrambled after her. She was trapped. The little knoll ended in an abrupt precipice with a sheer drop of more than a hundred feet. She would have to stop at its edge. Then they would get her.

The torches moved down more slowly as the pursuers closed in. They advanced on the little fingers of land raised above the surrounding terrain, the trap the

hunted doe was too frightened to see. They moved in relentlessly, right to the edge of the cliff. A rabbit, a small, pure white rabbit, looked at them with wide bewildered eyes. But there was no sign of the girl. It was as if she had disappeared from the face of the earth

Eileen and Paul Savage searched the faces of the crowd, looking for Nancy. People paid no attention to them. No explanation of the chase was given. They did not ask. They just kept looking, half fearfully through the crowd. Then somebody told Eileen that her father was one of those who had been trapped in the mine, probably smothered. At the mention of her father's name the horrible scene in the mine tunnel rushed back to flood the girl's senses. She slipped to the ground in a dead faint. When she opened her eyes Paul had carried her back a little way from the crowd around the smoking shaft.

"I've been working on this thing for weeks," he told her. "It won't make you feel any better, now that your father is gone, but the curse that had all these people frantic was a deliberate frame-up. Johnny O'Marra had made a deal with a mob who wanted to take take over this mine and bootleg coal. But they knew they'd never take it from the Blairfield crowd by force. He framed this stuff, those accidents. He used poor, strange Nancy, even started this fire. But the fire got out of hand. I don't think he meant it to. I guess he'll never come out now."

"I was afraid it was really bewitched," Eileen said. "And I was afraid that Nancy and old Seamus O'Calahan had something to do with it."

"He had nothing to do with it," Paul told her. "And O'Marra just used Nancy."

"Paul, do you think she killed Dad?" Eileen whispered.

"No. I'm sure O'Marra did it. Your

father must have discovered John was responsible for the dirty work. Nancy must have come upon them just as he killed your father. O'Marra knew Nancy was strange, so he gave her the knife to frighten us away."

"But she looked so horrible," Eileen insisted. "She was going to kill me."

"I don't think so," Paul said. "She just wanted to see fear in your eyes. Let's go home. Nancy is probably there by now, calm as anyone."

BUT Nancy was not home when they got there. She was never seen again. The last anyone had seen of her was when she had fled, frightened before the mob, into that little patch of woods.

Three days later Eileen was getting ready to leave Blairfield for good. She was coming out of a store in the village when an old woman stopped her. The same old crone who had called Nancy a changeling. The hag bobbed her head and cackled. "Did you hear about Mrs. Downey?"

Eileen shrank back, then asked civilly, "What about Mrs. Downey?"

"A little white rabbit came out of the woods and hopped right into her kitchen. It must have been good luck, because Mrs.

Downey, childless these sixteen years, just had a baby girl. And she not knowing or expecting one. I was there when it was born. A pretty little girl with big blue eyes that slant up at the outside corners."

"That's—very nice, I'm sure." Eileen hurried on to where Paul was waiting in his car.

"What's the matter?" Paul asked. "You look as if you'd just seen a ghost."

"I'm afraid if I stay here I will," she said. "Paul, drive as fast as you can, and as far as you can. There are some things I'll never be able to understand, and I don't think I want to—and never, never talk to me about anything that happened here, just as long as I live."

"Still brooding about Nancy?"

She gave him a long, searching look. "No. I've stopped brooding about Nancy. It's hard to explain—but Nancy is off my conscience now. I don't feel that I'm responsible for her any more."

Paul breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness that's cleared up."

Eileen shook her head. "No. It isn't, and it never will be. But there are some things I don't want to understand—and that's one of them."

Paul nodded, "Amen."

THE END



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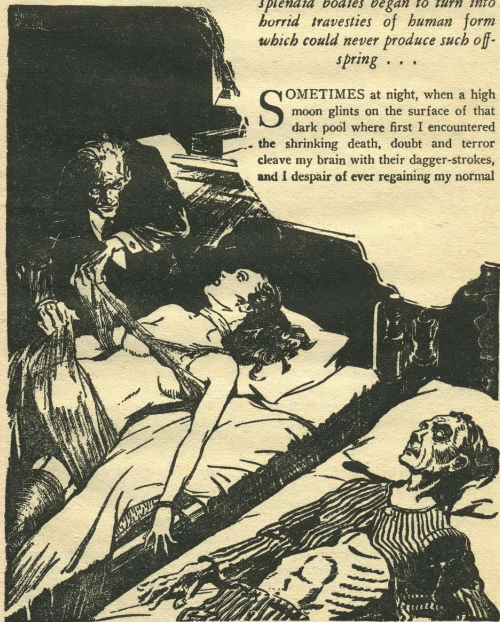
HER SUITOR FROM HELL

By H. M. Appel

(Author of "Attic of Terror," etc.)

Sequestered in their swamp-land home, Ralph Payne and his beautiful young wife desired strong, comely children. But that was before their splendid bodies began to turn into horrid travesties of human form which could never produce such offspring . . .

SOMETIMES at night, when a high moon glints on the surface of that dark pool where first I encountered the shrinking death, doubt and terror cleave my brain with their dagger-strokes, and I despair of ever regaining my normal



physique and health. Sometimes in my sleep I seem to feel again the hideous torpidity of mind, the loathsome human fluidity of bone and muscle, that rendered me an inert jellyfish shrunken to the proportions of a child. But science yet may save me. . . .

We were celebrating my thirtieth birthday, here at the old Louisiana plantation where our family, the Paynes, have lived for a century past. On every hand the grounds are guarded by a barrier of forbidding swamps through which a hard road leads to various plots of high land now cultivated by white tenants, once tilled by my grandfather's black slaves. During the year since Grace and I were married the old manor house had been modernized in various ways, and foremost among improvements was a gleaming, white-tiled outdoor swimming pool designed to take the curse off torrid summer days.

When the scorching sun had dropped behind a surrounding wall of moss-draped cypress trees, Grace proposed a cooling dip. Although our guest, Doctor Hemerich Koop, made some small objection, soon we coaxed him into a bathing suit and led him to the brink of the inviting basin. Grace ran to the end of the spring-board, her delicately molded form poised as lightly as a mocking bird's upon a swaying bough. Arcing through the air in a clean dive that sent drops sparkling upward, she rose to the surface laughing and called:

"Come in! It's delightful!"

Then, her face sobered as she floated there regarding the two of us with thoughtful eyes.

I SENSED the comparison she was making and knew the reason. Doctor Koop, whom I had employed, ostensibly to manage a small private hospital upon the plantation for the benefit of tenant families, but actually to safeguard the

health of my bride, was one of her school-day lovers whose doglike devotion had endured through adolescent years. As one of an adoring dozen she had given his aspirations no serious thought until, with college behind him and a profitable profession ahead, he proposed marriage and she told him it could not be.

With disarming candor she had confessed that she wanted a husband whose physique would match her own bodily health and strength; because she desired numerous children and there must be no heredity taints that might prevent the growth of tall sons and lovely daughters.

Koop's years numbered the same as mine, but I stood six feet two in my stockings and tipped the scales at two hundred weight. He was a scrawny man of five feet four and a childhood injury had left his back slightly hunched. Beneath his bulging brow dwelt a brain whose keenness mine probably never would attain, although I did well enough at managing the estate.

Hemerich Koop also guessed the tenor of her thoughts. Smiling, he said heartily:

"What a gorgeous pair of animals you are! In with you, Ralph, and have your fun. I'll sit and watch."

With the sense of something akin to pity I plunged, sympathizing with the hopelessness of his plight, yet selfishly glad in the knowledge that his fondness for Grace would result in especially watchful care. That meant a great deal to a young couple expecting to raise a family in the depths of a swamp forty miles from the nearest city.

It meant more than that to me, five minutes later, when a monstrous face was thrust out of a clump of shrubbery a few yards away and the idiot, Pedro, began smarling obscene Spanish oaths which frightened Grace into a fit of trembling hysteria.

Following a final gust of vile curses Pedro hurled some curiously shaped object which splashed into the pool near where Grace clung to me. Then he scuttled into the swamp before I could call a servant to catch him.

I held my wife in my arms, sitting upon a bench beneath the pergola, while Koop ran to the house for his small black bag. Returning, he gave her a sedative. Between us we strove to calm her fears, insisting that the half-wit's outburst was meaningless, but still terrified she cried:

"He has grown more bold! It has a dreadful meaning! That old crone, Zell Mendez, is slowly goading him to the point of murder. They mean to *kill you*, Ralph, because of the accident that crippled him."

I laughed the idea aside, but even Hemerich Koop's dark-browed face betrayed deep concern. Uneasily, he said:

"All the tenants talk of the threats Zell Mendez makes against you. They fear her curses. Superstitiously, they believe that she is in league with the devil. Sometimes, I wonder. Sorcerers have performed strange deeds which science cannot fathom."

"For God's sake, Koop!" I exclaimed. "You don't mean that you believe in such twaddle?"

He smiled, grimly. "Not as witchcraft, if that's what you're thinking. But we live in a swamp, Ralph, and I must confess that some of the secrets of swamp herbs and poisons handed down from one generation of voodoo practitioners to another have not yet been solved by the medical profession. Did you read, last spring, of the man in Bay St. Louis whose stature is slowly shrinking? Who has been dwarfed to the size of a child from a height of six feet? Not only is he said to be suffering from a curse, but similar cases have been recorded in Barbados and

in Porto Rico. It *makes* one wonder—"

Angrily, I seized the bottle of brandy he had brought from the house and gulped a steadying drink. Grace said, tearfully:

"Why should she blame you, that old old witch, for an accident that was unavoidable? Three people swore that Pedro Mendez darted out of the brush, squarely in front of your car—"

"Forget it, dear," I said, inwardly shuddering at the recollection of a stunning impact, the sickening crunch of flesh under heavy wheels, the screams of the stricken idiot when my speeding roadster felled him. "Doctor Koop did everything possible for the poor fellow. And neither Pedro's curses, nor his mother's, will mend his crooked legs nor harm us."

Hemerich Koop was looking toward the glassy surface of the pool.

"What did he throw at you when he was swearing there? I saw something queer splash—"

"I'll see." Standing on the brink I scrutinized the white bottom, saw a small blue bottle lying in the deep end exuding an inky cloud. "There it is. I'll fetch it up."

I dived. The immersion cooled my excited blood instantly. But, even as I enjoyed the pleasant sensation, blighting fear struck home. *Cooled me?* I felt chilled to the bone! My limbs seemed frozen. Neither arms nor legs would function. In a state of complete paralysis I glided to the bottom. The air in my lungs slowly raised me to the top but I hung face downward, helpless. By no force of will could I command the movement of a single muscle.

When my tortured lungs rebelled and I could no longer forestall the gasp which filled them with water in a drowning flood, I heard Grace's shrill cry of alarm echo as from a great distance. Then a black coma enfolded me.

THE time which followed was marked by vague periods of light and darkness. Occasionally, I realized that I lay in a hospital bed, that a doctor and a nurse came and went, that I had not drowned but was alive.

Days and nights passed like a blur of delirium, studded with moments of excruciating agony, broken by terrifying dreams in which the idiot's face appeared to leer at me as I suffered there, while he gibbered of escape from pain through use of some exotic drug contained in a small bottle of hellish midnight blue. At last, after an eternity of nameless terror, there came a phase of clear consciousness, yet so weak had my strange illness left me that I could not raise my heavy eyelids and, perforce, without a sign of life lay listening to the voices of Doctor Koop and Grace.

"He is wasting away to death!" My wife's anguished tone was sharp with grief. "It is Zell Mendez's curse! Ralph is doomed. You cannot save him."

"Now, now, my dear," the doctor chided. "Don't give up hope so easily. He lives! And while there's life there's hope aplenty. If only I could tell—" His voice thinned on a troubled note. "Whether this queer shrinkage is the result of a drug—or something worse—"

"You've said that before!" There was near frenzy in Grace's cry. "You, too, believe it is a curse! That old Zell Mendez has bewitched him—"

"Nonsense!" Koop snapped sharply. "Of course it must be the work of a drug. But, unfortunately, the small blue bottle which Pedro threw into the swimming pool had quite emptied itself before I went back to recover it. Analysis of water from the tank produced no satisfactory results because of great dilution. We have not yet discovered the nature of the poison."

"If Zell Mendez could be forced to

tell!" Despair edged my wife's sweet voice. "I've pleaded with her, but she only laughs, showing her yellow hag's teeth in a gloating snarl, calling down still more terrible curses upon poor Ralph's head. Oh, will he ever be conscious again? Or will he die?"

Try as I might I could not open my eyes nor give any sign that life was burning more brightly within me, that all was not lost. Grace came to the bedside. I felt the warm touch of her fingers upon my cold and flaccid hand. In her stifled sob there was a note of sheer horror, the reason for which I did not then comprehend.

"Somehow you must stop this horrible thing, Hemerich!" she exclaimed. "At any cost. Call in specialists to aid you, use every resource that money can buy, before it is too late."

"My dear Grace," Hemerich Koop said, "money won't help, nor can any specialist. I am doing my best to influence the outcome of this peculiar seizure and no one could do more."

His words cheered me as I lay there a motionless, helpless hulk, for I knew the keenness of his brain, his thoroughness in seeking the solution of difficulties. If only he could contrive to ease the worries with which Grace was besieged.

They left the room together. I heard the door open and close. Then, for hours it seemed, I was plagued by visions of vicious faces leering. The unwholesome countenance of old Zell Mendez loomed above the foot of my bed, snaggle-toothed, wild-eyed, stringy grey hair straggling across her leather cheeks. I thought the broken lips mouthed venomous curses over and over, and never in life or death would she forgive the accident that had crippled her son.

Pedro's malignnant visage tormented me after his mother's dimmed and faded. A moron at best, he was pop-eyed and

pimply. His forehead sloped straight away in line with a long, pointed nose, and his chin receded obliquely to form a snouted face like a hog's. After my car had smashed his legs and left them but flopping clubs upon which he stumped about with the aid of two canes, Pedro's appearance was enough to frighten women and children. His witless tongue forever drolled profane obscenity.

Lying there in my torpid state, seeming to hear the foul threats he voiced, suddenly I was obsessed with fear for Grace. What if the idiot sought to vent his spleen upon her? Alone in our big house, save for black servants, she would prove easy prey for him. The thought shocked me into wakefulness. My eyes snapped open, they widened with consternation, and my jaw hung loose at sight of the ugly face peering through an open window near my bed.

"PEDRO!" I gasped. "Is it you? Did I hear you talking?"

"I meant every word of it," he whispered, shrilly. "And why not? Now, you're no better than me."

"Filthy beast!" I rasped, weakly. "If I hear that you've so much as looked at Grace I'll horsewhip you. And should you attempt to molest her I'll break your back with my two hands."

"Y-a-ah! Your hands! Look at 'em, and tell me how much breakin' they can ever do. You'll never get off that bed alive. Don't you know that your finish is all planned?"

Pedro loosened the screen and swung it aside. I thought he intended to clamber in and murder me but a streak of stubbornness kept me from calling aloud for help. With all the force of my will I strove to lift the hands he mentioned so contemptuously, but could not. Powerless as a babe, I demanded hoarsely:

"What do you want? What do you mean to do?"

Pedro grinned, his eyes shining redly like two mirrors of hate. His subdued laughter jangled.

"I'll do everything I said—after you're dead. She won't listen till you're gone. But now that you look worse than me, your pretty wife'll let me love her once you're out of the way."

A red haze of hate suffused my brain and for a space I could not see clearly. Then the spasm passed and I found him leaning through the aperture, balancing a tiny blue bottle upon his palm.

"Take it!" Pedro invited. "Quick death, easy death, without any pain. Ma wanted me to slip it into your grub, to make sure you die. But 'tain't worth the risk. You're dyin' now. Take it, yourself, so your wife'll quit cryin' about you and listen to me."

"Get out!" I raged. "Go away from that window before I yell for help. I'll have you shot—"

Pedro drew back hurriedly.

"That ain't no way to act," he complained, "after I came to do you a favor. Here! I'll leave the bottle in this corner. Nobody'll see it and you'll want it soon." He refastened the screen.

After a long, gloating look at me Pedro disappeared. A low-flung shaft of light from the setting sun glinted upon the blue bottle and I stared, fascinated, wondering if in truth I might soon want the poison.

Why had the idiot said: "Now that you look worse than me. . .?" I remembered Doctor Koop's comment concerning a strange "shrinkage" that puzzled him. Did he mean my skin, the wasting of my flesh? I shuddered at thought of freakish human skeletons I had seen, struggled in a blinding effort to gain control of my limbs, almost succeeded.

After I had fallen back, gasping, upon

the pillow a harrowing fear possessed me. Something was horribly wrong! I must get up and away! To Grace. . .

What the ensuing effort to rise cost me in mental strain and mortal agony only God can realize. If there be such a thing as actual power of mind over matter, then it was that which, in the end, gave me command of my muscles again. Striving to the point of deadly nausea, beset in every joint by dreadful pains which nearly drove me mad, at last I forced myself to a sitting position, swung my legs down from the bed. Clinging to the white iron framework I made an effort to stand, although at first my knees buckled miserably.

Dimly, I perceived the door of a closet across the room. On hands and knees I crawled to it, seeking a robe or other covering for my nakedness. I reached for the knob three times and failed, before I could draw myself erect. Swaying there, I found inside a suit of my clothes which Grace must have brought as a childish means of bolstering hope that one day I would wear them home. Dragging garments from the hooks I crawled back to the bed again. After a grueling ordeal of rising and seating myself, I drew on the dark grey trousers and managed to stand. Dazedly I stared down at their absurd length, noting that the legs were *at least a foot too long!* Fumbling in the pockets I found a familiar purse. Yes, indubitably they were mine. Turning a little, then, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the glass of a window that was closed. A cry of horror burst across my lips at sight of the revolting figure there darkly revealed.

A dwarfed and hairless monstrosity! My bald skull bulked far too large for the scrawny neck and stunted frame which supported it. Deepset eyes were gloomy caverns beneath my brow. My nearly fleshless jaws were those of a Death's head, lips paper thin and tightly drawn.

My broad shoulders had narrowed and were hunched like those of a deformed child. My long and powerful legs were shrunken to spindling, bony shanks from which the last vestige of strength was swiftly ebbing.

Staring at the odious reflected shape I felt my reason sway. Loosing a rendering scream I toppled upon the floor and sank into a bottomless abyss of blackness in which my sufferings were extinguished with the appalling slowness of creeping death.

BUT I lived. When next I knew that death's groping clutch had missed me, it was to find myself again reposing in the hospital bed. The voices I heard, and the spoken words, dispelled an awful lethargy which gripped my brain but did not break the chains of weakness that shackled my leaden limbs.

"Ah, God! I can't bear to look at him." It was my wife's despairing cry. "No curse has done this! It is the poison." I listened to her muffled sobs of horror.

Doctor Hemerich Koop was speaking but I could not distinguish the things he said. When my eyes flicked open I saw that he held Grace in his arms and was whispering with lips pressed close against her golden hair. She broke away and whirled to face him, her cheeks flushed with anger and dismay.

"You dare say such things to me! While Ralph lies dying—"

"As well say 'dead,' my dear, for soon he shall be. And even though I were to keep him alive, would you not choose me, small and ugly though I am, in preference to the jellylike thing which was once a man? Ah! He is watching us! See him quivering there like a viscous blob upon the sheet."

"You demon!" Grace screamed in chattering frenzy. "Not Zell Mendez—but you! You did this—"

"And why not? He stole your love from me."

"As though I ever could have loved a hunched and evil creature!"

"I am a man!" Koop thumped his narrow chest proudly. "I am active and strong. My brain is fine. Look, now, at the one who thought himself superior. Is not Ralph Payne a disgusting sight? He little resembles that 'father of tall sons and lovely daughters' of whom you boasted."

Grace approached on laggard feet and stood beside my bed. Tears streaming, she touched my torpid arm, my bony face, crying bitterly:

"I love him! His soul lives despite the ruin you've made of his magnificent body. Oh, what have you done to him? What blight have you wrought?"

Doctor Koop came near and hatred glowed in his eyes as he grinned down at me.

"It was a master stroke," he bragged. "The strategy of using Zell Mendez and her half-wit spawn as pawns in my little game. For days on end she voiced her threats to all she met, after the accident. There are fifty witnesses to swear that she contemplated the murder of Ralph Payne and made Pedro help her plan it. Now, both are jailed, accused of poisoning your husband by contaminating the swimming pool, and no one ever shall hear of the clever operation that I performed upon his throat."

Grace stared, and so did I, my powers of speech paralyzed as yet although my tongue curled and twisted in an effort to talk.

"You operated on Ralph? Why?" My wife's eyes were round with terror. "Oh, tell me what you've done to him. Is there no cure?"

"I could cure him—but at a price you may not wish to pay. Another might, if he were skilled in the science of the glands

and knew what I have done. Prevailing upon Pedro Mendez to hide nearby and toss a bottle of common poison into the pool after frightening you, I let Ralph drink of drugged liquor from a bottle I brought, knowing that we'd have to rescue him from his dive. The numbing effect of the drug I used is instantaneous. That gave me an excuse to bring him here to the hospital. With only a simple-minded Cajun girl to help I planted a globule of metallic compound at the base of the parathyroid gland where it would immediately create sufficient pressure to halt the gland's functioning. The result, as you see, was swift decalcification of his bones, a shrinking of stature, a wasting of flesh. He is like a thing of rubber and jelly, now, as death approaches."

"But he could be cured?" Grace pleaded. "Oh, say that he can be saved!"

"Of course. By removal of the pressure, and with proper treatment, in a matter of months he might regain his normal size and health. But who shall grant him that boon, my dear?"

"You shall! Hemerich! You say you love me. You must be kind. Restore him. We'll forgive and forget. Stop this madness and use your skill to make him a man again."

"You heard my terms. I mentioned a price—" Koop's smile was lecherous. He seized Grace in his arms and sought her lips. "The price is yourself—mine for all ways. And you must answer now!"

NEVER shall I forget the play of torturing emotions that swept over my dear wife's face as she fought to submerge her revulsion, to find the courage to endure an odious ordeal. She gasped:

"What do you mean—for always? Not after he is well?"

"If I grant him life," Koop said, harshly, "it must be without you, and he shall never know. At best, his mind might not

be restored completely. It will do no harm to make certain of that."

Comprehending his horrible intention to render me a witless hulk endowed with life, Grace threw herself upon her knees and pleaded piteously. Roughly, Koop thrust her suppliant hands aside.

"If I only wanted you now, I'd take you. It must be of your own free will and for always."

Again, weakening, he put his skimpy arms about her and pressed his repulsive lips to hers. Grace tore herself free, she struck him with her open palm, and dropped in a sobbing heap upon the bed beside me.

"Let me die with Ralph!" she moaned. "Don't touch me. Only let me die—"

Hemerich Koop's swarthy face paled greyly. I knew, then, that he had expected victory. Failure seemed to drive him mad.

"Die? Never, you fool! I'll keep the pair of you alive so long as the spark can be held within your rotting bodies! You shall endure the same operation, Grace, and in turn shall become as he is. Bones of rubber and flesh of jelly, while your brain melts in harrowing helplessness. If you love him so, you shall lie beside him and dream of the ecstasies that you will know no more."

Springing upon Grace, Koop bound her hands with a towel, likewise her ankles. Dashing out of the room he returned with a hypodermic syringe and plunged the needle into her arm. Soon my wife's frenzied struggles ceased. Removing her bonds Koop leaned across her motionless body and peered into my starting eyes.

"You know! I can read the suffering there! Both must live to suffer endlessly. While I watch over you day by day and laugh at two strong lovers who coveted 'tall sons and lovely daughters!'"

His harsh mirth echoed in the room. He opened the door and called,

"Addie! Come here!"

A dull-eyed Cajun girl appeared, fear written large upon her stupid features. Koop exclaimed:

"The lady is sick. You must help me operate!"

He carried Grace out. The girl cast a frightened look at me. I thought her lips moved in soundless pity, that she felt an urge to render aid, but stark terror held her captive and she followed Koop obediently.

Once more I set my mind to the task of making the flesh obey. If only I could move, roll off the bed, crawl to the room where Grace lay helpless beneath his hellish hands. This time I could not. My greatest effort served only to elevate my head a trifling way. But in that brief instant a downward glance encompassed my shrunken legs and I groaned in trembling horror. The two limbs lay coiled awry upon the sheet like rubber tubes in which no semblance of bone remained. Koop had spoken truly. I was but a jellylike blob of slowly liquefying matter that was scarcely flesh. The shock seemed to disintegrate my brain and consciousness faded.

GRACE was lying upon a bed which had been moved into the room before I awakened. Some one had turned me upon my side so that I might see her there when the torpor lifted. A white bandage encircled her throat and her eyes were wide and staring. Both wrists and ankles were caught close to the iron framework by broad straps to hold her prisoner. Her quivering lips formed a whispered query: "Ralph! Can you hear me? Can you speak?"

For long moments I fought the rigidity of throat muscles, then croaking words grated across my dry teeth.

"Yes, I hear. Oh, God! I see—"

"He operated on me! Soon I shall be—"

as you are!" The dread sentence of doom gushed out of her very soul, a gulp of anguish.

"How long?" I gasped.

"A week, he said, before the gland is seriously affected. Oh, there is no hope—"

Koop's voice sounded at the doorway. His hateful visage was framed there, grinning.

"Oh, yes there is, my dear. I might yet reconsider—if, within the week, you decide that life with me is preferable to living putrescence."

I found the strength to curse him, to utter threatening prophecies of retribution. Doctor Koop only smiled.

"You have revived considerably, as a result of treatment last night while you were unconscious. I want you stronger—that you may suffer more! While you lie there, waiting, watching."

He stepped away to Grace's bed, threw back the coverlid, tore her gown away. Lust gleamed in his hot eyes but hunger for vengeance and the will to torture prevailed. He turned aside, muttering:

"*Watching!* Seeing her lovely form shrivel and shrink. There'll be wrinkles and bony angles where you knew curves and tender maiden's flesh. Love will be smothered in revulsion as you watch each other disintegrate and become two dwarfed, disgusting things with only brain cells living."

Koop went out, saying as he departed: "Soon the treatment will make you ravenously hungry, Payne. In an hour or so I'll bring you food and feed you with my own hands. For you must live! To see and suffer. . ." His brittle-laughter echoed from a distance.

Grace was weeping. I could think of no cheering thing to say. Stupefied, I lay resigned to the inevitable. But soon I experienced a faint sensation of life, of circulation, in the arm which lay crushed

beneath my body. Koop's remark flashed across my mind. "You will be stronger. The treatment last night—" Hope flared faintly. Strong enough to move, to crawl, to exhaust the last faint spark of life force seeking aid for Grace?

I thought of our isolated position in the swamp, then remembered the telephone. But the instrument in the outer office might as well have been miles away. Feverishly, my frantic brain struggled with the problem of what might be done if I found some vestige of strength restored. My wandering gaze paused at the nearest window. An idea sprang into being.

"Grace!" I exclaimed. "There may be a fighting chance. If you could free an arm or leg. Try it!"

Pitifully, she looked at me and shook her head, but I urged frantically:

"Try! Twist and try!"

Grace began to writhe, to tug and struggle. Faint moans of pain escaped her tight-drawn lips as the straps cut skin and flesh. At last, she said:

"I've one foot loose. But, Ralph, I can't do any more."

"Plant your heel against the wall," I cried. "Push hard! Force your bed against mine, and shove me nearer to the window. It's only a matter of inches—"

Grace succeeded in doing what I asked. Our beds collided and the impulse of her thrust skidded my cot against the window sill, rolling me upon my back as I made a desperate effort in that direction. Lying there, then, I tried to move my hands, found new life in the finger tips but none in my arms. Slowly, gropingly, nails scratching at the bed linen and mind savagely intent upon accomplishment, I dragged one hand in fractional jerks across the sheet onto the window ledge, and seized the tiny bottle that Pedro Mendez had hidden there.

The trivial muscular feat that followed

exhausted me more than I can express. With the prize precariously clutched between thumb and forefinger I worked my hand back by the power of fingertips alone until it reached my body. Three attempts I made to raise that left arm and failed. Then, like a crawling worm, I made it creep across my chest until it met the other. In a little while, when the cold sweat of weakness beaded my brow and nearly all my strength was spent, with my right hand I laid the vial in Grace's palm. Her fingers closed upon it.

"What—"

"It means escape," I exclaimed. "Hide it!"

"I don't understand."

Her eyes sought mine. I rolled my head and whispered:

"It is *poison*."

DOCTOR HEMERICH KOOP came later, bearing a well laden tray. His forecast was correct. I knew the pangs of hunger but the viands he carried interested me less than the bottle of wine. Placing the food upon a table, he turned to smile at Grace and said:

"You've hurt yourself struggling. One strap was poorly fastened. Why not agree to my proposals and have them all off?"

My wife looked up at him long and moodily. One could scarcely recognize her voice when, chokingly, she said:

"I can't bear it! *To be like him!* Oh, God! I can't—"

"You mean—" Doctor Koop leaned above her, eagerly. "That you have counted the cost of hopeless love for the thing that he has become?"

"My love is dead!" she stormed, hysterically. "I was faithful, I was true. But Ralph Payne is gone! There remains only . . . that!" She swung her eyes toward me and quickly looked away.

Koop exclaimed: "Then you'll come to me? Oh, this is glorious."

Awkwardly, in his haste, he fumbled at the straps which bound her. Casting them aside he caught Grace in his arms and helped her to arise.

"My dear one. My lovely one," he gloated. "Always I've watched you, wanted you. And now you are mine!"

With a shuddering sigh Grace pushed his pawing hands aside, forced a shrill laugh, crying:

"Yours I shall be, but don't ever call it love. It's the price I must pay."

"Have it your own way," he snapped. "So long as you do pay."

"Don't be angry," Grace pleaded. "I am upset and unnerved. Perhaps a little of that wine—"

He snatched up the bottle, smiling again.

"Of course. It's just the thing!"

Pouring two glasses he raised one and turned to me in mock salute.

"Now, Ralph Payne, you'll have something more to watch. Here's to greater suffering."

Grace lowered the glass from her lips, face white as death, exclaiming:

"Drink your toast to me! Have I not deserved it?"

Koop's countenance split in an evil grin.

"You're improving, my dear! We'll get along famously."

Grace took his glass, half emptied, and gave him hers.

"The better to seal our bargain, Hemerich!" she cried, and a laugh like an echo from hell rattled upon her bloodless lips.

Koop tossed off the drink at a gulp. He started violently. A terrible tremor shook his scrawny frame from head to foot. Collapsing, he screamed:

"*Poison!*"

THE man expired before he struck the floor. Grace crashed her glass against

the wall and swayed as though she might faint.

The door opened. Addie, the Cajun girl, stood gaping there.

"I watched through the keyhole," she whispered. "Is he . . . dead?"

"Dead!" I shouted, relief strengthening the voice in my throat. "Executed just as we planned it."

"He was a devil. He put a curse on you," she mumbled stupidly.

"The telephone," I gasped, as vague fears for the future flooded into my brain. "Help my wife to it, Addie. Quickly! We must lose no time."

Grace steadied herself. Hope flamed in her eyes.

"I'll call Doctor Carondelet at New Orleans. He'll operate on us. We'll both be saved."

* * *

Perhaps we shall be. I am not yet well. But, sleeping or waking, my beloved is always near. The soft caress of her hand, the sight of her loveliness unimpaired, give me hope and courage. When gaily she measures the inches added to my stature during the month, and playfully runs slender fingers through my newly sprouted hair, I feel sure that ere the year ends I will dare appear again in the haunts of men, as tall and muscular and proudly fit as before I was stricken by the shrinking death.

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LAUGH AND DIE!

By Ray Cummings

(Author of "Madman's Ghost," etc.)

THE ROAD went suddenly over a high narrow trestle spanning the gorge. We held our breath while negotiating it. And then we saw the lights of our destination.

Groff Hall! Private residence, hotel or whatever it might be, it perched like an eagle's nest high on the crags, with the river-gorge in a hairpin turn almost surrounding it. Eerie location indeed, with

these wild lightless defiles, slashed and broken, storm-swept by rain and wind of gale force now. The trail looped and turned, and then we came to the small rocky top, with the two-story rambling stone structure before us. The lights of its windows were blurred yellow blobs through the torrential rain. Whatever sort of place it was, it had to be our resting place for the night. Our car would

Jack Baker felt that all was not well in the ominous appearing establishment of the sinister Dr. Gross—but he little guessed, when he took his beautiful young sister into that place, that he was exposing her to the brutal lusts of one whom a weird madness had already driven to acts of unnameable horror . . .



**A Blood-Chilling Novel-
ette of Night-Cloaked
Mystery and Death!**

go no further.

I pulled up under a porte-cochère. Our radiator was boiling again; the engine was knocking violently when I shut it off.

"I've had enough," I said as I climbed from the car. "Wherever we are—here we stay."

If I had known!

"Good evening, sir.

The voice by its very unexpectedness, was horribly startling. Edith, my sister, gasped, with a faint, suppressed cry. I whirled to find a man standing at my elbow. In the dimness, here under the porte-cochère roof, I could see him as a tall figure, broad and burly. He was without hat and outer coat; evidently seeing our approaching headlights as we toiled up the grade, he had come out to greet us.

"Oh," I said. "How do you do? My sister and I—we're lost. You—we hoped this was a hotel—our car's running badly—we're hungry."

He turned with a queer, stooping gesture as though peering at Edith. He said:

"I'm Dr. Emil Groff." A heavy, guttural, foreign voice, but there was a dignified suavity about it. "A hotel?" he said. "Well—not just that. But you are welcome. Come in. The young lady must be cold."

He left us standing on the threshold of the open door while against my protestations he carried in our two suitcases. We saw a dim hallway with electric lamps heavily shaded. A tall, brown-haired young woman in a maid's uniform stood watching us.

And suddenly there was the distant sound of a girl's laughter, instantly checked. It echoed through the silent interior; and there was about it so eerie a quality that Edith and I stared at each other wordlessly, and the maid, whirling at the sound, hurried instantly away.

Dr. Emil Groff came with our suitcases.

"Most horrible night, my friends. I

shall put your car away later. We're short-handed tonight. My nurse is on holiday, and my man went to Chattanooga for supplies. I fear the storm may keep him away for tonight."

What was this place? A hospital? A madhouse? I saw this Dr. Groff now as a man of perhaps forty. A burly six-foot fellow, with a head of close-clipped black hair—a smooth-shaven face of rugged, somewhat handsome features. He stood fingering a black eyeglass ribbon that hung around his neck; his dark gaze, from deep-set eyes under heavy black brows, seemed appraising me.

"Oh—yes," I said awkwardly. "It certainly is a bad night."

I told him our name—Baker; and that we were traveling from Florida to Chicago. He listened, with a very queer, grave smile faintly pulling at his mouth; and abruptly he interrupted me.

"Well, I am honored that you came here, Mr. Baker. We shall make you comfortable—this storm, no one could travel these mountains a night like this." His gaze clung to Edith's dark, slim beauty. He added, "We are glad to have you, my dear young lady. We will do everything possible to make you happy."

A madhouse, here in this wild, lonely mountain fastness? This man—himself one of the inmates? Thoughts may run wild very fast . . . Edith took an involuntary step backward as though his words were physically repelling, and she flung me a startled, questioning glance.

Then before I could speak, he had turned to me. "I understand you, Mr. Baker." His lowered voice and his bulk momentarily excluded Edith who was a few feet from us. "Your sister needs—attention? Later we will discuss the details."

I OWN that my wits were scattered. I saw the brown-haired maid in her

black and white uniform again standing near us. I stammered:

"Why—we don't want to intrude, Dr. Groff. I really thought this was a hotel—"

My one wild wish then was to get Edith out of here, storm or no storm.

"Hotel?" he said. "Well—yes, you might call it that. Of course your stay will be brief—supper only, perhaps, if the storm diminishes. When my man returns I will have him fix your car. He is a very good mechanic."

The maid said, "Shall I take them upstairs, Dr. Groff?"

"Yes, Millie. Just temporary rooms. They may leave after supper. I'll bring up their luggage."

The maid touched Edith's arm.

"Come, miss." She said it gently but firmly, as one would talk to a child.

And again Groff was leaning close to me.

"Naturally they don't like the idea of permanency. That's almost always the case."

Edith, the patient to be humored upon her admittance here! I smiled with relief.

"Look here," I said, "you've got us all wrong, Dr. Groff. Is this a hospital? I didn't realize it. I assure you there's nothing wrong with my sister."

Certainly this fellow was no madman. He saw that Edith could not hear me now—that I could not possibly be talking for her benefit. He looked startled, and disappointed.

He said, "I did not understand you. It is so almost impossible for any one to arrive here by chance."

"But we did," I said, and smiled. A sudden vague hostility had come to him. His gaze had an appraising suspicion in it. I added, "We won't intrude further."

His suspicion seemed to vanish. "No intrusion," he said. "This is Groff Hall.

We receive patients who are—depressed. Melancholic, shall I say? My treatment has proven very efficacious. There is happiness here."

Certainly nothing very sinister, for all its weird morbidity. I said, "I see—well then, if we might have lodging until the storm is past."

"Of course," he agreed. "My charges are reasonable and we have plenty of room—Oh, my wife, Dr. Agatha Groff. This is Mr. Baker and his sister. Not patients—they were lost in the storm."

A woman in black had approached us. Despite my polite endeavor to smile as I took her extended hand, an inward shudder swept me. The woman was of indeterminate age, certainly older than her stalwart husband—a little, hunched, thick-set figure no taller than my shoulder, gorilla-like, with long thick arms. Her dress was stiff black taffeta, with white ruching around her short neck where her head set down between wide hunched shoulders. The dress gave an incongruous air of primness, carried also by her black hair, streaked with grey, primly parted in the middle, plastered down and rolled into a knot at the back.

But it was her face that most startled me. Sharp, hatchet features; and for all her smile now, there was so intense a malevolence in her face that I caught my breath.

"Mr. Baker? You are welcome—"

She had the same guttural accent as her husband. Her hand gripping mine was like a roughened, scaly claw. Then she turned to where Edith stood gaping.

"You are welcome, my dear." Her little glittering eyes seemed feasting on Edith's dark slim beauty; she sucked in her breath with an audible hiss. "Why, my dear child—you are beautiful—beautiful—"

We presently followed the maid upstairs. Edith gripped my arm.

"We'll go right after supper!"

"Yes!"

THE NOISE of the storm was far more apparent up here on the second floor. The slap and pound of the rain on the roof was audible. Gusts of wind, as though this were a tropical hurricane, rattled the old building from end to end. A dim upper hallway confronted us, with a number of bedrooms opening from it.

The maid turned to a closed door almost at the head of the staircase. She said, "This will suit you, Mr. Baker. Two connecting rooms. There is plenty of choice. We have only two other patients just now."

She had a quiet dignity, this maid. An intelligent-looking, handsome girl of about twenty. What could have been her dark and tragic history, that made her a part of this wild place? I have often wondered.

"Other patients?" I said. "We're not patients. We're leaving right after supper."

As though the storm were hurling defiance at my words, there came a sudden sizzling lightning flash, and a crack of thunder with it. The lurid glare showed through a window at the distant end of the hall. The electric lights of the house simultaneously vanished, so that for that instant I saw the figures of Edith and the maid painted green-white, and the decrepit hallway an inferno of glare. Then the hall lights flickered on again. The thunder rolled away into the distance like a grumbling, retreating giant.

Edith gasped, "Good heavens, that was close."

"We have bad storms in these mountains sometimes," the maid said. She stood with her hand on the bedroom door; her gaze on Edith. "You're going after supper? You're not—sick?"

"No," Edith said, and tried to smile. "I'm not."

From one of these upper bedrooms,

near us now, again came that eerie chilling burst of laughter. So close to us—it seemed two girls laughing behind one of these closed doors. Laughter so queer, so wildly, unnaturally strange that to the listener there could not seem any quality of mirth in it, but only horror. I saw the maid stiffen; she took an involuntary step toward the sound. Then she changed her mind and swung on us.

"You're going right after supper?" She was breathless, with furtive lowered voice. On the nearby stairs, Dr. Groff was starting up with our suitcases.

"You do that," the maid added swiftly. "You—never mind the storm—you get your sister out of here—"

"Yes," I agreed. I gripped her shoulder as I bent toward her. "Millie, tell me—"

A bedroom door diagonally across the hall burst open. From it two young girls came running. The hall light shone on their slim pink-white beauty, their bodies clad in brief filmy undergarments, their hair wildly flowing. They staggered together into the hall, clinging to each other, wildly laughing in a paroxysm of macabre mirth. Then they saw Millie as she sprang for them.

"We want Mrs. Groff!" they screamed. "Where is Mrs. Groff. Isn't it time?"

Millie was struggling with them. "No, not time yet! You go back. You shouldn't have done that. You stop it."

She shoved them back into the room, and banged the door on them. But their wild screaming laughter still sounded. Edith and I stood frozen. Gruesome, unholy laughter. What was this ghastly thing?

CHAPTER TWO

Lurking Fiend

NO MORE than five minutes had passed. Dr. Emil Groff had brought up our suitcases, with his face stolidly

inscrutable, ignoring that brief wild appearance of the two laughing girls. In the hall he had murmured a few words to Millie, with a glance at the nearby door behind which the girls now were silent. I caught a fragment of the maid's answer:

"—locked them in."

Then Dr. Groff had come to our door. "Supper will be ready presently. Come down soon."

He left us; he and the maid descended the stairs.

Edith stood shuddering. I took a look around the two small bedrooms. They were meagerly but comfortably furnished. Each had a single window, and a door to the hall; and there was a connecting door between them. I peered from one of the windows. Solid blackness, with only the wild rage of the storm. But I could see enough to realize that there was a sheer drop from these windows, down into the canyon upon the brink of which the house was perched.

"Those girls—" Edith murmured, when I went back to her.

Whatever this macabre mystery, I could see no sense of talking about it. Heaven knows, Edith was frightened enough.

"I'll get us out of here right after supper," I said.

Then we heard a car arriving. Not the manservant from Chattanooga, for as we silently moved out to the head of the stairs, the visitors were visible down in the lower hall. Dr. Groff and Millie, greeting a party of three. Two men and a girl. One of the men was elderly; grey-haired. He seemed ill; he stood a moment, then Millie brought a chair in which he sat down while the other man talked with Dr. Groff. This other man was young—in his thirties doubtless; a stalwart fellow, with smooth black hair. The girl had taken off her hooded cloak. The hall light gleamed on her pale-gold

tresses. She was small, no older than Edith, and extremely beautiful.

I thought suddenly of the way Dr. Groff's deformed hag of a wife had stared at the dark slim beauty of Edith. Was this new arrival another possible victim?

An aura of wealth was upon these three latest visitors. They came upstairs in a moment. At the staircase head they turned down the hall in the other direction so that they did not pass our door, but the girl's voice floated to us:

"You're not too tired, father?"

We were presently ready to go down to supper. As we started, it seemed that amid all the noises of the outside storm I heard footsteps, pattering away in the upper hall.

"Edith! Wait here a minute!"

The dim hall was empty; but ten feet or so beyond the locked door where Millie had shoved the two girls, the hall turned a right angle to the left, into another wing of the building. I ran there. The hall beyond the angle was almost dark. Thirty feet from me, it seemed that I saw a shadow—a blob of dark, indistinguishable shape disappearing into a doorway.

THIS section of the hall was heavily carpeted. I padded noiselessly forward into the deepening darkness. It wasn't a doorway into which the shadow had plunged, but the top of a steep flight of descending back stairs. Solid blackness. But down at the bottom there was a vertical slit of light which marked a door. The slit was narrowing; the door evidently just being closed by whoever it was I had been following. The door stopped, ajar, and abruptly I heard dim voices. They were muffled, blurred by the confined space and the sounds of the storm; but I caught fragments of the words.

"You—Ludvig—what are you doing?"

"No business of yours. Who was it who came?"

"The Forrests. The old man, and Rolf Forrest, his nephew. And the old man's daughter came—"

It was Emil Groff talking; I felt sure of that.

Then Ludvig said, "His daughter! I saw her—pale but somehow glowing—like burnished gold."

"Ludvig! Stop that, you fool! You'll get us into trouble with your devilish—"

"You talk like that to me! Emil, you dare talk like that!"

"Yes, I do. It's going to stop, I tell you. These two damnable girls—when they die—that's the end. We'll have no more in this house!"

"Get us into trouble!" There was a wild cackling laugh. This Ludvig, whose authority Emil now was challenging—was this a maniac, or something near it?

"Get us into trouble? Worse than your murders, Emil? Worse than—"

"There's big money in that, you fool. These Forrests are rich. It's all been carefully planned, so there is no danger to us in it. This young fellow, Rolf Forrest—"

"You—go to hell," Ludvig suddenly rasped. "You can't control me: you'll do what I tell you, as you always have. Who owns this building? Whose money set you in business here?" Again that wild chuckling laughter. "You dare to tell me what I shall do! It's pleasure, Emil. What is life without pleasure?"

It seemed suddenly that they were scuffling. The door at the foot of these back stairs clicked closed as one of them bumped against it; and the sounds were shut from me. With my heart pounding, I went back to Edith. A maniac loose here? Thus Ludvig, lurking here, never showing himself, intent only on his lust for some weird, fantastic pleasure?

Edith was still at our bedroom door. "Jack, what was it?"

"Nothing," I said. "Some one may have been up here—went down the back stairs—I didn't see anybody—"

In a minute or two we left the room. Muffled, eerie laughter was coming again from the bedroom in which the two girls were locked. In spite of ourselves we stood a moment, shudderingly listening to it. Then we descended the front staircase. In the front lower hall Mrs. Groff came forward to meet us.

"Ah, my dear children—you are ready? Come in to supper."

She stood in her prim black taffeta, smiling at us ingratiatingly. Hideous little woman. A travesty of womanhood, like a grinning female gargoyle. I wondered then if my revolted impressions of her were not inspired by the mere misfortune of her deformed, physical ugliness. Certainly she seemed trying to be pleasant. She led us along the back lower hall, to the dining room where a dozen broad tables stood devoid of setting.

"You have very few patients just now," I said.

"Yes—only two—Millie serves them in their room. And a party of three who will dine with you."

The table, here in a corner of the dining room, was set for six. The Forrests came now; and when the introductions were over, Mrs. Groff said, "My husband—he expected to be your host—but he is detained—"

My thoughts leaped. He was still having trouble with Ludvig? Why was there no mention of this Ludvig?

Mrs. Groff added, "But Dr. Groff will join you presently. As for me, I must help Millie—" She smiled her grimace upon us all. She said, "This terrible storm—we will do our best for you—"

She moved off to the kitchen, and Millie served us. Five of us, with one empty chair like a spectre in our midst. We were, in truth, a strange little gathering.

Old Mr. Forrest—a man with the aura of wealth and the blight of illness so obviously upon him. Rolf Forrest, his nephew—stalwart, darkly handsome fellow, with an arrogant swagger that wealth had doubtless given him.

And Anne Forrest. To her, most of my interest went. She was sitting beside me—hair of pale gold—faultless complexion—a face beautiful as a cameo. Beautiful as Edith. Amazing contrast, these two girls—the dark, slim Latin beauty of Edith, inherited from our mother; and this Anne, like a little fragile flower of the north.

I NEED not detail our conversation during the meal. It was strained, awkward, as though each of us might be engrossed with thoughts that could not be voiced. Edith and I told the misadventures which had landed us there. And the others explained that old Mr. Forrest had come here for his health—a nervous depression which had come upon him from overwork in Nashville.

"I shall be lonely here," he said somberly.

"But only for a week or two, uncle," Rolf Forrest said. "Then you'll be so well we'll come and get you and take you back."

Anne Forrest spoke hardly a word. But when the meal was nearly over, at a moment when the others were talking with Edith, she suddenly leaned toward me. And I caught her agitated murmur, "I must—see you alone tonight—please!"

"Yes," I murmured.

I had for the time, forgotten that Edith and I were leaving tonight. I admit I was attracted with a singular swiftness to the fragile golden beauty of Anne Forrest. Whatever menace was here in this sinister household, certainly it was directed at this other girl, not at Edith. And her whisper now was appealing.

She added, "You and your sister—I—

I'm frightened—I must talk to you—"

Rolf Forrest was saying, "Yes, we expected—Anne and I—to go back to Nashville tonight. But the accursed bridge is down—no way of getting out of here—for anybody—not till daylight."

It brought a gasp from Edith, and it snapped me to alertness. Marooned here.

"Why," I said, "nobody told us that. My sister and I were leaving tonight."

Young Forrest shrugged.

"Not a chance. You came over that bridge—you know, the one like a trestle, nearly falling down of its own weight—" He gestured. "Just down the cliff a hundred feet or so. That lightning flash! Lord, we'd only just gotten over the bridge when the lightning hit it!"

He laughed. I suppose it was quite a normal laugh, but it sent a shudder over me as though any form of laughter in this mysterious house must carry horror.

"That bridge," he added, "just slid sidewise and fell."

I looked to Anne for confirmation, and she nodded. Mrs. Groff was approaching, helping Millie with the dessert.

"My husband has just been to verify the wreck of the bridge," she said. "It is down. On foot, one might get around the canyon to the other road by daylight, but it is many miles."

Marooned here. With the pale-gold beauty of Anne Forrest beside me, I own that at that moment it did not seem so horrible a catastrophe.

If I had known! I would have taken Edith and Anne and run out on foot to huddle through the night among the black, storm-swept crags—if I had known!

CHAPTER THREE

Murder Stalks

"WELL, I'm not going to sleep," Edith said.

"We'll take turns keeping awake," I

agreed. "Just as a matter of precaution. But don't let's get too tense over it."

I laughed shortly; and I was startled to see Edith flash me a look, as though to her too, the sound of laughter here was frightening.

"Mysterious damn place," I added. "Melancholia patients! That's morbid enough for anybody—but I don't see any danger to us."

I said it lightly enough, but the things I knew that Edith didn't know, again leaped at me. The lurking Ludvig. A third member of this Groff family? The one who held the purse strings, a lustful fiend who must not be seen by us visitors—or even mentioned. Demoniac with his desires unspeakable, so hideous that even Emil Groff was revolted at them—afraid of the consequences. Yet Emil himself, had been—and perhaps was now—engaged in murder. And I thought of the appeal of Anne Forrest. Something was threatening her, so that in her terror she had appealed to me, a stranger.

I had had no opportunity yet of seeing Anne alone. After supper we had all gone into a cheerless little sitting room. It was by then nearly nine o'clock. We sat for perhaps half an hour, discussing the storm which still was raging. Queer storms, these of the Tennessee mountains. The lightning bolt which had demolished the ramshackle bridge was the last. No more had come. But the wind was still high, and the rain was still a torrent.

It seemed that Anne was watching an opportunity to talk to me alone, but could not find it. Then her father seemed tired. They went to their bedrooms, with the hunchback little Mrs. Groff escorting them to be sure they were comfortable; and Edith and I followed.

At the top of the stairs as we all said goodnight; it seemed that Anne flashed me a glance, but whatever her meaning, I could not determine it.

"You can sleep if you like," Edith was saying. "And I'm staying here with you—not in my room."

We sat together in one of the bedrooms. We had closed and locked the hall doors of both rooms; and left the connecting door between them open. The house had gone almost immediately silent. There was up here on this floor with us, as far as we knew, only the two girls locked in the bedroom diagonally across the hall; and the Forrests, who had three adjacent bedrooms on this upper hall just beyond the front staircase.

Those two girls whose unholy laughter was so shocking to hear—I sat wondering whether Millie had taken up their supper; if any attention were being paid to them. They were silent now—a silence that somehow seemed more ominous even than their blood-chilling laughter.

The Groffs and Millie were downstairs, so far as I knew; perhaps their bedrooms were down there. Emil Groff had not appeared. And that Ludvig—

I found that I was dozing, with drifting thoughts. If only I were armed. Some weapon—but I had none, save a very ineffectual pen-knife. But I mustn't mention it to Edith. Tomorrow I would see Anne again—

That Ludvig—would he be roaming the house now?

The thought snapped me into alertness. "What is it, Jack?"

"Nothing, Edith. Hadn't you better lie down on the bed? I'll stay awake."

"No. I'm all right here."

Abruptly the small electric bulb in the room was extinguished. We were plunged into darkness.

"Jack!"

"Sit still," I murmured. "Probably it'll come on in a minute."

But it did not. All through the storm the lights of the house had been wavering; but now it seemed permanent.

THE darkness crowded us—frightened, against all reason. I could hear Edith's terrified breathing; her hand reached out and gripped my arm.

"Oh—Jack!"

"Easy," I said. "There was a stump of candle on the table. I guess the lights up here in these mountains are never very dependable."

I fumbled and found the candle; lighted it. Even its wavering, tiny yellow glow was reassuring. Then a startling thought hit me. The light was out in our adjoining room. The storm, during the last half hour, had seemed rapidly abating. The rain had ceased; the wind was still strong, but noticeably less than before; and outside our windows now there was fitful moonlight. Queer, that having weathered the storm, the lights would go out now. Were they out all over the house, or just in our two rooms? Had someone pulled out a fuse, to plunge us, and all the house perhaps, into darkness?

I went to the bedroom door, with Edith's gaze upon me.

"What is it, Jack?"

"Just want to see if the lights are out in the hall."

The little hall was solidly dark. Evidently every light in the house was extinguished. And there was a new silence here now—a black, empty silence, with the rattle of rain on the roof missing—and the surge of the wind almost gone, so that now the silence was blank, unnatural. I stood, straining my hearing. Was that a dim, choking sound of laughter?

I turned to Edith.

"Those girls," I said softly, "laughing again."

Was it laughter? Or something else now? On impulse I crossed diagonally to the door on the other side of the hall. Behind me, Edith stood framed in our doorway, by the candlelight.

I reached the other doorway. Laughter?

It was soft, eerie. A choked laughter? I bent with my ear to the wooden panel. And I heard a blur of confused sounds. The thump of the girls moving about. And queerly gruesome sounds of their suppressed voices. Giggles . . . A laugh, choking into a sob. . . A thump, with a revolting, giggling little scream. . .

With wild running thoughts I straightened, to return to Edith. And frozen, I stood tense, with dilating nostrils. What was this I was smelling? A drift from under the girls' door. A faint, weird smell, of which I had suddenly become aware. A stench? A perfume? Indefinable—

I went back to Edith; closed our bedroom door, and locked it.

"They're in there," I said. "Just the same—laughing—poor little devils—maniacs—"

There must have been some look on my face that stopped her questioning. I did not meet her gaze.

"Lie down, Edith," I added. "The night will seem interminable if you just sit there."

"I'm all right."

Half an hour. It did indeed seem an eternity as I sat alone with my questioning thoughts. Beside me, in a little wooden rocker with a bed pillow behind her, Edith was dozing.

And suddenly in the silence I heard a tap on our bedroom door. Soft. Furtive. Edith sat up, staring at me wordlessly. The tap came again.

"Don't open it," Edith warned as I rose.

At the door I said softly:

"Who is it? What you want?"

"Mr. Baker. Oh, please—" Anne's voice. I jerked open the door and she came in like a white, darting wraith, the light of the candle she was carrying painting her head and neck with its yellow glow.

"You—" Edith gasped; and as I snatched the candle, Anne ran to Edith with a little cry.

"Oh—I've been so frightened—I had to come to you. When the lights went out a while ago—I just couldn't stand it—I had to come—"

She was shaking with cold and terror; Edith led her to the bed, and sat there with arms around her.

"What is it, dear? You're frightened? Well of course—this ghastly house."

JUST a girl terrified at being alone in this weird place, so that she was impelled to seek protection from us strangers, even though her father and cousin were here with her? Edith's glance questioned me. I said gently:

"I couldn't make any opportunity to talk with you. I thought, tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow may—may be too late," she gasped. "Oh, I suppose it's just my silly fears. This—this ghastly house, as you say. But I was afraid, even before Rolf brought father and me up here."

My mind flung back to that altercation I had heard at the foot of the stairs just before supper. Emil Groff, and the mysterious Ludwig. "These Forrests are rich. It's all been carefully planned."

"Your cousin Rolf brought you up here?" I demanded.

"Yes. Father was taken ill—a sort of nervous breakdown. Depressed—threatened with what they call melancholia. Then Rolf found this place. He came up here to inspect it. They—they cure people here who have melancholia—" She sucked in her breath. "Depressed insanity—that's what they call it when it gets worse. And Rolf said that the cure here was wonderful and he persuaded father to come."

Like a little light in distant darkness, I began to understand.

"Your father is rich?" I said gently.

She stared. "Yes." And she added with

a stark note of terror in her voice: "You're guessing what I'm thinking. It's only my imagination maybe, but I—I've always been afraid of Rolf. He wants to marry me—I don't love him—"

"Afraid for yourself?" I murmured.

"No. Afraid for father. My father said he'd never let Rolf marry me. And there's the business—the inheritance. Rolf is general manager now, but father doesn't like his work. They—they quarreled a few weeks ago, and father threatened to have Rolf leave the business—and to change his will maybe."

Murder for a price! So that was what Emil Groff was after! "Big money in it—no danger to us—all carefully planned—"

This place, a murder house—where one might bring his intended victim to be killed! A little of this grewsome, sinister mystery—one angle of it at least—now seemed plain.

I said swiftly:

"Is your father sleeping alone now?"

"Yes. He has one bedroom—Rolf's is adjoining with a door between them. Mine is next to Rolf's."

"No door between you and Rolf?"

"No. And I got terrified—just thinking. Oh, what are you going to do?"

I had seized one of the candles.

"Wake your father up," I said. "We'll have to plan some way to guard him."

In truth, I had no plan, save that I could not let that old man sleep in there alone now. If only I had a weapon! I saw now so many adversaries, tonight in this sinister household! Emil Groff, intent upon murdering this victim—aided, no doubt, by his malevolent gargoyle wife. And Rolf Forrest, here to see the murder accomplished, and to take the body back home with Dr. Groff's death certificate.

And the lurking, fiendish Ludwig—what part would he play in this?

Both the girls were clinging to me. I said:

"We'll figure out some excuse to guard your father. We'll tell him you got too frightened to stay alone. Then Edith and I will stay with you and him—"

They followed me, clinging to me as I opened our door and raised the candle to light the dark and silent hallway. It was only fifty feet to the bedroom of Anne's father. We passed the front hall stairs. No sound. The wavering little light from my candle shone partly down the stairs, with solid blackness in the lower hall.

"This is your father's door, Anne?"

"Yes—"

I rapped softly. I said softly:

"Mr. Forrest—oh, Mr. Forrest, wake up."

The silence was ominous, Ghastly. Terrifying. The old door rattled slightly as though from a puff of wind behind it. I turned its knob and shoved; but it did not yield; it was locked on the inside.

"Anne, you call him," Edith murmured.

"Father! Father, dear—"

No answer, though I rapped again, much louder. It was loud enough now to arouse Rolf. I turned to the adjacent door.

"This Rolf's?"

"Yes."

I thumped.

"Rolf Forrest? Let me in! This is Jack Baker. Let me in!"

No answer. I turned the knob. The unlocked door went inward with my shove and I burst into the room with the girls behind me. It was unlighted, save by an eerie shaft of moonlight from the window, and now, the light of my candle. The bed had not been occupied. Rolf Forrest was not here. To one side was the closed communicating door to the bedroom of Anne's father. I dashed to it; turned its knob. It swung and I went through.

A GUST of wind met me, extinguishing my candle. The window was wide open, with moonlight streaming in, and a blast of the night air. Anne's father lay in the bed, with the covers to his chin. He seemed to be peacefully sleeping. I bent over him. Pallid face in the moonlight. Behind me the girls were shuddering.

I said, "Mr. Forrest, wake up." I shook him insistently, with a wave of dismay sweeping me because I knew it was futile. Then I swung. "You girls step back. He—he's fainted, I guess."

Anne gave a little cry, and Edith drew her back. Both of them knew what I meant.

Dead. He lay here, unbreathing. I jerked down the window sash—I saw outside that sheer drop of a hundred feet or more down to the little canyon of the mountain torrent. Then I turned back to the bed. Dead, unquestionably. Yet, so far as I could tell, no mark of violence on him. No blood. No wound. No sign even that the bedclothes had been rumpled. No contortion of the face, nor the muscles of the limbs as one who dies by poison.

What had done this? What mysterious agency of murder was this, to leave a peaceful unmarked corpse which Rolf Forrest could take back to Nashville and offer for autopsy perhaps, secure that no evidence of murder would exist? As though to answer my unspoken question, it seemed now that despite the opened window and the blast of night air, there was a vague smell in the room. A stench? A perfume? Indefinable—

"Dead," I said gently. The two horrified girls were staring at me from the communicating doorway. I shoved them back into Rolf's room, and closed the door on the moonlit scene of death. "We were too late, Anne."

And what were we to do now? So many lurking adversaries here—

The hall door of Rolf's little bedroom

still was open. And abruptly all three of us stood here in the dim moonlight, frozen with a new surge of horror. From outside in the hall there came the sound of dragging. A slow, labored scraping on the hall floor—a sound so grewsomely horrible that I stood transfixed, holding the two shuddering girls, and with my breath seeming to stick in my throat, my lips dry. . . .

The sound stopped. Came again. A little louder, as though nearer. Tiny muffled thumps, mingled with a dragging scrape. Something out there in the hall, dragging itself toward us?

I was hardly aware that I had moved to the door; stood with the girls huddling against me so that we crowded the doorway with the moonlit room behind us. The distant hall was blank darkness, from out of which the sound was coming. The moonlight scraggled past us and laid its wan pallid glow on the hall floor in a little patch just before our door. The blackness was a wall beyond it. Ghastly, approaching dragging thumps, there in the blackness. . . .

With a rush of terror so shocking to my senses that the grisly scene swam and blurred before me, I saw, down by the floor, a head appear. A head of straggling long brown hair, wild and tangled. A disembodied head? A face, livid white, contorted with mortal agony—smeared with blood—wild staring eyes—a mouth with parted lips like a crimson smear—

Millie! For all the noisome horror, I was conscious of my recognition. The Groff maid—her disembodied head, hobbling here? No, there was a ghastly throat now—and white shoulders with the brown hair tangled on them. Another dragging, labored hitch—I saw now her pitiful body, lying on the floor, emerging into the moonlight patch as slowly she dragged herself, hitching on one elbow.

I tried to shove Edith and Anne behind

me, but like me they were staring with shocked, whirling senses. Millie dragging herself here in death agony—her throat a crimson gash, with the blood streaming—draining—

She saw me now. Her hand tried to gesture; her gasping dying breath, choked with blood, was audible—and I was aware that I had flung off the girls and was bending over her.

"Millie—"

"He's—dead. I just found him murdered—his throat cut—like mine. Oh and I—loved him—so much—"

"Millie! Who's dead? Who murdered him?"

Her head had fallen now. The blood rattled in her throat. Then other words came:

"He—murdered him—and did for me—just now. He'll murder everybody. He is—"

The words rattled off into the last choking agony of her death. Her whole body twitched for a moment; then lay still, her white cheek against the floor with a spreading crimson stain under it.

CHAPTER FOUR

Room of the Maniac Girls

MURDER, stalking in the blackness of this ghastly household! Old Mr. Forrest, dead here in his bed. Millie, here in the hall, with slashed throat. And some one else was murdered, Millie had said. Some one whose body Millie had found lying somewhere here in the dark—some man Millie loved. Who was it? The fiendish Ludvig? Dr. Emil Groff? Or—Rolf Forrest? And who had murdered him?

"He'll—murder everybody. He is—"

The choking words of the dying girl echoed in my head, as I leaped to my feet. Lurking, stalking fiend, roaming this house with the frenzy of these murders

turning him into a raging madman so that now he would not stop until he had murdered us all!

And I was unarmed. I seized the pallid, trembling Anne and Edith, shoved them through the doorway of the room Anne had been occupying. It had no communicating door into any other room. It was small, compact. Its single window overlooked a sheer drop into the canyon—no chance of an assailant coming through the window. Barricaded in here we would be safe—

The bed was a small, narrow iron affair.

A weapon for me?

Edith gasped:

"What are you doing?"

"A weapon. Help me."

I tumbled the bedding to the floor. Snatched off the mattress. Lifted out the springs. A jerk, and I had detached from its slot one of the iron side rails of the frame. It was nearly seven feet long; with it I could crack the head of any one or anything that came near me.

A frenzied panic for action was upon me. I turned to the girls.

"You lock yourselves in here. There's a telephone near the foot of the stairs. I'm going to call for help—the police in the nearest town. I won't be a minute! We'll barricade ourselves in here—"

Or should we run from the house, out to the wind-swept crags? More dangerous inside, or outside? Who could say—yet to me then it seemed that we would be safer locked in this room than in the open moonlit wildness outside.

"You lock the door," I reiterated. "Don't open it unless you hear my voice."

They nodded wordlessly. I stood with the iron bedrail in my hand, listening as they locked the door. This silent house! The grisly corpse of Millie lay at my feet. Brooding black silence everywhere. Amazing silence. Edith and Anne had screamed at the horrible sight of the dying

Millie; and certainly I had made enough clatter snatching apart the bed. Yet the house stood unaroused; darkly silent. Where were all its other occupants? Two maniac girls, still locked, doubtless, in their bedroom, up here at the other end of the hall. But Rolf Forrest? Mrs. Groff? Emil Groff—and Ludvig? One of them, Millie had said, was murdered. But the others? Where were they now, that my commotion had not aroused them? Had they vanished, like spectres? Or, like Millie, were they all lying here somewhere—murdered? All but one! And that one, somewhere here, was lurking. . . .

From the stairs I could see faint shafts of moonlight now dimly illumining the lower hall. No one—nothing down there? I stood on the stairs with the heavy bedrail poised, straining my hearing as though by force of will I could penetrate the silence and hear this monstrous adversary. At the bottom of the steps I stood peering. Wan, eerie patches of moonlight by the windows—and so many shadows everywhere, each of which might hold the lurking monster.

There was a little moonlight glow by the wall telephone. With every muscle alert, I went there, rested the heavy iron bar beside me and lifted the receiver. Uncanny silence of the instrument, like the uncanny silence of the house. No buzz of current; no distant operator's inquiring voice.

And then I saw the cut wires, dangling under the box. The fiend had been here. I could send no call for help. With a deepened sense of terror I seized the bedrail and fled back up the stairs. At the door of Anne's room, I rapped. I called sharply:

"It's Jack—let me in—"

And as the words were still echoing, I felt my heart contract as though as icy hand were clutching it. Silence. A silence

so fraught with horrible import that it whirled and blurred my senses.

"Edith! Anne! Let me in! Edith! Answer me, Edith—"

Silence so horrible, I pounded the door; rattled its knob. Then I stepped backward, half stumbling over the gruesome body of Millie—and I lunged with the heavy bedrail. The wooden casement that held the lock, smashed inward. The door swung and I went with it.

THE little moonlit bedroom was empty. The window, locked on the inside, was undisturbed. But Edith and Anne were gone.

A stark panic descended upon me in that terrible moment so that I lunged and flung aside the heap of bedding, shoved wildly at the bureau as though by some diabolic necromancy the two girls might still be here, though at a glance I had seen they were not. . . .

And then I saw where they had gone. A panel of the wall showed a narrow slit—a sliding door here, which when closed was undiscernable. But it was not quite closed now. A doorway to some descending secret lair? I shoved my fingers into the vertical opening; the panel slid sidewise and I launched myself through, brandishing the bedrail.

I was merely in the adjoining bedroom—a duplicate of Anne's, with a white iron bed unmade; moonlight through the closed window. No one here. I stooped, hurriedly searching. No one. Nothing. The room's single door was ajar; it admitted me back into the hall, only a few feet from Millie's body.

So great a terror was on me now that I was hardly conscious of rational reasoning. Where had the fiend taken them? Somewhere in this ghastly house—Ludvig, lusting for pleasure; lusting for the white beauty of young womanhood. The room up here in which the two maniac

girls were confined? Had the fiend taken Edith and Anne there? Had the maniac girls come out and lured them?

I dashed to that other door. It still was locked. I listened, with ear to its panel. No sound! There was only my own panting breath and thumping heart. With the bedrail, I burst in the door.

Ghastly scene. Disheveled room of these maniac girls. Filmy garments strewn and scattered. A place of lusting pleasure, mute now with death . . . Death everywhere in this house. A gust of wind from the open window met me. And there was enough moonlight glow so that I stood gaping at the silent, tragic scene. The two maniac girls were here, white bodies scantily clothed, hair down. One was sprawled on the floor with arms up on the sill of the open window. The other was beside her, one arm over her companion's hip.

Both of them dead. Unmarked by violence. For a moment I stood transfixed, peering down at them so pallid in the moonlight. And I saw now their slim bodies revealed by death to be wasted to thinness. Pitiful little creatures. Maniacs only with this strange lusting spell which had been upon them. Pinched thin cheeks under the rouge—bodies in life consumed by the fire of their lusts so that now, in death, they seemed only pallid wraiths of womanhood. And on both the contorted faces there was a frozen grimace, as though even in death they were trying wildly to laugh.

In that shocked moment, I saw also a curious aspect to these death postures. A sort of stretching of the necks—gaping, stretching mouths—as though the one at the window, realizing that death was upon her, had staggered here, flung up the sash; and then fallen, and on the floor had again reached upward, stretching with her mouth for the air too late to save her.

And the other, weaker, had seemed to have been dragging herself—

My mind flung back. That stench? That perfume? Indefinable—

It was here now, widening my nostrils. The room was permeated with it, clinging, saturating this carpet, these draperies. For all the wind from the opened window, I smelled it now more strongly than ever before. And with every breath I was conscious of a little heady thrill to my senses. Gruesome lethal breaths that seemed to hold a lure as I sucked them in—a wild pleasure of the senses that could only end in death.

I gathered my wits. Edith and Anne were not here. I searched the room—peered along the walls for some loose panel. And then, brandishing the iron bedrail, futilely, for there seemed nothing but the dead remaining in this terrible house, I fled back to the hall. The right-angle turn to the left was here. I dashed around it. Was that a moving shape, off there in the distance along the hall? I went with a wild run. No—it was nothing but my memory of that shadow I had pursued here just before supper.

I found myself at the head of the back stairs. The door at the bottom was partly open now, with a little moonlight glowing behind it. Cautiously I descended. Stopped to listen. Only silence here.

At the bottom, I shoved the door. But it bumped something on the other side—something which partly yielded to my shove. The door moved wider, with a dim scraping on the floor behind it. Like Millie, dragging herself—

Like Millie, I pushed myself through the door-opening. I was in a small, back lower hall with a nearby window admitting moonlight. Something was here on the floor at my feet—I had shoved and moved it when I pushed the door.

Like Millie. The huddled body of Emil Groff was lying here, weltering from a

ghastly crimson slash that almost severed the throat.

This charnel house of death. I rose erect. I think vaguely I may have heard a sound behind me but it was engulfed by a crash on my skull. The world seemed to split with a roar and a burst of brilliant light so that I was conscious only that the bedrail was clattering from my hand as I fell.

CHAPTER FIVE

Orgy of Death

WITH all my senses faded, there was for me nothing but a blank abyss of empty, soundless darkness. Death itself may be like that. But presently, after some nameless interval, I was aware that I was alive. Dimly conscious, I could feel myself lying on the floor, with rope lashing my wrists behind me and wrapped around my ankles.

My senses faded again, but I struggled this time to hold a little something which was Me. In the blackness there was the sound of a panting breath. The fiend was here; I could feel fingers tying the rope at my ankles. The fabric of garments brushed me. And I could hear the breathing that was the swift triumph of a frenzy about to be consummated.

Then I was being carried. Half carried, half dragged, with head and shoulders raised and my legs trailing on the floor as this gibbering adversary tugged and panted with my six-foot bulk.

And sight dimly was coming to me. Vague moonlight. This was the narrow back hallway along which I was being dragged. A door opened. I was jerked through, tumbled to what seemed the softness of a rug. Strange swell here. A perfume? Distinctly a perfume now. Exotic, aromatic smell, like some powerful incense burning here.

I heard the door slam closed. And at

my appearance, there had seemed the dim blurred sound of a girl's terrified cry. Edith? Anne? Memory of them snatched my senses to greater alertness. I was conscious of a throbbing pain at the back of my head; my hair wet and matted, doubtless with blood. But the horrible weakness was leaving me; strength coming back to my limp muscles; all my confused senses sharpening, clarifying.

I was in a dimly candlelit apartment, draped and shrouded. Heavily carpeted; soft chairs; couches; wall rugs and hangings, great splashes of red and black velvet. Macabre interior. Paintings on the walls, with the flickering candlelight vaguely disclosing their voluptuous nudities. . . .

A guttural voice at my ear said:

"Oh, you are not dead. That I hoped."

A grim, gibbering chuckle—unholy laugh that had nothing of mirth in it but only horror. "Then you sit here and watch. You will enjoy this, before you die—"

I saw above me the leering, malevolently vile face of Mrs. Groff. Gargoyle woman fiend, with her bent thick body, like a gorilla of amazing strength. The prim black taffeta dress was blood-soaked now. She stood shaking, trembling with the frenzy of murderous, demoniac triumph.

"You sit here and watch. Beside him—"

I FELT myself being propped up like a bent bundle on the floor, with cushions behind me. Another figure was here. Ghostly shape, sagging here beside me. I turned my head to regard it. Rolf Forrest. He sagged here, propped by cushions so that he could not fall but slumped with dangling head against his chest. Grisly companion. His face was livid, blood-streaked; blood welled from a wound in his side—a great slash which

had ripped his shirt half from him, exposing his crimsoned flesh. Dead? No, he was still breathing, faint gasping breaths of unconsciousness.

Swift disclosures. No more than half a minute had passed since I was flung into this room. I heard again that girl's cry—and with senses at last fully clarified, I saw across the long apartment in shadows beyond the candlelight, a broad couch of black and red drapes. Edith and Anne were huddling there. Unharméd, save by the extremity of their terror, they crouched clinging to each other; disheveled, with hair tumbling to their shoulders and their clothing half torn from them.

The thick gargoyle shape of Mrs. Groff swung away from me, and then came back. Maniacal glittering eyes; gibbering unholy laughter; hideous face so frenzied now that it was contorted beyond semblance of either woman or man so that it was only a monster.

"You two will watch—that will be pleasure indeed for us all. Him I did not mean to kill—not just yet, but he made me with his fighting—"

She leered down at me and young Forrest; then like a gorilla, she swayed away. At the wall, where now she stopped for a moment, I saw a row of huge upright steel cylinders, each tall as a man, with a pressure-gage on top. She opened their valves now. In the sudden silence I could hear the gas hissing out to mingle with the perfume of the incense which drifted in a lazy cloud from a brazier on the table.

Then she was at the couch, where Edith and Anne lay, pawing at them with quivering hands.

"Oh, you are afraid of me? Little beautiful ones—you, so slim and dark—and you, pale like white gold—"

I tugged frantically, futilely at my bonds. Beside me the dying Rolf twitched

and Anne shrank back before her claw-a little, as though he too were spurred to frenzied effort. Edith now was screaming as the vile hag pawed her.

"You are afraid of me! You want me not to touch you! But this is pleasure, little ones. The smell of pleasure will be with us in a moment. You hear it hiss? Can't you begin to smell it now? You feel its caress? You must laugh now and be happy. It is the smell of laughter—the intoxication of laughter—the thrill of doing everything your senses bid you to do—and laughing—laughing—"

Raging maniac now. And as I panted, jerking at the ropes that lashed me, I could feel my nostrils dilating. . . . That little heady thrill to my senses with every breath. . . . I choked back a grim laugh. God! Why could I laugh when horror tingled every fiber of me!

Then the crooked, gorilla-hag's voice rose louder:

"Listen! He laughed! We must all laugh!" Abruptly the caressing tone turned to rage. "And still you resist me? You will not lose your senses to the pleasures that are coming? Because I am a woman?"

Suddenly the claw-like hands swept up to her head. The primly parted hair was snatched away to become a wig, wildly flung across the room. This demonic fiend—not a woman. I saw his bullet head of close-clipped black hair; and now with clawing hands he tore away the taffeta waist and white ruching so that from under it his muscular hairy chest seemed to burst out, freed of its pinching garment.

"See, my beautiful dear ones—" He stood swaying before the couch, gorilla now indeed in every physical aspect. "See? The woman you thought me, is gone—Mrs. Groff—gone—never existing. I am Ludvig—master of pleasure—master of laughter—"

BUT the girls were screaming again as he reached to clutch them. Ludvig! My half drugged senses whirled with complete realization. This charnal house of death—we, the living—the only survivors now—were all gathered here in this room of lust. Ludvig! Emil Groff's older brother, who masqueraded always as the wife of Dr. Emil Groff, to give a greater semblance of respectability to this supposed sanatorium—to give him also a greater freedom with the young girl patients who had been admitted here—until with the spell of lusting laughter upon them, he could disclose himself as a man.

These diabolic steel cylinders? Compressed oxygen! Diluted in the air, as normally we breathe it, oxygen is life-giving. I think, in the case of Anne's father, nothing but pure oxygen was used. We later found the tubes under his bed, leading it from tanks at a distant part of the house. He had gone to sleep, perhaps with a sedative. His window had been ordered closed against the storm—and then the oxygen had been introduced.

Strange device for murder. An over-stimulation of the heart, which in the old man's case, Emil Groff had known would certainly kill him quickly. And from the blood and tissues of such a murdered victim, the over-charge of pure oxygen quickly will evaporate so that no autopsy can discover the cause of death.

Unique murder plot. Emil Groff doubtless had been successful with it many times. But the half-mad Ludvig was not interested. What diabolic other gases he mixed with the oxygen to create in his girl victims the lust that enslaved them, has never been disclosed.

I had almost overheard the murder of Emil, for unquestionably that quarrel at the foot of the back stairs had led Ludvig to an impulsive slashing of his younger

brother's throat. For Ludvig then, the die was cast. Whatever vestige of reason he had ever possessed must have been swept into maniacal frenzy then, with his brother lying weltering before him, so that Ludvig saw only that he must kill every one here. With me, perhaps his most feared antagonist still alive—and Edith and Anne still with me—his twisted brain must have told him to hide the evidence of the gas, so that he crept through the wall panel with which most of these rooms were equipped, opened old Mr. Forrest's window, and verified that the old man was dead.

And with each ghastly murder Ludvig's frenzy was telling him that he was nearing undisturbed possession of Anne and Edith. The culmination of his unholy lusts now was at hand. The dim candlelit room here had once been a storeroom back of the kitchen—equipped by Ludvig for the lair of his orgies. And he was laughing now, with his triumph so near.

"You feel it now, little white beauties? You breathe its thrill? Intoxicating pleasure—"

And I could feel it now, more overwhelming with every breath. A thrilling, exultant pound of my heart. A wild sense of power. Desires stirring in me—an intoxication of the senses—a falling away of shackles of restraint which always before had been upon me and my animal desires—

God! Was I laughing? Was that Edith's wild laugh of intoxication ringing out mingled with her half-choked screams of horror? I saw the hideous monstrous form of the half clothed Ludvig reaching across the couch—the white, intoxicated, shuddering girls—

WITH all the pounding wildness of my new-found strength, still the

damnable rope was holding me. My lungs bumped the blood-soaked body of Rolf Forrest. He slumped against me. His contorted face twitched—not quite dead, for the oxygen was bringing a last little strength to hold death away a moment longer.

And what was this? Rolf's almost vacant eyes imploring me? A little twitch at my lashed wrists behind me! His dying, twitching fingers with a little stimulated strength in them, plucking at my bonds! His numbing brain with death creeping into it, still could direct his twitching fingers—

Then the death rattle was in his throat; a shudder swept him—a twitching, and then he slumped and fell forward on his face and lay motionless.

I jerked and found that my arms were free. I fumbled at my ankles, cast off the last of the rope and sprang erect. Ludvig did not see me as I bounded the twenty feet across the heavy red carpet. He was sprawled forward on the couch, laughing, pawing.

With a last bound, like a pouncing animal I was on him—lifting his hideous, vile little body with all the amazing power of my intoxicated strength, so that I shook him as though he were a gigantic rat and whirled and pounded his gargoyle head against the nearest of the steel cylinders. Pounded—and laughed with my own wild unholy laughter until his head cracked—and I cast him dead upon the floor.

"Edith! Anne—come—"

With my arms around them, we ran, slamming the door upon the ghastly room. And up in the house I wrapped their shuddering bodies in blankets, and we sat through the night, waiting for the dawn.

EMBRACE of the PYTHON

By Robert C. Blackmon

(Author of "Graveyard Guardian," etc.)

It was a strange sickness that assailed John Bellam, for his skin had become covered with reptilian scales — and every dawn revealed some body crushed as though by a huge serpent!



REVULSION grew in Stanley Austin's lithe body as he stared down at the figure of John Bellam in the mountain cotage bedroom.

Bellam's thin body, tapering slowly from bony legs to narrow shoulders, made a strangely reptilian shape beneath the

bed covers. Flakes of dead cuticle covered every visible inch of his skin, rimming his pale lips and surrounding his

close-spaced eyes, which were bright and ophidian in their fixity. His wrists and hands, covered with the dry scales and thrusting from his pajama sleeves, were like broad-headed serpents nesting in the bed linen.

Mary Bellam had told Stanley that her Uncle John Bellam, owner of Bellam's Greater Circus, was recovering from a skin disorder, but the warning had not prepared the young lawyer for anything like this. He must have shuddered, for Mary's warm hands tightened reassuringly upon his arm.

"Mary has chosen well." The words hissed from Bellam's lips. His cold eyes moved slowly from Stanley's polished shoes to the strong breadth of his shoulders, the firm set of his well-shaped head. Bellam moved one hand, the long, scaled fingers coiling palmward, and the brown hair prickled along the back of Stanley's neck. "I wish you both great happiness."

"Thank you, Mr. Bellam!" Impulsively, Stanley's right hand thrust forward and he took another step toward the bed; then horror chilled him as Mary clutched frantically at his arm.

"Stan! No!" Her voice was a terrified wail.

"Don't touch me!" John Bellam recoiled with the swiftness of a serpent. "You might—" Abruptly, his thin body relaxed. "Sorry to frighten you, but we're not sure about—this." His right hand slid across his chest, moving with the slow grace of a reptile. "Bellam's Greater Circus specializes in giant pythons and boas. I have always loved snakes. Since this happened a month ago, I've wondered if handling the big snakes could have—"

He stopped as the door behind Stanley and Mary opened.

Stanley turned, and gulped as a squat, misshapen man waddled into the room. The man's big eyes, bulging almost level

with jutting brows, slid over him, then flicked to the bed. He was strangely nervous and frightened.

"You call, Misser Bella'?" His voice was a throaty croak.

"No." Bellam's tongue darted out to moisten pale lips. "Mr. Austin, this is Shagar. He was my snake-man until a maddened python attacked him." Bellam's glittering eyes seemed to mock the squat figure beside the bed. "Shagar hates snakes. Oddly, he believes I am becoming a giant python." Bellam's rustling chuckle made Stanley's scalp tighten. "I believe Shagar hates me for—"

"I—I—" Shagar's gnarled fingers clasped nervously. His bulging eyes darted fearfully about the room, and Stanley saw terror in their colorless depths. "I hate snake! I no hate you, Misser—"

"Enough." Bellam's hand lifted, a scaled reptile rearing its broad, flat head. "Mary, you, Elbert Weiss and Shagar are circus folks; you have cared for me in spite of this. Therefore I shall make arrangements to leave each of you a third interest in Bellam's Greater Circus. I shall be dead within the week."

"Uncle John!" Stanley felt Mary's slim body quiver against him.

"You shouldn't permit yourself, Mr. Bellam, to—" he began uncomfortably.

"I shan't." Bellam's bright eyes slitted, and Stanley felt a chill feeling that was half fear creep through his veins. "I regret dying, a human, and tamely in bed." Bellam's glittering eyes seemed to stare through and beyond the three beside the bed. "I'd prefer the swift death of the jungle—the stunning impact of a lightning thrust from overhanging branches—the anesthesia of fear! Then coil after coil of steel-cabled body—"

"Please!" Near-hysteria sharpened Mary's voice.

"Your pardon, Mary." Suddenly Bel-

lam's voice was mild and lulling. "Where is Elbert, Shagar?"

"He—he go see dog." The snake-man's twisted body seemed to shrink.

"Dog?"

"Something ketch dog back of cottage."

Shagar said, squirming nervously, his bulging eyes wide with terror. "It—it squeeze dog—dead." His voice dropped to a terrified whisper. "It kill like big python!"

"Python!" Breath whistled shrilly from Bellam's slitted nostrils. Soul-wracking fear froze his thin, scaled features, and his voice was the voice of a damned being. "Merciful God, have I already—"

"Hello, everybody!"

The nasal voice came from behind Stanley. He swung about and saw a well-built man of about thirty standing in the open doorway. The newcomer was tall and muscular, and his sleek hair glistened in the afternoon light coming from the open front door at the end of the hall.

"Oh, pardon me." His black eyes appraised Stanley. "Didn't know we had company."

"Mr. Weiss, this is Stan—Stanley Austin," Mary said, and clung tightly to Stanley's arm.

"Congrats and all that, Stan. You're lucky." The pressure of Weiss' hand upon Stanley's was quick and strong. "Next Thursday, so Mary says. She's a prize, but I'm warning you—you're marrying into a circus crowd. Of course, I'm not really one of the family, but—"

"Certainly you are, Elbert!" said Bellam as his pale lips bared long, fanglike teeth in a fond smile. "You've been with me for years, and you'll share equally with Mary and Shagar in the Circus after I'm gone. We—"

"Thanks, Mr. Bellam. But let's not talk about your—going." Weiss stepped to the bed, clasping long-fingered hands behind his back. His black eyes darted

to Shagar's twisted figure. "Shagar told you about the dog, eh?"

"Elbert! Is it true? Was the animal really—" Bellam had risen to a sitting position and his close-spaced eyes were filled with stark terror.

"It was." Weiss' eyes lifted from Bellam's scaled body, and Stanley saw his lips tighten. "The dog was crushed—apparently by a huge snake; but that, of course, is impossible. A boa, anaconda or a python couldn't live in this mountain climate. It—" He snapped long fingers. "I almost forgot. We're going to have more company. I saw Herman Kelley's big red car coming up the road. He's probably after Bellam's Circus again. Consolidating Kelley's and Bellam's would make the biggest combination in—"

"If that scoundrel—" Bellam's slitted eyes were flaming with hate.

"Hi! Anybody home?" The big voice boomed through the cottage. The screen door banged and heavy feet stamped toward the bedroom. "Hi, Elbert! You get purtier and purtier, Mary! Hi, John!"

Stanley didn't have to be told that the heavy-jowled giant barging into the bedroom was Herman Kelley, owner of Kelley's Shows.

"Heard you was sick, John, so I come to see you." Kelley's big feet slapped the floor toward the bed. His little, piggyish eyes swept Stanley from head to foot. Mary introduced them. "Glad to know any guy Mary knows." Kelley grinned and turned to the bed. "Now, John—"

"Herman Kelley!" The words spat from Bellam's lips. He drew away from the rival show owner like a snake settling to strike. "If you've come up here to—"

"Easy, John," said Kelley, spreading a beefy hand. "My show's playing Maxton, four miles over the hills. I heard you was sick, so I come over to—" Abruptly, Kelley's heavy jaw dropped and he backed

away from the bed. "Holy cats, John! You got scales like a snake!"

"Uncle John has malignant eczema." Mary spoke indignantly as she left Stanley and moved toward the bed, her curly blond head high. "He is in no condition to discuss—"

"Okay. Okay. It—it just gimme a turn seeing them scales." Kelley mopped at his beefy face with a purple-edged handkerchief. "I—I been catching hell with snakes lately. Bought some boas and pythons from a busted show and the damn' worms been driving me nuts. The biggest python got away in Maxton."

"Got away!" Mary screamed in a way that made Stanley's teeth click together. "Then the dog was—"

"You—you're hunting for the snake?" The words pushed from Stanley's tight throat. The crushed dog—perhaps a crushed human next—His eyes sought Mary's trim blond figure, and a shudder rippled through his body.

"Hunting it, hell!" Kelley snorted. "I should delay the show and waste a thousand bucks for a fifty-dollar worm! The damn' thing can't live in these mountains. It belongs to the guy who finds it!"

Then a grin split Kelley's red face, yet his keen little eyes watched Bellam's every move. "How 'bout five grand over my last offer for Bellam's Circus? You're laid up and there ain't no telling how—"

"Get out!" Bellam's sharp hiss drove the larger man back. Kelley barged to the door, then stopped, turned and leveled a thick finger.

"You might jest's well sell me the show, John," he boomed, piglike eyes narrowed. "I'll get it—sooner or later!"

Then Kelley was gone, his heavy feet pounding out of the cottage.

"THERE'S the dog."

Elbert Weiss, slightly ahead of Stanley Austin and Shagar, pointed

through the thin growth of pines and underbrush in the narrow valley behind the mountain cottage. Two strides of Stanley's long legs brought him beside Elbert. Shagar waddled at the lawyer's heels.

Directly before the three men a shapeless bundle of brownish-gray fur huddled upon the needle-carpeted ground. Bright afternoon sun sifted through the trees and splashed the ghastly object with shafts of light.

Elbert moved toward the thing. Stanley followed.

He could hear Shagar waddling behind him. The twisted snake-man was muttering viciously beneath his breath. They reached the crushed carcass, and a strange mingling of nausea and fear gripped Stanley Austin.

The animal had been a well-developed German police dog. Now it was but a horribly shapeless mass of blood-clotted fur. A throaty croak made Stanley's scalp tighten before he realized the sound was coming from Shagar. The crippled snake-man was staring down at the crushed dog, his bulging eyes glazed with horror.

"Python do that." A shudder twitched Shagar's squat, misshapen body. "'Most do me like that. Misser Bella' watch. Laugh like he glad I hurt. He been punch snake, make him mad. He hate me." Shagar's croaking voice went shrill. "He like to kill me. Misser Bella' talk to snake, tell him to squeeze me. Snake talk to him, hiss. Misser Bella' always half-snake. He be *all* snake quick! He ketch me—do me like—that! He squeeze me—squeeze more people like—"

"Nonsense, Shagar!" Elbert Weiss' laugh was strained. He wetted his lips nervously. "Forget the crazy stuff." He seemed forcibly to tear his black eyes from the dog's crushed body. "We've got to get that python. You take the other side of the valley. You know what to do. Stanley, you'd better go to the little clear-

ing about a quarter-mile down the valley. If the python comes near you, sing out. Shagar and I'll be with you in two minutes. I'm going up the valley and work back. We ought to have a few more men, but— Well, let's go."

Elbert stalked off through the trees, heading toward the left.

Still muttering, Shagar waddled past the dog's carcass and headed across the valley. Stanley could hear him slipping on the pine needles after his twisted figure had disappeared behind the trees. The young lawyer started down the valley, his muscular fingers tight about the short club he had picked up near the cottage.

Elbert had said the python would be unlikely to measure over eighteen feet, and it would undoubtedly be sluggish, half-dormant. Yet—

A tight smile touched Stanley's firm lips as he moved forward cautiously, brown eyes probing the trees and brush about him.

The pines thinned and disappeared after he had walked a few moments. Stanley was coming into a small, irregular clearing, rimmed with the scrubby trees and underbrush. Afternoon sunlight made the place look almost cheery, yet strange thoughts thrust into Stanley's mind.

Was John Bellam actually being transformed into a reptile? Were those ghastly scales upon his skin but a forerunner of the horror to come? Had Bellam, as Shagar charged, deliberately prodded the python into attacking the snake-man? Could the strangely reptilian circus owner actually talk with snakes, speak their hissing language? Had the police dog been attacked by the python that had escaped from Kelley's Shows, or had it been crushed by—John Bellam—whose thin, scaled body was snakelike in its—

A derisive laugh burst from Stanley's lips.

He was letting the queer happenings

break his nerve. The whole thing was sane enough—just a skin disease, a crippled and half-mad snake-man and an escaped python. Yet—

Underbrush rustled nearby, and every muscle in his body snapped taut. His fingers went white about the short club. Bleak with a sudden, almost numbing fear, his brown eyes probed between the surrounding trees. A slight movement caught his eyes, then a small bird darted up from the ground. The lawyer relaxed, and grunted as he realized that the muscles of his jaws ached.

Resolutely, he started to whistle, but he stopped as he recalled reading somewhere that reptiles were peculiarly susceptible to shrill noises.

Damn circuses and snakes! After he and Mary were married—

Sudden horror held Stanley motionless, and the abrupt pounding of his heart all but drowned the shrill scream ringing in the narrow, wooded valley.

It was the terrified scream of a man in the maddening throes of infinite agony. It came again.

Stanley stood rigid. The cry was coming from the right side of the valley. It knifed his eardrums again, then stopped, choking short with a gurgling moan. For a moment the valley was gripped in awful silence. Then Stanley heard a heavy body breaking through the brush to his left.

"Shagar! Weiss!" His voice sounded queer—shrill in his ears. He broke into a stumbling run toward the sound, his fingers glued to the short club in his right hand. Swaying tree branches plucked at his clothing. Underbrush whipped at his legs. Yet he stumbled on, the horrible cry still echoing in his brain.

After a few moments he stopped, every faculty concentrated on listening. The noise of breaking brush had ceased, and there was no sound but the throb of blood in his ears, the eerie whisper of wind in

the trees about him. He moved forward cautiously, his aching eyes probing the brush.

A shapeless mass upon the ground some distance ahead drew his gaze like a magnet. Cold horror swelled in his brain, waves of nausea swept over him and the dread certainty that the shape was human grew in his mind. Gritting his teeth to steady jerking nerves, he forced himself toward the ghastly shape.

It was a man—a man whose body was crushed into a mocking travesty of a human form. There were no definable outlines to the horribly shapeless mass. It was but a ghastly huddle of crushed flesh, bone and blood-soaked clothing.

Controlling himself with an effort, Stanley forced himself to examine the thing. It was Shagar, the crippled snake-man. Shagar's features were bloated. His colorless eyes had burst from their sockets—horrible globes pendant from red veins and muscles. Trickle of blood streaked his cheeks. His mouth was fixed in a grimace of agony. The side of his head was bruised. His body was a blood-seeping pulp. John Bellam's mad words flashed into Stanley's chilled mind as he stared down at the crushed snake-man.

"The stunning impact of a lightning thrust from overhanging branches, the anesthesia of fear! Then coil after coil of steel-cabled body—"

Stanley spun, his right fist white about the short club, cold prickles racing along his spine.

SOMETHING had moved in the trees behind him. He heard it again, then saw the figure of a man coming through the underbrush.

"Stanley! Shagar!" cried Elbert Weiss. He broke from the trees and ran toward Stanley, his face deathly pale. "My God, Stanley! I'm glad you're unhurt! I heard—"

He saw Shagar's crushed body behind the young lawyer and his black eyes went wide, filled with horror.

"It—it—got Shagar! I was afraid it was you. I—" He raked sweat from his forehead with shaking fingers. "I—"

He stopped, froze into an attitude of listening, then Stanley heard some one plowing through the brush toward them.

"Hi! Elbert! Shagar!" shouted Herman Kelley's big voice. In a moment the heavy-jowled showman came into sight, his big body crashing toward them. "Heard a gosh-awful screech and thought mebbe I'd better see what's what. You got any idea what—"

Then Kelley saw Shagar's pulped body.

"Holy God!" His voice was but a hoarse croak. "The python—"

"Your python!" Elbert Weiss' voice was brittle.

"My python, hell! I give the snake to John!" Kelley whipped about with surprising swiftness and gripped Stanley Austin's arm. "You was a witness, Austin! You got to say I give the snake to John! I ain't responsible for—this!" His bulging eyes fought clear of Shagar's crushed figure.

"How'd you happen to come up here?" Swift thoughts clicked in Stanley's mind.

"You can't pull me in on this!" roared Kelley, big hands clenching. "I left the cottage, stopped at the store and talked a bit."

"Miss Mary come in and I left, started across the valley in my car. Then I heard the screech and come up and—"

"You saw Mary Bellam at the store!" The words exploded from Stanley's lips.

"Sure. She musta come down after something. It ain't but a half-mile from the cottage to—" Kelley stopped, bulging eyes following Stanley as the young lawyer whipped past him, moving with a swift, ground-eating stride. "What—Where you—"

"To the cottage!" Stanley flung the words over his shoulder. "John Bellam's up there alone, and Mary's out where that python can attack her!"

He increased his pace to a run, heard Kelley and Weiss pounding after him.

Reaching the cottage, Stanley crossed the front porch, legs stiff, cold horror gnawing at his heart. The place was quiet with a queerly sinister silence. Kelley and Weiss burst from the trees about the cottage and trotted toward the porch.

"Mary! Mr. Bellam!"

The silent, empty cottage seemed to engulf Stanley's call. There was no answering sound. He pushed through the open doorway, striding toward the door to the Bellam's room. He heard Weiss and Kelley on the front porch.

Bellam's room door was open, and Stanley saw the bed at the first glance. It was empty, the covers thrown back. There was no sign of Bellam's thin, scaled figure. Mad thoughts churned in Stanley's mind.

"We got to get together on this thing, Elbert!" Kelley's bull voice drifted in from the porch. Weiss' nasal tones answered.

"It's now a case of getting—" Weiss stopped, then his voice was shrill and high. "There's Mary now, coming up the—"

Stanley reached the front door as the car neared the cottage. Kelley and Weiss were running toward the road. Mary Bellam seemed lost behind the wheel of the big sedan. Her blue eyes went big and frightened as she braked the car to a stop. Weiss and Kelley crowded to the opened left window. Stanley strode across the porch, ran toward the car.

"Why did you leave Mr. Bellam?" Elbert Weiss was reaching for the door handle. Stanley caught his arm and pulled him away.

"You heard me give the damn' snake to

John, Mary!" Kelley's big head was thrust through the opened window. "You got to witness." Stanley's muscular hand upon his shoulder stopped him. The young lawyer pulled Kelley away from the car.

"Take it easy, you two!"

"Stan! Something terrible has happened!" Mary's slim hands were warm on Stanley's wrist. "Uncle John sent me to the store for cigars. Something has happened to him! Tell me, Stan!"

She pushed the car door open and stepped to the road, frightened eyes seeking the cottage door.

"Bellam's gone!" blurted Elbert Weiss, long fingers claspng nervously. "The python killed Shagar!"

"Oh!" Mary swayed against Stanley. A dry sob choked in her throat.

"Weiss," said Stanley as his arm tightened about Mary's quivering shoulders, "suppose you take the car and notify the Sheriff and coroner."

"Coroner, hell!" bellowed Kelley. "We don't want law in this yet! We'll find Bellam and the python, then holler cop. I'll get a gang of show-hands."

Before either Stanley or Weiss could stop him, Kelley was in the Bellam sedan and had it swinging about, heading down the valley in a cloud of dust.

"Why, the dirty—" Burning anger flamed in Elbert Weiss' black eyes as he stared at the speeding car.

A deep frown creased Austin's broad forehead and his lips tightened grimly as he watched the sedan disappear around a turn.

Herman Kelley was after Bellam's Greater Circus. He had been in the valley when Shagar screamed. Could the beefy showman have planned to murder all but one of Bellam's heirs before killing Bellam himself, then buy the show from the survivor? Kelley didn't want the police—yet. Could that mean he was using his

supposed trip to Maxton for show-hands as a cover for another murder? Was John Bellam alive, or had Kelley watched the cottage, waited until Bellam was alone, then—

"Elbert! Austin!"

The faint cry was coming from the narrow valley behind the mountain cottage, and the eerie tones seemed to pluck with chill fingers at Stanley's nerves.

"It—it's Uncle John!" Mary Bellam's clutching fingers dug into Stanley's arm.

Elbert, Weiss was already running toward the sound. Stanley started after him, Mary dragging at his arm, and as they sped toward the narrow, wooded valley behind the cottage, a dread certainty grew in Stanley's mind. Each one of these strange happenings was but part of a mad plan. Each incident was leading to a hideous, death-filled climax.

"Mr. Bellam!"

He heard Elbert Weiss running through the brush ahead. Mary was stumbling, panting at his side.

"Stanley! Elbert!"

John Bellam's shrill cry came from slightly to the left. Stanley changed his course, following Elbert Weiss, helping Mary through the entangling underbrush.

Then they saw the thin, pajama-clad figure of John Bellam ahead through the trees, and Stanley thought of a horrible, half-reptile creature wandering in the wooded valley.

THEY reached the circus owner, and again revulsion swept over Stanley Austin as he looked at the dry, scale-like flakes of dead cuticle on Bellam's skin. A queer tightening came into the young lawyer's body.

"Something has happened to Shagar!" Bellam's narrow head thrust forward—as he hissed the words the head of a scaled reptile upon a thin, upright body. "I heard him scream! It was like his scream

when he was attacked by the python!" Bellam pawed at his narrow forehead, and the dry rasp of scales sent prickles of horror through Stanley's tight scalp. "Circus folks *feel* death." Bellam's ophidian eyes were unnaturally bright and uninking. "I know Shagar is dead!" His thin body swayed, a queer, sinuous movement. "Take me to his body."

Stanley Austin felt the hair rising upon his head.

Bellam had sent Mary away from the cottage. He had been alone. He hated Shagar, had—according to the crippled snake-man—prodded a python into attacking him before. Bellam could have slipped from the cottage, crossed the valley and—Stanley shuddered. Shagar had said Bellam was half-snake, could talk the hissing language of serpents. Shagar had predicted his own death in the crushing coils of a snake! He had said that Bellam would be that serpent. Had the crippled snake-man possessed some horrible, secret knowledge about John Bellam? Had he been crushed because of that knowledge?

"Take me to Shagar."

John Bellam's thin figure weaved in a loathsome, serpentine movement. His sharp tongue licked pale lips avidly. A queer, hungry gleam burned in his uninking eyes. His cold, fixed stare fastened upon Elbert Weiss.

"Take me to Shagar, Elbert," he commanded hissing.

Weiss lifted muscular shoulders in an expressive shrug, turned and started off through the trees, heading for the spot where Stanley had found the crippled snake-man's horribly crushed body.

Muscles hard with a strange tautness, Stanley followed. Mary walked at his side, her trembling hands clutching his arm.

The sinking sun painted darkening shadows in the narrow valley. A slight evening breeze had started, and faint,

erie whispers drifted through the trees—

Stanley stopped, warned by something he could not define. Quickening blood pumped in his ears. His lips felt parched and dry. His right hand clenched—then he remembered he had dropped his short club near the cottage. Beside him, Mary Bellam stood stiffly, her frightened breath shrill in his ears. He could feel her slim figure trembling against him. His bleak eyes probed the trees ahead. Then the something which had warned him became apparent. Elbert Weiss and John Bellam's thin, pajama-clad figure were nowhere in sight. No sound came from the trees and brush ahead.

Slowly, Stanley moved forward, fingers knotted into hard fists. Mary walked at his side, held silent by his tenseness. As they passed a low mass of brush Stanley heard a furtive rustle behind him.

Chilled breath stopped in his throat. The skin of his back crawled with sudden, numbing horror, and John Bellam's strange words flashed into his mind.

"The stunning impact of a lightning thrust from overhanging branches, the anesthesia of fear! Then coil after coil of steel-cabled body—"

Instinctively he pushed Mary away from him and swung about, his fists knotted. Half-way around he was aware of a vague something lashing out from the brush. A smashing weight crashed into the side of his head.

Lights flamed within his skull. Mary's terrified scream reached his ears, seeming to come from an incredible distance. A sable pall tightened about him.

Something hard and round encircled his body, yet he couldn't move, couldn't scream the terror swelling in his lungs. Merciful unconsciousness engulfed him.

STANLEY AUSTIN became aware of a strange, acrid smell, a nerve-tightening odor that had a rank, corrosive qual-

ity about it. It was somehow unutterably slimy and unclean. Then abruptly he knew what it was—the nauseous stench of reptiles!

His eyes snapped open and a startled cry rushed to his lips, and stopped. He was gagged, bound hand and foot, and lying upon the rough stone floor of a large cave. To his right, he could see Mary Bellam's slim figure. The girl was also bound, and a gag bit into the soft flesh of her cheeks. She was unconscious, her eyes closed.

Still dazed by the blow upon his head, Stanley looked about him.

Farther toward the back of the cavern was a queer structure of heavy beams and coils of heavy, hawser-like rope. He saw a powerful hydraulic jack. The shadowy figure of a man was crouched behind the crude machine. Stanley's eyes swept past the man, drawn irresistibly toward the back of the cave, then the noisome gag between his teeth flung back the scream of horror that tried to burst from his tight lungs.

The dusky shadows at the back of the cavern held the coiled bulk of a giant python!

He could see the sinuous coils of its huge, scaled body, the blunt triangle of its head. Its eyes made tiny points of light in the shadows. It seemed dormant. Yet there was a certain pulsing of life about the giant bulk.

Stanley's eyes swung back to the crouched shape of the man, the crude machine, and the hideous solution of the whole mad scheme burst like a blinding flame within his brain. He knew now the purpose of the ropes and beams, knew the identity of the kneeling man.

A ghastly vision of Shagar's crushed body swam before his eyes. He knew now why he and Mary had been brought to this cavern.

Frantically, he tried to burst free of the

ropes about his wrists. Warm blood crawled upon his skin as the rough hemp bit into his flesh.

He saw now that a man's head thrust above the coils of hawser-like rope between the heavy beams. The features were all but obscured by the thick folds of a gag, yet Stanley knew who it was—John Bellam!

Stanley threw every ounce of his strength into straining against the ropes, but they held fast. A groan of despair forced from his tight lips.

Warned by the sound, the figure crouched behind the machine straightened, turned. Stanley knew his identity before he rose. It was Elbert Weiss.

"Well. Well. Mary's brave lover is awake." A hacking laugh rasped from Weiss' leering mouth. "Kelley and his show-hands will find plenty when they come back."

Weiss bent, released the big hydraulic jack, and the thick ropes about Bellam's thin figure loosened. He pulled the shapeless mass that had been Bellam's body from the machine, flung it over his shoulder and stalked toward the front of the cave. "They'll find Bellam and you crushed by the 'python' and they'll find Mary's body in the coils of my prize beauty!" He jerked his head toward the rear of the cave. "I will own Bellam's Circus. In a few months Kelley and I will consolidate—the Greatest and Biggest Show on Earth, and I'll own half of it!"

Chuckling throatily, Weiss strode out of the cave, carrying Bellam's crushed figure.

Stanley tore at the ropes about his wrists, a rising sense of defeat beating at his mind. Bellam was already dead, crushed in the hydraulic machine. He and Mary would be next. Grinding his teeth into the wadded cloth in his mouth, Stanley

tried to push the gag free, tried to shout. Then he heard Weiss returning.

"It's my turn now, *Miss Bellam!*"

Weiss stalked to Mary's bound figure and stared down at her, black eyes flaming with mad hate. Mary's eyes snapped open, filled with terror as she saw him.

"You've looked on me as a bum and a common circus hand ever since I've been with Bellam's. You've always avoided me, but you can't now." Weiss' voice dripped venom. "Within ten minutes, you'll be dead and I'll own Bellam's Show. Shagar was easy. He died without a struggle in my machine, but I'm saving the live snake for you, *Miss Bellam!* I'll watch and laugh as it crushes you. Your lover can watch too, but he won't laugh. He'll be fighting the ropes in my mechanical python! After you two are dead, I'll put you and the python in the valley for Kelley and his men to find. I'll be at the other end of the valley, *hunting for you!*"

Picking the girl from the floor, Weiss carried her to the back of the cavern, dropped her upon the coiled python and stepped back, a mad, snarling laugh bubbling from his lips.

The huge serpent's angry hiss filled the cave, and Stanley's eyes widened with horror as he saw the deadly mottled body sliding about Mary, enfolding her in its ghastly embrace.

The young lawyer exploded in a mad effort to burst the ropes about his hands, dropped back as his tortured muscles rebelled under the strain. The python had looped two coils about Mary's slim figure, one about her waist, the other about the fresh plumpness of her breasts. The girl was paralyzed with terror—the anesthesia of fear.

Stanley tried to jerk erect, and a sharp projection of rock beneath him gouged into his pressing hands, cutting the flesh. Abruptly, he stiffened and new hope flashed into his mind. Feverishly, he

lammed his bound wrists on the sharp rock, and a sob caught in his throat as the hemp snagged on the projection. In less than a minute several strands of the rope had parted.

Weiss was standing near the python, unholy interest gleaming in his black eyes as he watched the snake coiling about the girl. The serpent's mottled body was weaving slowly about Mary. One coil had trapped her ankles, another contracted about her thighs. Even as Stanley stared, the python looped another coil about the girl's shoulders, and he could see steel-cabled muscles crawling beneath the reptile's mottled skin as it tightened about its terrified prey.

Congested blood darkened Stanley's face as he put every atom of his strength into the effort of freeing his hands. Horror-pent breath swelled his lungs.

Driven by sheer despair, he strained at the ropes. Flesh and bone threatened to give away under the strain; then abruptly something snapped. He felt the weakened hemp slackened about his wrists. Madly he clawed free of the bonds, lurched to his feet.

Weiss spun and hurled his tall figure at Stanley as the latter stumbled toward Mary Bellam. The young lawyer met his rush with a flying right fist that banged squarely on Weiss' mouth. The mad killer swung his feet in a vicious kick that raked skin from Stanley's shins. Stanley's right fist stabbed at Weiss' face again, connected, and a sharp, grinding pain shot up to the lawyer's right shoulder, as he felt hot blood gush over his knuckles. Weiss shot toward the back of the cave as though catapulted, his muscular body squirming as he tried to keep his balance. He smashed into the rock wall and dropped to the floor, still squirming.

Stanley lunged for the hissing python—Weiss' statement clantoring in his

brain. A man could handle the big snake! His stiff fingers touched the reptile, and the scaly feel of its body sent waves of horror through his lithe figure. Tearing frantically at the engulfing coils, he freed Mary's shoulders, stabbed at the reptile's weaving head with bloody hands. Sluggishly, it tried to trap him in its mottled coils.

He fought free, tore the slimy body from about Mary as sheer terror and horror gave added strength to his jerking muscles. The girl was unconscious.

Stanley pulled her free, caught her limp figure up in his arms and stumbled toward the mouth of the cave, the angry hiss of the sluggish python echoing in his ears. A quick glance showed him Elbert Weiss rolling over, trying to get to his feet, but Stanley strode on, Mary Bellam in his arms.

The sound of underbrush breaking in the woods nearby stopped him at the cave mouth and in a second he saw Herman Kelley's big bulk plowing through the bushes toward the cave. Six thick-shouldered huskies burst from the woods behind the big show-owner. All of them carried ropes and clubs.

"Hi, Stan! I brought the boys! We'll find that—"

A shrill, maddening scream burst from the cave mouth—the scream of a man faced by unspeakable horror—and Stanley thought of Elbert Weiss, almost helpless. The young lawyer shuddered.

"What the—"

Kelley stared at Mary's bound figure, his piglike eyes wide.

"Get your men in the cave, Kelley!" Stanley worked at the gag and ropes about Mary Bellam's white flesh. "Try to save both of the snakes in there. Come up to the cottage after you are through. I'll explain the whole thing to the coroner and the police."

A BRIDE FOR DEATH



A curse, older than Confucius, threatened the lovely body of Liu Mei—a curse

Gordon Bais laughed at until she disappeared mysteriously from his very arms; only to reappear, after he was doomed and helpless, in a chamber of dread surrounded by lust-mad coolies, whose master demanded of her a sacrifice that could be conceived by no brain not spawned in hell!

A DANK fog rolled over New York's Chinatown from the rivers and the Sound. Now and again we heard the dismal wailing of distant foghorns—the very soul, it seemed, of Chinatown itself. Chinese music came

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

(Author of "Call Me Monster," etc.)



A Weirdly Moving Novelette Charged With the Ominous Mystery of the East

through, too, from many hidden places, and it was, to me, a cry from the heart of China.

I waited, there in the sitting room of Liu Ti, for him to tell me why he had asked me to come. I'd have come to him around the world, and he knew it. For

forty years my father had been his friend, and his father's friend, in China. Liu Ti and my father had been blood-brothers, had mingled their blood from cuts in their strong right forearms.

I, too, knew China. I had spent all of my boyhood and most of my young man-

hood there, and had learned to love it.

"It is a dangerous thing I am asking you to do, Gordon Bais," said Liu Ti.

I didn't answer. I looked at his niece, gorgeous Liu Mei, and knew that it had to do with her. Did she know my secret, this Liu Mei? Did Kwan Tao know it? Kwan Tao, the dusky, stalwart young Chinese who stood beside her? I doubted it. I had never told it to a soul, though Liu Mei must have read it in my eyes. We had been children together, had almost grown up together. Her father had married one of Liu Ti's sisters, and her father had been an American. In the eyes of her world and mine, she was an Eurasian, neither Chinese nor "foreign". I looked at her and thought of how cruel people could be to one another.

"In the veins of my niece," said Liu Ti, almost in a whisper, "runs the proud blood of kings."

She was the most gorgeous woman I have ever seen. Her hair and eyes were black and she had the delicate beauty which must have been that of Kwan Yin, Goddess of Mercy, when she had been a mortal, walking the earth.

"I am ready to do anything, old friend," I said to Liu Ti.

"I know. There has always been a bond between us, and between thee and Liu Mei. You played together as children. Now, Gordon Bais, take her away and cherish her!"

I gasped in amazement. I think my surprise must have made me look ridiculous.

"But Kwan Tao, to whom you have promised her—"

"It can not come to pass, just now. Gordon, a shadow of which I can give you but the slightest hint hangs over the houses of Liu and Kwan. It means death! It whispers in the wind across the windows. It sighs in the fog. It moans in the sounds from the river. Take her away

with you, quickly. For you, an American, it may be possible."

I looked at Liu Mei. Just to meet her eyes had countless times caused my heart almost to stop beating. She didn't smile. Her lips were white, and terror was in her face—as it was in the eyes of Liu Ti, and Kwan Tao.

There were beads of sweat on the forehead of Liu Ti, and he was of the old school, one of those whose faces did not change, even under torture!

"If I asked you, Gordon," said Liu Mei herself.

"Anything, Runt," I said, "you know that." I'd called her "Runt" when we had been brats together in Canton. "But what of Kwan Tao?"

I looked at her fiance, trying to figure it out. Liu Ti spoke again.

"It is better you did not know. Liu Mei knows little, which she may tell you when she is safely away with one who loves her. Later, perhaps, Kwan Tao—"

The weirdness of Chinatown, of China transplanted, chilled me. Again I was conscious of the dismal foghorns, of the creepy mist that swathed the windows, of the strange music from the heart of Chinatown.

"Nobody will bother a foreigner, behind whom is the threat of the foreign police," said Liu Ti. "You will go forth unmolested. It will be thought that because all of the blood in her veins is not Chinese, I have cast her out, to become a member of her father's people."

I could see the scheme then, and it seemed mad; yet, perhaps, the only one that might work. And I knew something of the frightful fury of nameless "shadows" in Chinatown.

"I shall guard her, until I have word from you, as though she were my sister—which, almost, she is."

"It was knowing this that made me send for you. I have never asked before."

Liu Mei, tall for a Chinese girl, dressed in Occidental garb, came to me then, smiling a little, and gave me her hand. How soft it was! It made me think of a beating heart, a bird's heart perhaps, beating in the palm of the bird's captor. And after Liu Mei came Kwan Tao, with a firm handshake which said more than any words he could have uttered.

THE beating of my own heart almost suffocated me as I stepped into the hallway with Liu Mei. And there was sorrow, too, that was deeper than the wells of Shaltajai. I would have given my life for this girl. I could understand the great love, defying all prejudice, all conventions, which must have bound this girl's father to her mother. And now both were dead, and Liu Mei dwelt in the house of her uncle, and bore his name.

She put her hand on my arm as we walked to the electric elevator. Liu Ti's establishment, combination office and residence, was of five stories, and the stairs were almost never used for travel between floors.

It suffocated me, almost, to stand in the tiny elevator with Liu Mei. Surely she must know, and her eyes told me that she did; that she knew she might never mention it. I would never dare. And because I would never dare I blurted out:

"I've always loved you, Liu Mei. My greatest desire is for your happiness."

She was very close to me then, and her hand was still on my arm. Her perfume was in my nostrils, like the radiant ghost of herself that might go with me always. Her eyes told me that she had always known. Was it fancy, or did I see, deep down in their depths, some hint of love returned? I shook my head, in the shock of the near revelation, to drive away the image of the happiness that might have been ours were it not for the insurmountable barriers of blood.

"There will never be another, Liu Mei," I said.

I pressed the button for the first floor, and the cage started down. Liu Mei, as we passed the fourth floor, reached out her hand and turned off the light in the cage. I was alone in the dark with the woman of all women, whom I loved, and for a moment, as the cage went creaking down, the knowledge held me paralyzed.

I had looked at my watch, from force of habit, when we had entered the cage. Ten minutes after eleven at night. By eleven-thirty I would have taken Liu Mei to safety. Then I must bear my own strange cross in patience until she was taken from me forever.

Her hand had dropped from my arm, as though she were afraid of what I might do in my madness, and I locked my lips tightly on whatever else desperation might have made me say.

The first floor was just below us. I snapped on the light again, mustered a smile, and turned to lead her forth when the cage stopped.

I couldn't believe my eyes. The cage hadn't stopped moving, I would have sworn to that, but Liu Mei was not with me! She had vanished, out of a moving elevator, as though she had turned to fog and eddied out through the grills into the shaft.

Nor was that all. Five stalwart men in hideous devil masks had taken her place. I stared at them in amazement. It couldn't be—yet it was. Somewhere along the route from the fifth floor to the first Liu Mei had vanished and the five had taken her place. And the cage hadn't stopped moving. It had been magic.

"Where is she?" I demanded in shrill, frightened Cantonese.

"Gone!" said one. "And it is an order that the meddling foreigner be punished, so that never again will he be tempted to meddle."

The speaker pressed the button again, and the cage started to ascend. They stopped it between the third and fourth floors. As we went up I snapped a glance at my watch. It said eleven-thirty! The cage, bearing Liu Mei and myself, had been twenty minutes descending!

The speaker turned out the light. I must have been paralyzed with fear and surprise, for I didn't even offer resistance. In the dark the hands of the "devils" began upon me. Their feet came into use, too. They kicked me. They clawed me. They battered away at me. They ripped clothing from me with their knives.

Finally, when it seemed I could stand the agony no longer, something heavy struck the top of my head. The cage was filled with shooting stars as the bottom seemed to fall out of it, dropping me headlong into the shaft, where I struck to find oblivion, black as the deepest night.

When I regained consciousness I was sprawled outside the elevator on the ground floor. The outer door, of course, was closed. Fog seeped through under it, to be absorbed by the lights. I was alone in a building filled with echoes and horror. My hellish assailants were gone.

I staggered to my feet. My head was splitting. I ached in every bone and muscle. I was a six-footer who should have been able to put up a terrific battle, but the five had handled me with ease, giving me the most brutal beating any man had ever had to take.

The seeming miracle of the twenty-minute descent, the vanishing of Liu Mei, the appearance of the five, did not puzzle me as it might have any one who did not know the potentialities of Chinese master mummies as I did.

I didn't leave, though, as the five, or those who had sent them, must have expected. They did not know my feeling for Liu Mei, which would have sent me into the pit itself.

I rang for the elevator again. It crawled into it, wondering what sort of hell would breathe its brimstone into it this time, and went back to the fifth floor. The door to the apartment of Liu Ti was open. I crossed the threshold my terror mounting.

There was nobody here but Liu Ti, and what I might have said to him would never now be said. He was dead. He hung by a silken cord from a beam of his living room. His face was a mask of horror. His bulging eyes stared right at me, as though he said:

"By the bond which existed between your father and me, Gordon Bais, I command you to stand by my niece and her betrothed until the end!"

CHAPTER TWO

Tiny Shoes

VERY carefully and reverently I cut the cord which hung Liu Ti to the beam and lowered him to the floor. I had closed the outer door. Then I now went, systematically, through all the rooms. Not another soul was in the place, living or dead. Yet he had had a sister here, a wife, and a brother. Now all were gone.

And I, by virtue of being my father's son, was a part of this family! I had been spared, I knew, because I was not Chinese. But if I did not refrain from meddling, my recent captors had said, and had proved by their manhandling, my white blood would not save me from their sinister designs. Right now, I could have sworn, scores of eyes were watching me, studying me, waiting—

The family of Liu Ti was gone. *He* at least, would never know if I went out, this very minute, into the street, and left Chinatown never to return. What had I to do with the Chinese? Maybe, in the final analysis, I loved that part of Liu

Mei which was of my own race. Maybe I was blinded by my love of China, where I had spent so many years. Maybe, when my own people looked upon love between the races with revulsion, they were right. Maybe— Well, if I went away now I was safe. *They* had said so. If I stayed, the beating I had taken would be horribly little compared to what they could do to me.

But, Liu Mei's father had been white, and my own father's friend. I knew what my dad, if he had been living, would have done. And I knew what my own heart dictated. I stooped over Liu Ti, then, and whispered:

"They won't get away with it, old-timer," I said. "Not while I'm alive."

He couldn't hear me, of course—or could he? His face didn't change expression, but somehow I knew that he knew—had, perhaps, known from the beginning.

Hell's bells, the love between Mei and me was the sort of thing which might develop between any boy and girl who, reared together, had never been allowed to know what the outside world thought of what it cruelly called "mixed love". It was just that, nothing more. To me she was a Chinese, and the sooner I forgot about her, the better. But even as these traitorous thoughts went through my brain, like black lightning flashes, I seemed to see Liu Mei standing before me, her eyes calm, filled with the knowledge of the ages, as they stared into mine and said:

"It isn't like you, Gordon!"

And it wasn't. Why should human beings draw back from one another because of race, or color, or religion?

I knew then that nothing would ever change me, not even when the time came, as it probably would, when I would be put to torture for my meddling.

Without a backward glance I hurried

from the room of Liu Ti and into the hallway I had last traversed with Liu Mei.

"Somewhere between the fourth floor and the first," I told myself, "the strange thing happened. I must find which floor. I'll start with the fourth." For it was there that Liu Mei, afraid of being spied upon, had turned out the light.

I went down in the elevator. It pleased me to defy the enemy in this much at least. I stopped at the fourth floor and got out, shutting the door behind me. I was in another hallway, brilliantly lighted. I began to move along it, my eyes studying every inch of space. I had the feeling that somehow Liu Mei would drop something that would let me know, that would point the way to the place I might find her. But there was nothing. I went back to the elevator.

I hadn't seen a soul, and the echoes of my own footfalls had taken on sinister meaning in the deserted hallway. They seemed to be shouting to me to go back, to run, to cease trying to pry into the dark secrets of Chinatown.

I started to open the elevator door, but it would not open. My heart stopped for a moment. Since I had left the cage, some one had signaled for it, and it had gone—down or up. Viciously I jabbed the button—and heard the whirring of the cage from below. There was something horrible in that whirring. What would I see when I opened the door of the cage? Who had signaled it? Had that one known what I was doing? Eyes watched me now; I knew it. They would watch me as long as I was in Chinatown, and wherever I went out of Chinatown, until the tortuous Chinese minds were satisfied that the affair of Liu Ti and Kwan Tao and Liu Mei had been settled according to the relentless Chinese code.

The cage stopped at my floor. I yanked open the door. I don't know what I expected to find, certainly not what I did

find: Liu San, brother of Liu Ti, standing in a corner of the cage, rigidly erect, his black eyes staring into mine.

There was the haft of a knife sticking out of his left breast. His right hand was clutched about the haft. Cold chills raced along my spine. He was dead. He had to be dead, with the knife in him like that. But why did he stand upright? And why was he in the cage now, when it had been empty the last time I had seen it. Or had it? The last three words were almost a cry of terror. Had he been there with me, during my recent descent from the fifth floor to the fourth? If he had, I hadn't known it; yet I knew it was possible.

I would have screamed, but knew it useless. A hundred murders could have been committed here, and none outside the wiser—as long as the victims were Chinese. A white man, disappearing, would be sought.

I stepped into the cage, which quivered a little, and touched the body of Liu San. Instantly it toppled sidewise, crashing stiffly to the floor. The corpse was already rigid.

Had this body been sent to me as a warning? I didn't know, but I did know that some one listened—many some ones—and watched. I shouted, knowing that my words went ringing up and down the shaft, and out through the grills at all five floors:

"So help me God, I'll bring every one responsible for this to justice—and I'll slay them with my bare hands if any harm comes to Liu Mei."

Of course it was foolish. No sooner had I shouted, the echoes ringing all through the empty building, than I knew just how foolish it was. On the hallway of the floor above me I could hear the scuffling of sandaled feet. On the floor below I could hear it, too. All through the building.

I slammed the door, dropped down to the next floor. And this time I left the door open, so that only by coming to this floor could any one use the elevator. And I'd be in the hallway, where I could see whoever approached. I was fighting mad, and more frightened than I had ever been; for Liu Mei, mostly, I told myself, and didn't fool myself at all. I remembered the kiss and caress of Chinese knives, and knew that I would feel them again.

Liu Mei, perhaps, was feeling them now!

I searched this hallway, too, and found nothing. Then I went back to the elevator. No one had approached it, for repeatedly I had looked back, to make sure.

I started to step into the cage.

The body of Liu San had vanished. In its place reposed the dead body of Liu Ti's sister, around her neck the mate of the cord which had strangled Liu Ti! The elevator had become an instrument of hellish black magic. Two people had been slain in it within the last fifteen minutes, or slain elsewhere and dumped into it for me to find, by some means I couldn't even guess at.

I was like an automaton, geared to run a certain distance in a straight line. I couldn't, wouldn't turn back, or change my course in one iota, come hell or high water. I dropped down to the second floor, still seeking the trail of Liu Mei.

This had to be the last floor, for I had come to on the first floor to find Liu Mei missing.

I stepped fearfully over the supine body of Liu Ti's sister, into the hallway. And almost at once, like eyes of cats blinking in the dark, I saw the shoe. It was a tiny shoe, and I recognized it at once. One of Liu Mei's, set with the brilliants that peeped forth so alluringly from under the hem of her gown when she walked.

It seemed to call to me, beseechingly.

It seemed to plead.

It seemed to threaten, to challenge me.

It took all of my courage to walk down the hallway to that single shoe, to stare down at it. It rested on its side at the top of a flight of stairs. It was Liu Mei's shoe, without a doubt. She had kicked it off for me to find or had she? Maybe her captors had left it there, to lead me to destruction. What would happen to me if I picked it up and went with it down the stairs? Those stairs, strangely, were ominously black, filled with ebon foreboding of disaster to come.

The whole building seemed to have fallen silent to listen—to what? To the beating of my own terrified heart?

I wouldn't take the black stairs. They led down to the first floor. I'd take the elevator, stubbornly, as I had taken it hitherto. This time I expected to find that some other horror had developed in my absence.

But no. The door of the cage was still open, and the sister of Liu Ti still sprawled supine on the floor.

I started to shut the door when the cry came—shrill, piercing, filled with agony, and with terror.

"Gordon! Gordon Bais!"

The cry came from the depth of that black stairwell, whence steps led down into God knew what. That it had been the voice of Liu Mei I knew for a certainty, as I raced for the stairs.

And scarcely had the echoes of my footfalls started in the hallway again, than it came once more, with something added:

"Gordon! Go back! Go back! Don't fol—"

And there it broke short off, and I knew that a hand had closed tightly over her mouth—a dirty hand, a grimy Chinese hand, like the hands which had beaten me, smelly hands, hands which it were sacrilege to use upon the person of Liu Mei. If I could get my hands on the fellow who had stopped her! Even for touching her,

I would tear his heart out with steely fingers. I didn't realize she had warned me back until I had plunged headlong into the black stairwell—to be swallowed by a darkness redolent with the odor of incense and Liu Mei's perfume.

I saw her, then, vanishing into the hallway on the first floor, around the corner of the stairwell below, carried backward, upright, in the big arms of two huge men whose faces I could not see, but which I knew were devil-masked.

Something struck me at the base of the skull, and I rolled down the rest of the stairs, numb from the blow but knowing as I rolled that my attacker was right behind, coming to strike me again.

I hit the bottom and fought for the strength to meet him when he reached me.

CHAPTER THREE

Where Is Liu Mei?

MY WHOLE body, as I dragged stubbornly to my feet, seemed to be made of lead. My arms were unbearable burdens, my legs were almost too heavy to drag under me. My neck was stiff, almost immovable, as I twisted it, by great effort of will, to face the man who came down the stairs behind me.

A Chinese, of course, and a huge one, wearing a devil's mask. I couldn't have handled him, man for man, had I been in full possession of my faculties, and he unarmed. As matters stood I was on my feet, but out, helpless, and he carried a club in both hands. He wore the queue, most unusual in a modern Chinese, and it looked like a snake above his mask.

His teeth were showing in a snarl, or a grimace of murderous amusement. He was like something out of a nightmare. I raised my hands, or tried to, to ward off the blow he was sending at my skull. But my hands wouldn't move, and the blow

landed. It landed with a dull sound, as though he had struck the head of a drum, and I scarcely felt it at all.

That one thing told me how close I was to death. He had brought the club down with both hands. I had tried to pull my head out of the way. I think the blow was a glancing one. It must have been, else it would have driven my head down into my shoulders.

He came at me, striking again. My right shoulder . . . well, I think it was almost broken by that first blow. I had no defense whatever, except my wits.

And a certain knowledge of Cantonese. Now I used the latter knowledge, and heard sing-song words burble madly through my lips—lips that felt thick as untanned leather. The figure of the Chinese danced before my eyes, until there seemed to be two of him, as I spoke the words:

"I must get to Liu Mei. She has done nothing. What will they do to her?"

His answer was so strange that for a long moment I did not understand him.

"You know the ancient Cantonese custom of the broken urn?"

"Urn? Urn?" I repeated. "What has Liu Mei to do with urns?"

"This," he answered, falling back a little because I had managed to lift my left foot against him, to keep him from getting too close. "That a Chinese husband expects his wife to come to him, as foreigners call it, 'clean'. If he finds it is not so, he sends her back to her father, on a rattling cart, with a broken urn swinging below—a broken urn surrounded by bits of metal that clink."

The horror of it drove most of the numbness out of me, then and there. I loved the Chinese, always had, the bad with the good, but had never been able to think of their heartlessness to women without a shudder of revulsion.

"But Liu Mei can not thus be sent

back!" Again that horrible rattling in my throat which I could scarcely recognize as my own voice speaking Cantonese. "There is no finer, more suitable woman anywhere."

"That is true," he said, "at the moment. But when we have finished with her—"

He left it there, and I knew the full meaning of his horrible, fang-showing grimace. Liu Mei was to be given to these monsters. She was being taken away to that fate even as we spoke. Afterward Kwan Tao, being a Chinese, could no more have taken her to wife than he could have denied his belief in gods and devils on the rivers of his native land. It wasn't the first time a fragile, delicate Chinese woman had been given to a mob.

And here was I, numb with hurt, unable to stop this unspeakable horror, and Liu Mei already gone. Nothing had happened to her so far only because her captors must first make sure of me. They had no desire for "foreign" police to break in on them.

I cried out in agony. I was a desperate, savage man at that moment, who couldn't be hurt any more. Whether I loved Liu Mei or not, I'd have gone to help her, because she was a woman, and her captors blood-mad brutes.

My desperation lent power to my hands, my feet. I lunged at my attacker, with my head down, like a football player smashing the line. Again his club crashed down on me. This time I took most of the terrific blow on my shoulderblades, but almost intolerable pain shot through my entire body. Then my head crashed into the man's stomach. He was taken by surprise by a form of attack new to him and went violently backward to the floor, striking his head with a sickening thud. The club rolled from his hands.

I saw it and resolved that, whatever happened to Liu Mei, none of it would be because of this man at my feet.

I picked up the club. I remembered the blows which had crashed against my skull. . . . I *must* have been mad, a beast in my own right.

With all my power I smashed the club down on his head, just as he lifted it from the floor. As it struck the top of his skull, I felt the club sink in, or the wood give, and his head dropped back soddenly upon the floor.

Something red and sinuous, like a crimson snake, crept out from his mask, sluggishly crawling.

Still with the club in my hand, I whirled and ran, sluggishly, along the way those two had gone with Liu Mei. I scarcely realized that the blood from my own wounds was streaming down my cheeks until I tasted its salt on my lips.

Another flight of stairs led down into darkness. . . . I didn't hesitate.

I CRASHED down those stairs, and from that moment on what happened was a kind of blur. There were masked men on the stairs, and I struck at them savagely, with all my power. I felt the club crack against skulls, cheeks, against bodies. I rammed the end of it into bellies, but I allowed none of this to stay my headlong plunge down those stairs.

It was dark, that basement, where I struck the bottom of the stairs, but far ahead of me I saw a faint glow of light, and I knew that I was somewhere in the labyrinth under Chinatown—that maze of tunnels and passageways which no white man ever sees.

There were men behind me, but they feared my bloody, swinging club. Besides, I was mouthing weird cries which sounded insane even to me—and Chinese have dread respect for the insane.

Knowing this the inspiration came to pretend insanity, to keep it up until the last. If they'd realize that, insane or not, I was aiming directly at the freeing of

Liu Mei they would know I was not mad, but if I acted fast enough they wouldn't have time to think.

I came to that glow of light. It was a tunnel mouth, and in the tunnel I dashed to the first turning. Even here I could see that it led to another basement, and a vast room outfitted with gaudy lavishment. The room was filled with coolies, scores of them, standing, facing their master with becoming servility, masked heads bowed.

There was one man on a dais, a man in gorgeous robes, with a black cap on his head, topped by a red coral button. He wore the five-strand beard of venerable wisdom, and there was no smile on his lips, nor mask upon his face. Bound, gagged, fastened to a column which upheld the roof, stood Kwan Tao. He was struggling with his bonds. His eyes were shooting flames.

I stared at him as I ran. He was naked to the waist, and his torso was a mass of blood. Kwan Tao had been beaten with the bamboo until his skin and flesh had been shredded. His chest was crimson and dripping and horrible. It made me think of the ghastly "death of a thousand cuts . . ." but I know Kwan Tao wasn't thinking of those wounds, those ghastly wounds which would have killed a white man.

Standing between two coolies, before the man on the dais, was Liu Mei.

Her face was deadly white, but she stood proudly erect, like a soldier. I saw the lips of the man on the dais, and they were moving, but what the man said I couldn't make out. Yet I was close enough to have heard.

I saw the lips of Liu Mei move in answer. I saw her head thrown back, as though she flung defiance into the face of the seated man. His face was twisted into bestial lines as he listened. But why couldn't I hear what was being said? Had

something happened to my senses as the result of the beatings I had taken?

The whole thing was utterly weird. It was like watching a silent motion picture, and hearing not even the machine which ran it. Yet all of these people were alive, unless I were looking into a vast mirror, which seemed impossible.

The man on the dais suddenly rose, shot out his hand and slapped Liu Mei twice, once on either side of the face, so hard that I thought her head would be knocked from her shoulders. I knew that she screamed, for I could see her mouth open, but I heard no sound. The Chinese master stood there in his wrath, and I knew that he heaped that wrath upon this woman who defied him.

Her uncle, his sister—and God knew who else—had already paid the penalty for something. I had seen two—a sister and a brother of Liu Ti—and knew some of the answer. When any Chinese tribunal sentenced a man to death, his whole family died with him, for what good did it do “to destroy the tiger and spare the cubs?”

Only Kwaa Tao they had spared, for the moment at least; but in the end he would go the same way. Just now, though, they wished him to know to the full the humiliation to be visited upon Liu Mei.

I HAD the most terrible feeling, as I hurled myself toward this ghastly tableau, that I was a man in a nightmare, with someone I loved in danger and my own feet rooted to the ground so that I could not move, while death raced upon me from the rear.

It was like swimming in glue, my forward march, because of my weakness. My feet drummed against the tunnel floor, but seemed to take me forward not at all. My club was almost too heavy to hold. I had to clutch it with all the strength of my two hands.

I wondered if Liu Mei didn't know I was here, trying my best to get to her—if only that I might slay her myself, to save her from what the monsters would do to her. Did she guess? As though in answer to my thought she turned and looked directly at me. I thought her right hand lifted, palm toward me, as though she would order me to get back, to save myself.

But she couldn't, possibly, have seen me. I knew that instantly, and yet in some strange fashion she must have known I was there, trying my best to reach her.

I whirled. There where hideously masked faces all around me, Chinese blocking my retreat had I wished to retreat. They didn't offer to touch me again. They merely laughed, horrible cackling laughter which shook their bodies with their ghoulish glee—and they were laughing at me.

I whirled, hurled myself forward again. I struck something, an invisible mysterious something, in full stride, and it knocked me flat on my back, stunning me again. I almost lost my club . . . and all around me they laughed and chattered. I scrambled to my feet, felt in the air for whatever it was that had knocked me down.

My hands came in terrifying contact with an expanse of spotlessly clean glass, of such dimensions that it shut me in the tunnel entirely—yet let me see the horror of the room beyond!

CHAPTER FOUR

Hall Below

MANY things were made plain to me in that one agonizing moment. I knew, or guessed, something of what must have happened. Coming down in the elevator, Liu Mei and I had passed a floor just after some sort of volatile drug, hidden in the odor of incense perhaps, had

been blown through the grill. It had instantly rendered both of us inanimate. The cage had automatically stopped at the ground floor, where I had been taken out.

Then the enemy on the other floor had pressed the signal, and the cage had gone back up, bearing Liu Mei, helpless, unconscious of what was happening to her, into the hands of her enemies.

I had awakened in the cage again, and had been beaten horribly because I was too numb and stupid from the drug to fight back.

Why had the Chinese gone about their work in so elaborate a fashion, when a single knife thrust would have done for me and left Liu Mei in their hands? There seemed, at the moment, just one explanation, the one I had given myself. They played with me to keep me from going out and bringing the white police. And they didn't kill me solely because they didn't know for sure that I hadn't told police to come looking for me if I didn't reappear in a certain length of time.

And this glass in the tunnel, shutting me off from the room beyond. I could imagine why it was there. Not for my personal and special confounding, but so that enemies of this unholy group, or people who doubted its power, might see what the monsters were capable of doing.

I couldn't go forward. The tunnel behind me was packed with Chinese.

Knowledge of my plight drove me mad. In a few moments something terrible would happen to Liu Mei. I had to reach her.

I think desperation must have given me the strength of many men. I stepped back from that expanse of glass. I felt my biceps bulge. Power, unimaginable power, seemed to swell and distend my every nerve and muscle.

The world whirled.

The tunnel spun.

I hurled myself at that glass. I didn't feel my hurts. It was as though my anger had nullified my agony. Sweat dripped from me, the salty sweat of a cornered brute beast.

My club crashed against that glass with all the power I had. As it did, every face, and every mask, in the room beyond was turned toward me. Liu Mei turned, and her hand went to her mouth. Her eyes were big with terror.

A great jagged star showed in the glass. I felt someone hurl himself at me from behind. I spun, swung instinctively, lifted my aim a little, and crashed my stick in the man's mouth. It must have knocked out every tooth in his head. He turned a back somersault into the press behind him.

But I didn't even wait to see him strike among his fellows.

I whirled back to the glass again, seizing the split seconds left before the enemy behind overpowered me. The first crash of my bludgeon against the glass had sounded like the crack of doom.

The second was even worse, for slivers of glass broke free and clattered into the tunnel in jagged shards, while others fell in the room beyond. Berserk now, unstoppable, desperate with terror, I swung, and swung again.

I smashed through. The opening was small, but I stepped back and hurled myself through it, just the same. Jagged points like a thousand swords struck me, caught at my clothing, ripped my flesh. I was sobbing and cursing.

I would reach Liu Mei. I would free Kwan Tao.

I STAGGERED to my knees beyond the glass, turning a little, to see the smaller Chinese coming through the glass after me.

I paused just a moment to crack down on the skulls of the first two. I did not spare my strength, and there were other

splatters of crimson on the glass when I again swung back to the occupants of that hateful room. My enemies in the tunnel, aghast that one man could be so murderously destructive, and drawn back.

Now I could hear the voices of the men in the room I had so violently and madly entered.

The man on the dais:

"Seize the girl! Take her to the room beyond! Half the coolies with her, the other half here to slay this meddler!"

The coolies divided as though they had already been instructed. Kwan Tao, a bleeding horror, tugged without cessation at his bonds. The man on the dais scarcely moved, nor did the expression on his face change.

Coolies jumped between the girl and me. Through their ranks I saw the others, bearing the girl to the other room. I had no trouble guessing what would happen there.

But no damned coolies could keep me from reaching her!

I swung into that first group with all my desperate fury. One went down with a smashed skull. I heard the man on the dais shout:

"The first man to break ground before I bid him, dies by my hand!"

I snapped a glance over my right shoulder. The man on the dais gripped a snub-nosed automatic in his right hand.

Another Chinese went down. Desperation drove the other coolies as they stood shoulder to shoulder to fight me off. There were still more coming through the glass behind me, I knew. But I didn't take time to turn.

I swept the heavy end of that club along the faces of my enemies, not to land solidly, but to graze and maim and smash. The effect was horrible, the now bloody masks askew.

It was like running the end of a stick along a picket fence, save that the result

was bloody horror. And I cried out shrilly, all the time. I saw the door beyond them open. Liu Mei cast one despairing look over her shoulder at me as the coolies bore her into that room, out of which a faint light came. Then she was gone, and the smirking coolies with her, and hell had never spawned a fury such as I became.

I swung again—and missed completely.

And this was the reason. The man on the dais had said:

"Enough! Let him try to reach her now. You are too late, Gordon Bais. By the time you could rip down that door—"

He didn't have to finish it. I hurled myself toward the door, but my mind was not on that objective. It held a picture of the automatic gripped on the knee of the master of all this horror. I couldn't reach him. Bullets would travel too fast. His eyes would be following every move I now made. I had his location fast fixed in my mind. I must make no slightest error of judgment. And I did not. Almost at the door, I whirled like a dervish, and the blunt-ended club sped from my hands with all my power, and with all the skill that sometimes comes to a man in a desperate place.

It went like a shot, directly for the chest of the man on the dais. His mouth opened to scream. But the sound never got out. His right hand half swung toward me, but he didn't have time to pull the trigger.

The blunt club struck him in the chest, and bones and cartilage must have given back before the hurtling projectile. The man toppled backward from his dais. I was right behind my strange weapon of offense, while the coolies, slow thinkers almost incapable of executing anything without the command of some superior, stared at me like so many yellow statues.

Only their eyes moved.

I grasped the unconscious leader by the throat, yanked him to his feet.

I shook him. I had to bring him to. I grabbed at his automatic, held it in my right hand, so that its muzzle menaced the wall of coolies who now surrounded me.

"Make one move against me," I said hoarsely, "and I'll twist this man's head from his shoulders!"

They knew I meant it, and this man was their rice, their living, their master. No move was made by any one. The man was coming around.

"Where is the key to that room?" I demanded. "If I don't get it I'll still kill this monster!"

Nobody spoke. The unconscious man couldn't.

Kwan Tao still struggled with his bonds. I snapped at the nearest coolie, in whose belt was a knife.

"Loose his gag! Cut his bonds!"

NO COOLIE had ever obeyed a master more quickly. Kwan Tao stepped free. His face, his whole body, had been so harshly tortured that it was next to impossible to recognize him.

"Where is the key, Kwan Tao?" I demanded.

"On his left wrist, hidden under the sleeve."

I found it, fastened by a thong. I yanked it free, breaking the thong, but only after it had cut deeply into the man's flesh. I dragged him to the door. I commanded Kwan Tao to hold him there. . .

"If anything has happened to her," I said, "this man will wish to God he had never been born!"

Kwan Tao didn't answer me. He merely stared. His lips worked spasmodically. His face was a gargoylesque red mask.

"Take this gat," I snapped again, "and see that the coolies don't follow us into the room."

I twisted the key in the lock. The door opened protesting. From inside it, driv-

ing me to madness, came sounds which were like a woman's moans of terror. Then words in shrill Cantonese, in Liu Mei's voice:

"Turtles, sons of turtles, eggs of turtles! How dare you lay hands on a daughter of kings!"

And one voice making answer:

"Daughter of kings, true, but damned to eternity by mingling with the blood of a barbarian! Even your ancestors would say that what befalls you will be less than you deserve!"

Then I was inside, with Kwan Tao beside me, dragging the man I had all but slain. And what a tableau met my eyes. Liu Mei, backed against a far wall, much of her upper garments torn away. Her head was back, her shoulders were stiff with pride. Her right hand held a knife, poised, its point aimed at her own heart.

The masked coolies were closing on her in a tight semi-circle, like hyenas to the kill.

"Drop it, Liu Mei," snapped some one. "Out, you curs, back with your own!"

The crimson Kwan Tao was the spokesman. Liu Mei dropped the knife. The Chinese slunk past us like beaten mongrels.

Kwan Tao, while relief began to surge through me, shut the door, locked it, put his back against it.

Kwan Tao grinned, a savage, red grin.

The man he had dragged in with him had vanished! Maybe he had been playing dead. Maybe, well, the fact remained that between the second Kwan Tao shoved him against the wall, and closed the door, the man had snapped into consciousness, and had slipped out behind Kwan Tao.

Kwan Tao hadn't closed the door.

It had been closed from outside, and all three of us were prisoners!

"We bungled it," said Kwan Tao, "but maybe it is just as well."

He stared at Liu Mei, as I did. Her face would never be whiter. She had plainly been through hell. I wanted to ask her what had happened. Chinese are, to us, brutally frank. Kwan Tao asked her before I could:

"Those coolies? Did they—"

"Have coolies ever, in all our history," asked Liu Mei bitterly, "failed to take advantage of women captives?"

She didn't mince words. I saw the face of Kwan Tao change as no torture had ever been able to make it change. No Chinese of his station could possibly ignore the "law of the broken urn."

I broke in on the grim, impassable thing that had come between Kwan Tao and the woman both of us loved.

"Will some one kindly tell me the meaning of all this?"

"I will," said Kwan Tao, "and I must hurry, for we have little time."

"Little time?" I repeated.

"Yes, for even now the snaky tendrils of the yellow smoke comes into this chamber from the room of hell beyond."

The flowery language of the high-born Chinese did not desert him even now. I whirled, and saw the yellow smoke; yellow tentacles of it, coming in through the keyhole, making one think of an inept smoker trying to blow rings.

I choked. It already had me by the throat.

CHAPTER FIVE

Chinese Blank Walls

"**LIU TI,**" said Kwan Tao, speaking very rapidly, "wished me to take Liu Mei in marriage. I wished it, too, proud to have for wife the daughter of Chinese kings. But the tong said no. Liu Ti defied the tong. They threatened us all with death if Liu Ti persisted in his defiance. Liu Ti thought you might help.

This is the result. And now, my two good friends, here we are, altogether, with but a few minutes of life left to us."

He didn't go toward Liu Mei. I knew that centuries of tradition held him apart from her. Modern America would have ridden, in its youth, over any such barrier as convention had reared between these two, especially when the fault was not with Liu Mei.

Kwan Tao spoke to her.

"I loved you from the bottom of my heart, Liu Ti."

"I know." Her voice was harsh. "But if we were to escape from this pit, you would never again so much as touch my hand."

He didn't nod; he couldn't. He didn't shake his head. There was no answer he could give, because Liu Mei had already given it.

"I love you, too, Liu Mei, have always loved you," I said.

One might as well speak truly on the brink of the grave, where there was nothing to win or lose.

"I loved you both," said Liu Mei, speaking as one already dead. "And now I die, alone. It is so unutterably lonely."

I didn't tell them, even if there had been time, what had befallen their people. They must have guessed anyhow. They knew their own kind.

I whirled on Kwan Tao.

"Go to her, Tao," I choked. "Take her in your arms. What can it matter now, when death is so close?"

He looked at her and did not move. In the ear of my mind I could hear a creaky cart on the streets of Canton, with a tinkling, broken urn swinging below it. I could see Liu Mei, white of face, sitting on that cart, jeered at by multitudes along the narrow, muddy streets.

The thought almost broke my heart.

I started toward Liu Mei, and couldn't make it. My feet didn't work properly.

I staggered, almost falling, away over to the right. The wall was jumping at me. I couldn't lift my arms, to ward it off. It struck me in the face, knocking me flat. I rolled to my side, looked at Kwan Tao. He was staring, his face a mask of agony, at Liu Mei. But he hadn't taken a step toward her.

Now he swayed, like a tree in a hurricane, as the drug which was slaying all three of us got in its deadly work.

I got to my feet, finally, and it was like lifting a mighty weight. I slid against the wall, trying to shove myself toward Liu Mei. She was watching me, and her eyes thanked me. It must have been terrible, to a delicately nurtured woman, to die like this, with two men who knew what a dreadful thing had happened to her.

I finally reached her.

I put my arm around it. It was like trying to lift an arm of lead. I sagged against the wall. A yellow film now stretched between Kwan Tao and me, through which he seemed still to sway. His eyes were still fixed on Liu Mei.

I thought he was talking, but there was a ringing in my ears, so that I was none too sure.

"Daughter of kings! Blood of kings!" I thought he was saying. "Defiled by dregs from the rottenest gutters of China-town! How can I—"

I turned to Liu Mei.

"It wouldn't matter to me, darling," I whispered, my whisper a sobbing kind of gasp. "I know you couldn't help it. I would take you in my arms, hold you forever, and we'd both forget."

She whispered back.

"How good it is to know that, Gordon Bais, on the brink of the Eastern Heaven."

She, like Kwan Tao, used the flowery speech in a crisis. She was all Chinese, save that her coloring was almost as light

as my own. She, to me, was an American girl.

I tried to hold her more tightly. But both of us were swaying, and I was trying to grip the smooth cold wall with the fingernails of my free hand. I felt the nails slide along the stone; I heard them, like a thin screaming in my ears. These weird impressions told me that hashish, at least in part, was in the yellow smoke which destroyed us.

There was nothing ahead of us but death.

I turned to face Liu Mei. Maybe, by slapping her, by shaking her head, I could keep her awake. Soon the enemy would open the door. Then, perhaps, I could hurl her out, save her.

But, God help me! I couldn't manage my hands and arms. All my strength could not lift them. I couldn't even take my arm from about the proud, graceful shoulders of Liu Mei.

We were all three doomed. This was the end.

I swayed. We swayed together, and I think Liu Mei held me up, once or twice, when I would have fallen. My eyes seemed to bulge as I looked at that locked door, so that the thin tendrils of yellow smoke became as large as full-bodied pythons—yellow, hideous, nightmare pythons, showing their coils through a Gargantuan keyhole to quest for the three of us.

I tried again to tell Liu Mei that it didn't matter. But now no words would pass my lips. My vocal cords would no longer serve me.

THEN, unaccountably, I was down on the floor, on my belly: I couldn't rise again. I couldn't wriggle my fingers. Beside me Liu Mei was standing with her feet wide apart, proudly trying to die erect.

The yellow film was everywhere.

Kwan Tao still stood, weaving, swaying, looking at Liu Mei.

She must have been looking at him, too.

But she preferred me, I was sure of that.

It was something to take with me into the Hereafter, where our heavens would not cross, and we should never meet again. Unless the white of Liu Mei came to my heaven.

How silly it was! But the yellow smoke caused it.

And then my heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. I was losing Liu Mei. Perhaps I had never had her. Her love, yes, a strange kind of love, but part of my life. Now the two of them, Kwan Tao and Liu Mei, staggering, almost falling, were moving toward each other.

I saw them meet.

His hands, by some superhuman power which I did not share, because I could not move mine at all, went out to her. They caught her left arm, drew the hand through his elbow. They stood side by side with this strange Chinese handclasp—which was the signal of forgiveness, of close harmony of souls.

And then, though both knew American kisses, because both had known the freedom of American schools, they were both all China.

They were rubbing their cheeks together, because the true Chinese did not kiss.

They locked in each other's arms. Then they fell, as a tree falls, and though I saw them strike the hard floor, I did not hear them, because of the ghastly roaring in my ears.

They fell, sprawled supine, but held fast in each other's arms, and my spirit writhed in agony as they fell. For I knew that in those last minutes both had forgotten there had ever been such a one as Gordon Bais.

I took that awful, strange agony, with me into abysmal darkness, where there

was nothing but the Niagara-like roaring in my ears.

Darkness, through which shot long tendrils of yellow smoke, engulfed me.

I REGAINED consciousness in an elevator that was moving. Strange and horrible and unearthly it seemed. My last memory had been of Kwan Tao and Liu Mei, falling side by side in the room of the yellow smoke, forgetting all about me.

And here I was in a moving elevator. My hand was on the control. The cage was dropping.

Save that Liu Mei was not here, I might just have entered it with her. But what hell there had been between!

My dazed, drugged wits began to come back. I noted the passing floors. I was dropping from the third to the second. I jammed the control, to stop the car at the ground floor. I ran out. I was crazy, I suppose, but it couldn't end like this. I had to find Kwan Tao and Liu Mei.

I screamed. I went racing through the corridor, down the stairs, heading for the tunnel where Miu Lei, Kwan Tao and I had suffered.

I smashed headon against a wall where the door leading down had been.

There was nothing. Just a smooth wall, with no sign that a stairway had ever existed here. I banged against that panel, shouting. I couldn't have broken it down with a battering ram. The echoes of my cries, and my pounding, ran eerily all through the house.

That was all. No other sounds.

Wild with terror, I raced back to the elevator.

Half an hour later I had scoured that building from top to bottom, and had found not one living soul. Nor a dead body. And this, at the last, was the result of my madness:

I had found no trace of Liu Mei or Kwan Tao, no hint that Liu Mei's uncle

had ever even lived here. Every trace of the things which had happened here had vanished.

I found nothing. I satisfied myself that I was alone in this place that had become a mausoleum of dreadful mystery. I battered against that mystery and could find no answer. I tried to find ways down into the warrens, and only cold blank panels met my every attempt.

I was beaten, whipped.

I'd get officers. I dashed to the outer door, the only one in this place that wasn't locked. I raced out, looking along the street for police.

The door clicked shut, and locked, behind me.

I couldn't get back in. I banged against that door until I broke my knuckles. I cried out Liu Mei's name, and Kwan Tao's.

I sobbed with futile rage and despair.

This was, I knew, the end.

Nobody in all Chinatown, throughout

which my cries and battering must have been plainly heard, gave the slightest sign, until almost an hour of madness had passed.

Then an old, a very old, Chinese gentleman came to me, looked up and said:

"It is futile for the foreigner to batter his head against the stones. The dead must bury their dead. The past is gone. Nothing can be regained. The task of the living is to forget quickly. In your place, my young friend, I should go back to my own. For never again will you see any of those you knew so well—no, not even though your police tear Chinatown into shreds."

It took a long time to convince me, but he did it, finally, and I went home, staggering like a drunken man, while fingers of yellow mist seemed eternally to be striking the lobes of my brain, pushing them against the inside of my skull.

Out of it all, I thought crazily, the yellow smoke, at least, would be always with me.

THE END



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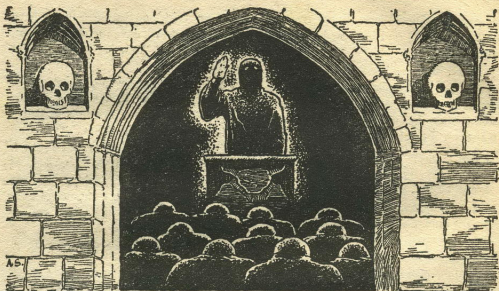
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THE BLACK CHAPEL



JOE SEITZ had risen from puddler to the control cab of the big ladle in less than three years. A hard worker, Joe Seitz was, and the hearth foreman had had his eye on him from the first. Before the first year was out he had seen that Joe was put in charge of furnace No. 12, and the only reason Joe hadn't risen steadily from that time onward was due to no fault of Joe's. It just happened that, at the time, there was no job open to promote Joe into.

There was a pause in the puddler boss's upward progress that lasted almost two years. That two years strained Joe Seitz's patience to the limit—and beyond.

But Seitz had never worked anywhere but in the steel mills. He didn't know anything else. He had to stick—but there was nothing to keep him from advancing up and away from the furnaces. Nothing, that is, except the fact that Ben Grady had the job he was in line for—and in two years' time Ben never gave a sign of slipping, never made a mistake, never missed a day's work. It was maddening.

Joe Seitz went on a three weeks' drunk to see if he couldn't think of something to do about it. His brain was sluggish and dull when he was sober. Only his motor-sensory system worked efficiently, seemingly, without the stimulant of alcohol. But liquor loosened his imagination, gave him ideas. He emerged from the drunk with a fully-hatched scheme for removing Ben Grady from his path.

Once in a while the big ladle got stuck right in the middle of the mill. It always happened when there was a full load in it—the weight of the molten metal in the huge cauldron making the accident more

likely to occur. There was a slight dent on the girder the conveyor traveled on, and the bump sometimes sprung a dog in the cut-off mechanism so that the circuit to the motor was broken. When that happened, the man in the control cab had to walk out on the girder until he was directly over the huge vat of boiling metal in order to re-set the cut-off dog.

The mill did not have a night shift. Business was dull, and Seitz had no difficulty in avoiding the nightwatchman when he came to put his plan into operation. The plan was very simple. All Seitz did was to crawl out on the girder and grease it thoroughly at the spot that would be directly over the ladle the next time the dog slipped. . . .

It did. Ben Grady died horribly, and Joe got his job.

Ben had screamed, when his foot slipped on the grease Seitz had put on the girder. He had screamed again as his body plunged down through space into the ladle of white-hot molten metal. Joe Seitz remembered those screams. He was afraid that he would remember—and at intervals seem to hear them in all their brain-twisting horribleness—until he died.

Lately it had been getting worse. Every time the ladle passed the middle of the mill opposite the point where the cab was located, Joe Seitz shuddered. He could look down into the big vat from where he perched, and, in fancy, he saw his own body plunging into that lashing fury of steel soup. He tried to tell himself that it was a merciful death.

That didn't help any. Whenever the ladle reached the point where it used to get stuck occasionally, Joe could hear Ben Grady scream. The ladle didn't get stuck any more. Ben's death had resulted in the repair of that dent in the girder. Something like that usually had to happen in the mill before a piece of machinery was fixed. But Joe continued to hear Ben scream—the screams got louder every day.

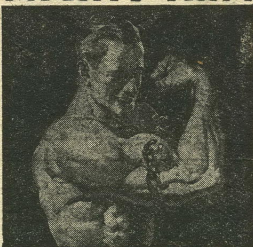
Finally it got to the point where Joe decided he couldn't stand it any more. This job that he had waited three years for, that he had worked himself blue in the face for—that he had even committed murder for had turned sour on him. He realized that his nerves were breaking under the strain of waiting to hear Ben scream a half dozen times a day. All his sensory nerves—his whole brain—seemed to be centered in his ears every time the ladle came by with its load. He would sit there, tense, quivering, waiting for the ladle to reach that middle point. Then he would hear the screams. . . .

Joe set a date for himself. He decided to quit in two weeks. Those two weeks were hell—but he stuck it out. Then—on the last day—he almost changed his mind. The first full ladle went by—and he heard nothing. The second started up from the hearths, and he felt nothing. His nerves remained relaxed. He was as calm and unperturbed as he ever was in his life. The second ladle reached the mid-point and went on by. Joe heard nothing. It was the same with the third.

At lunch time Joe was more cheerful than he had been in months. He laughed and joked with his fellow-workers with a freedom and spirit of camaraderie that made them look at him speculatively. They wondered if he was drunk. As for Joe, he was glad that he had not given the foreman notice. If things went all right in the afternoon he would stay on. It looked like he had laid Ben Grady's ghost, at last.

(Continued on page 127)

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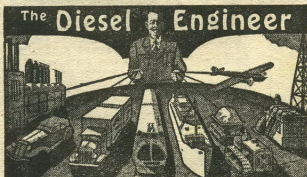
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(Continued from page 125)

The fourth and fifth ladles went by that afternoon without incident. No nerve tension, no screams. That decided Joe. He would stay on.

About four o'clock the sixth ladle started up from the hearths. Joe watched it come with a faint smile on his thin lips. He had licked it. He had beaten his terror of the ladle. He had silenced Ben Grady's screams for all time—

Then, suddenly, his body tautened, every muscle and nerve was suddenly as rigid as a steel rod. His breath caught in the top of his lungs, and his eyes started from their sockets. The ladle had come to an abrupt stop. It had come to a stop at the exact point where it used to get caught when that dent was in the girder! But there was no dent there now. . . .

Joe Seitz sat in his cab and shivered. He didn't know how long he sat there, but at length a hail from below aroused him from his reverie of terror.

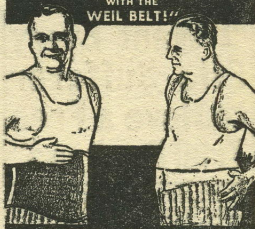
"For God's sake, Seitz!" yelled the foreman. "Get out there and set that dog! What in hell are you waiting for?"

Seitz shuddered. He intended to climb out of his cab, go down below and tell the foreman he had quit. He crawled out of the cab to do it—but he suddenly realized that instead of heading for the ladder, he was walking out on the girder. Good God! What was the matter with him? His body was taking him out there on the girder to that spot directly above the smoking, boiling metal—and all the time he was trying to make it carry him below, out of danger. . . .

Then men below, looking up in hushed tenseness at Seitz's body up there on the girder, saw him crawl out, foot by foot, until he was over the ladle. Then a strange thing happened. Some said, afterward, that it looked exactly as if some invisible hand had given Seitz's leg a sudden yank. And as Seitz fell, they claimed that there were two screams—together. A few swore that the other scream was in the voice of Ben Grady. . . .

The stories that appear in **TERROR TALES** are sometimes based on the theory that physical death is not necessarily the end of a human entity, for, whatever one may happen to believe, it is hardly contestable that strange and eerie things do occur, occasionally, which cannot quite be accounted for by material explanations.

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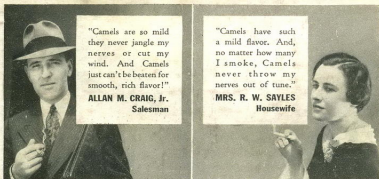
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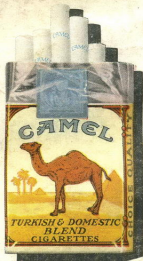
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