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TWO NOVELETTES OF WEIRD TERROR
The Body I Stole....................................................Russell Gray 52
As I went whirling through the vortex again and again, I forgot that he who
tamperers with the Laws of the Ages must be prepared to pay the eternal penalty!

The Moon Drips Blood...........................................Wyatt Blassingame 84
When Philip Madison came back from the temple of Oxatopal, the madness was
in his head and in his blood. The Little People had let him return alive—to tell with
his own lips the ghastly story of his wife bound to the curve of the blood-red moon
and dipped in the sacred well!

FOUR SHORT STORIES OF EERIE MENACE
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Within my hands lay a key that could open the door to the past and enable me to
start life anew. Did I dare tempt the Fates?

Seal Tight His Gravel............................................W. Wayne Robbins 41
I knew the rites I had performed over the dead body of my uncle had been—to
resurrect a vampire!

Forked Horror.....................................................Ray Cummings 68
Gloria Levant hated snakes as much as any normal woman, but in some ghastly way
she knew that in the body of the repulsive reptile was the soul of her first husband—
come back to claim her in death!

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She recognized the mistake she had made after the car had crashed into the gulley—
but was she damned to an eternity of lonely horror?

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JANUARY ISSUE ON SALE NOV. 22nd
THE GREAT EXPOSER

WE RETURNED the other day from our vacation. Our legs and back were red and blistered, our limbs were weary from unaccustomed exercise, and, definitely, we needed a hair-cut. But we had had a good time and an enlightening one. For the first time in a good many years we had returned to the small country town from which, long ago, we had set out to garner fame and fortune. Of course we did not expect the town band to meet us at the station, nor did we expect to be acclaimed as a world-renowned celebrity—but, we must admit, it did startle us a little to discover that not a single one of our old acquaintances even knew that we were a minor cog in the wheels of the publishing industry. But our greatest shock came when we talked to our best chum, a chap with whom we'd gone straight through from kindergarten to college. He was totally unaware that there was such a magazine as TERROR TALES.

"You mean to say," he asked us incredulously, "that people actually publish a whole magazine devoted just to being afraid?"

We thought that that was not putting it quite accurately, but, in general, it covered the situation.

"But," he protested, "that doesn't sound like common sense to me. I should think your readers would get bored in no time at all."

What was his reason for thinking that? We were quite of the opposite opinion.

"Well," he explained, "it's too narrow a field. All the stories must be pretty much the same—there's no room for variety. Either you're afraid, or you're not afraid—and that's all there is to it. What's so darned interesting in that?"

Pause a moment, we said. Stop and think a little before you commit yourself too far. Remember that fear is one of the basic human emotions—perhaps the most fundamental emotion of all. You might just as well say that 'love' is uninteresting, that it has no variety. Either you love, or you don't—yet will you say that love as a subject for stories, books, plays or what-have-you, has lost its appeal?

"No, of course not," our friend admitted. "But everyone knows that love is a very complex thing indeed, that its ramifications and vagaries are many and various. Fear, on the other hand, is simple and direct. It stems from a known cause, and has very little variety in effect."

Bosh! we answered. And we told him then that, compared to the emotion we call fear, love is as elementary as eating and sleeping.

For instance, we went on, we have a vivid recollection of two small boys creeping through the bushes toward a lonely shack at the dead of night. It was a very ancient shack, its walls were cracked and paintless, its floor and roof sagged as though ready to collapse at any moment. It was, in fact, completely disreputable, but it was the focal point of the two boys' trip. For in this shack was said to reside a witch who boiled her evil brew and conversed with the spirits of the dead every night at midnight. The two boys had boasted that they weren't afraid of any old witch; they'd go out there at midnight and talk to her, and if she so much as lifted a finger at them, they'd grab her and tear her to pieces.

However, as the two boys reached the edge of the small clearing that surrounded the shack, they found that their legs did not support them quite as well as when they had so boldly started out. In short, they were feeling the first pangs of fear.

Through the dirty glass of the shack

(Continued on page 6)
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NOTE: This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 8311
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(Continued from page 4)

windows, the two boys could see the dull red glow of a fire inside and occasionally they could hear the protesting squeak of an old rocking chair, but there were no other signs of life. No shadowy figures gliding about, nor any clank and rattle of ghost-chains. Then, just as the two boys had decided to move in closer, a gigantic Negro—at least to them he seemed gigantic—glided around from in back of the shack and slipped in through the partly open door.

Almost immediately, the fire flared up brightly and its flames took on a sickly greenish tinge. The sound of the rocking chair had stopped, but in its place there came a low, mournful chanting that sent chills up and down the boys' spines. The two stood up, hanging tightly to each other, undecided whether to appease their curiosity or their natural inclination to run like hell.

Eventually curiosity won out, and the two boys crept up to one of the dirt-smeared windows and peered inside. Their eyes were round and wide, their mouths were hanging open, and their legs were trembling so that they had to cling to the sill for support. At first they could make out little, then gradually the scene inside began to take on form and substance. The fire was burning on an open hearth in the center of the floor, its eerie, green flames licking up the sides of an iron kettle that hung suspended from a tripod above the bed of coals. Steam rose in great quantities from the kettle and filled the single room so that the shapes of its two occupants were vague and unreal, but the boys had little trouble in picturing the dirty white hair, scrappy limbs, and wrinkled face of the old woman who was reaching into the kettle with a long-handled dipper. And they saw, too, the huge, misty shape of the Negro standing beside the old woman, holding in his hands a battered tin cup.

It was a scene to make even the stoutest heart quake. And when the old woman withdrew the dipper from the kettle, poured its contents into the black man's cup, and the latter, kneeling on the floor, raised it to his lips—it became too much for the two boys. What they would have seen had they remained, they never knew. But at that time they had no thoughts in their minds but how to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Do you think, we asked our friend—who had had the grace to blush during our recital—that these two boys were bored during all this; do you think they found their experience, as mild as it was, dull and unexciting?

“No,” said our friend. “It was plenty exciting. I remember it all, now. We were scared as hell, but we could talk of nothing else for weeks. I'm beginning to see what you mean. I never thought of that escapade in connection with fear.”

Well, we said, the stimulation and excitement that it aroused was in direct proportion to the fear we felt. It is always that way. Fear forces extra adrenalin into the blood, makes the heart work faster and acts as a tonic on body and mind. Some of the greatest deeds of heroism in the world's history were done under the stimulus of fear, as well as some of the most craven. Fear is the Great Exposer. When you see a man who is afraid, you see the true man, stripped of all the artificiality and false veneer his environment and standing in life have cloaked him with.

Our friend rubbed his chin. “If that is true,” he said, “and I admit that it sounds all right to me, then that explains why magazines of mystery and terror have the appeal you say they do.”

Right, we admitted cheerfully. No one ever wants to go out deliberately and put himself in a position where he will be afraid, but when they can get the same experience vicariously by sitting in their armchair and reading—what more could one desire?...
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I thought I knew the ultimate horror when Nora told me she was going to marry the weirdly evil Avedis. But that was before the dead past came back to claim her—and before I had seen her eerie, pagan dance with a bloody sacrificial knife held high!
That inanimate, wooden thing lifted its arms, took a step after Nora... 

CHAPTER ONE

Death in the Sun

NORA HAD been afraid every time she had gone to the rock canyon. But that mad fascination that she couldn't explain kept drawing her back there day after day.
Today the terror was worse. Something hideous and menacing seemed to be crouching there in the silence. Her heart pounded in her throat till she could hardly breathe. Yet she could not stop. The torrents of sun glare beating through her brain set her vibrating to the call of forces she was powerless to resist.

She had been running so as not to be late to her rendezvous—of which Bill never must know. She walked forward tensely now, hands clenched at her sides, eyes rapidly uplifted.

Before her opened the rounded small canyon. Naked rock walls lurched up to a small opening hundreds of feet overhead. It was an uncanny spot, a Golgotha where no tree nor shrub, no thing that lived, spread its leaves.

It had been the man whose name she scarcely dared breathe even to herself who had showed it to her, the second day of her visit at Nils Bergman's house party. Since then she had been coming here to meet him daily at noon; the hour when the sun's beams poured a magical tide through the hole in the roof.

Every one of those clandestine appointments, when she had made excuses to slip away from the man she had promised to marry, had filled her with self-reproach. She told herself that she loved Bill with all her heart. But there was something about that other man—the things of soul-stopping importance that he was telling her; the unearthly weird power that he seemed to exercise over her mind.

Swiftly she glanced around to make sure that he hadn't arrived yet, that she was still alone. Her hands, cold with excitement, moved up to her throat. She drew in her breath with a hissing sound as she wheeled to bring the sunlight full on her face. Her arms rose above her head in a gesture eerie and strange.

Then with a sobbing cry she stumbled back to lean on a boulder to steady her legs whose strength seemed to have drained into the ground. She moaned faintly. Her hands flew to crush on her bosom where an insupportable agony had started to throb.

It was not pain of her tumultuous breathing that made her do that. It was anguish of terror that in some way brought with it an awful hunger. No one was there. Yet she knew the presence of a power, unearthly, before which she was helpless. It was a power that throbbed there in the sunshine.

She moved and her eyes fell on the ground. Close beside her something was lying that she hadn't noticed before. She stood frozen an instant, just staring. Then she went tottering toward it, hands pawing the rocks, her voice that strove to shriek out her horror locked in her jaws.

**THE DEAD** girl lay on her back. She had been lovely in life, slim and virginal. Now, midway of the little white dress that she wore, a crimson mouth seemed to be grinning. It was a crescent-shaped gash that had been cut in her torso, just under her heart. A cavity large enough for her heart to have been cut away and removed!

On her knees beside the dead girl Nora sank. With trembling cold fingers she parted the folds of the dress till she was sure of the hideous thing she had suspected. She didn't understand what weird compulsion made her do that.

The next instant she had leaped to her feet, eyes bulged and glassy, lips ashen. From behind, just around the turn in the gully, feet crunched on loose stones.

Her voice burst then in a wailing scream. She plunged a step toward the exit. But she couldn't get out that way, escape was cut off.

Then she leaped to the wall of the canyon. She went clawing and scrambling, fighting to drag herself up the furnace-hot face of the rock. Her fingernails left lacings of blood on the stones.
Closer yet the treads sounded behind her. That presence that menaced her from the sunshine, that she could hear and feel but could not see, was here now, in the canyon. If it came a foot nearer, if it ever touched her.

She made one more maddened effort to scale the wall. Then her overtaxed brain gave way and she slumped limp in a faint.

AND THAT was where I found her, a pitiful crumpled heap lying on the stones.

Fifteen minutes before, I had left the house with the idea of finding the girl I was going to marry and continuing her stroll through the woods with her. It had been the sound of her voice in terror that had sent me in a run to overtake her.

I sank on my knees beside her. With my body I shielded her face from the sun while I rubbed her wrists and whispered her name. "Nora! Nora darling, speak to me, tell me you are all right!" What on earth could have happened? The heat here was oven-like. If there was only a place where I could get some cold water!

Nora was a Latin type, slender but not too tall. She had slim tapering arms and legs, the most perfect hands I had ever seen. She had a wealth of lustrous black hair, small dark face like beauty shining out of a mirror. Her white dress moulded her loveliness like the sheath of a gorgeous black and gold lily. Her limp helplessness there twisted my heart.

In a minute or two she opened her eyes. She lay gazing bewilderedly then screamed and flung her arms around my neck. "Bill!" she sobbed wildly. "Bill, don't let it get me! Darling, hold me tight! Never let go of me!" Her soft figure throbbed in uncontrollable shiverings.

I pressed her closer, kissed her eyes and her shining dark hair. "Nora, sweetheart, what in the world is it?" I murmured. I felt my own fear starting to mount, for her nervous collapse was beyond anything for which I could imagine a reason. "Tell me what happened."

She straightened, swept the hair from her eyes, drew a shuddering breath. "I was just taking a walk in the woods. I happened to come here. The sunshine—it was so awful. It frightened me. It—"

I said: "What do you mean, the sunshine frightened you? Sure, it's hot, but—" I thought that some dreadful shock might have temporarily unbalanced her.

I patted her quivering shoulders. "Take your time," I tried to soothe her. Everything is all right now. I'm here to take care of you. Just try and tell me what happened—"

"I—oh, I am trying," she gulped. "I—she—" She nodded over my shoulder. She murmured half-incoherently: "Bill, it got her. It got Lucy. The sun made it hungry—for blood. It was right behind me. It wanted—my heart—"

I simply stared at Nora. And then all at once I saw what she had been looking at.

It seems incredible that I could have missed seeing the dead girl when I arrived. It had been my concern over Nora that had kept me from directing my eyes anywhere else. With a cry I stumbled up to my feet. That was the most horrible sight I had ever beheld!

"Why, it's Lucy. It's Lucy Marston," I exclaimed in horror. "She was one of the maids at the house. Who could have wanted to do that to her?"

"She fell in love with him. That's why she was killed here in the sunshine," Nora choked.

"She fell in love with whom?" I echoed bewilderedly. "And what has the sunshine got to do with it?"

"With Mr. Avedis. That man from Central America."

This Avedis of whom she spoke was undoubtedly a queer customer. But for
Nora to cry that Lucy had been butchered like that because she had fallen for him. . . .

"You must be wrong!" I exclaimed.

Nora looked at me with the strangest expression, eyes darkening, cheeks growing pinched. "Oh, Bill, you don't know!" she whispered. Tint by tint her face blanched till it became even whiter, if that were possible. "Bill, you don't know!" she echoed wildly.

"What don't I know?" I exclaimed a little impatiently. By now her odd behavior had me thoroughly frightened.

And then an astounding thing took place. Nora didn't answer me. Instead she seemed to shudder away from me. And then her broken cry came: "Bill, I can't marry you. I can't ever marry you!"

For an instant I only stared back at her. I was bereft of speech. She and I had been engaged for more than a year. I had thought that our love and understanding were well-nigh ideal. And now as if the horror we had found here wasn't enough, out of clear sky came the words that brought my world tumbling about me.

"Nora, for heaven's sake what are you saying?" I burst out at last. "What do you mean, you can't marry me? If I have done anything that I don't realize, at least give me a chance to explain."

She reached out impulsively to clasp her little cold hand around mine. "Oh, no, Bill!" she cried softly. "Of course you haven't done anything."

"Then what is it?" I exclaimed, more baffled and frightened than ever. And then my terror drove me to cry: "Why did you bring this up now? It can't have anything to do with Lucy's death?"

That question seemed to terrify Nora more than anything that had taken place yet. She bit her lip; stammered: "Why, no. No—of course it hasn't anything to do with Lucy."

I knew she was telling me an untruth. I saw her hands move with an indescribable gesture to clasp over her bosom. My uncanny fear mounted as I realized that she was gripping herself over the very spot where Lucy's heart had been rent from her body. As though she felt in her own lovely flesh premonitory tears of anguish!

"Then tell me why. Tell me the real reason," I insisted.

She looked at me with her love clouded in her dear eyes. She cried out brokenly: "No, I can't tell you that, Bill. Oh, if you love me, don't ask me that!"

She went on so faintly that I could scarcely hear: "But this—I've got to confess this to you. Bill, I've been meeting him out here. I've been meeting Mr. Avedis here every day."

"You've been meeting Avedis!" I echoed. "But why? I thought you disliked him—"

Nora whispered: "Bill, don't misunderstand. I don't mean—he and I only were talking. But Lucy was jealous. She spied on us when we came here. She—that was why she—why her heart was cut out in the sunshine—"

My darling's fingernails dug into my hand. "All the women who know Avedis must die—"

I shook my head to jolt the horrors out of my brain. This was incomprehensible. I was more sure now than ever that the dreadful experience through which Nora had passed had driven her temporarily out of her mind. But by her own admission she had been meeting that man here. She must have been swept off her feet by infatuation for him of which I hadn't dreamed. Lucy had felt the same. And Lucy was dead!

I drew her up to her feet intending first of all to get her back to the house. We had turned toward the narrow exit when I felt her start and then go rigid against my arm.

The newcomer had approached so quietly that we hadn't been aware of his com-
ing till he stood there beside us. He was the man of whom we had been speaking, Enrico Avedis.

I SHALL never forget the stab of revulsion that needlel me at sight of his waspish short figure, with bullet round head set neckless upon narrow shoulders, small pointed features and rodent eyes under retreating low forehead. He had an oily, dark complexion which heightened the suggestion of some noisome human tarantula that had crawled out of a rock crevice.

Nora and I had first met him the summer before at a beach. We had never learned much of his background; save that he was a native of some small Central American country; a wealthy man whose hobby was study of antiquities. From the first time when his eyes had fallen upon the girl I was going to marry I had known that he intended to get her away from me, to marry himself. I sensed that there was literally nothing to which he would not resort to win her away from me.

Ever since then he had kept hatching up excuses to see her. I had realized that it was no accident that he was a guest at the house party to which we had been invited. And now when she had confessed that she had been meeting him here...

But his opening words were sufficiently commonplace. "I heard some one screaming. I've been a long time trying to find the place." He looked more narrowly at the dead girl. "How terrible! Any idea how it happened? Who could have done it?"

His gall was impossible. I started to blurt out what Nora had told me about him and Lucy. But one look at my darling rendered me unable to utter a word.

I followed her locked eyes to Avedis. The man had straightened, red-fingered, from his inspection of Lucy. He stood with his gaze directed aloft to the opening at the top of the canyon through which sunlight poured. His arms rose in uncanny slow motion over his head, as though he were making obeisance to some power, unknown and unearthly, which he perceived there. His lips mumbled gibberish impossible to understand. Scarlet fingers wove a mystic pagan pattern against the sun.

It was then that I felt for the first time the presence of those powers, wielded, it seemed, from a supernatural world, which in the hours to come were to sweep me along the road of insanity. Something indescribably evil, irresistible, twining
around Nora. Powers summoned by Ave-
dis!

And then my dear girl said something
hideous! She whispered: “Bill, the rea-
son that I can’t marry you is that I am
going to marry Mr. Avedis.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “Marry
Avedis!” I whispered at last. It wasn’t
the thought of losing her that was the
worst. It was because her declaration
seemed forced from her not by her will
but by some devilish influence, some-
enchantment. And if what she had said
about him could be true, that all women
who were attracted to him must die.

Hoarsely I cried: “Nora, you’re get-
ing out of here!”

I got my arm around her and started
drawing her into the rock-walled gully
that led out of the canyon. Short legs
moving rapidly, Avedis trotted behind.

CHAPTER TWO

In Pagan Tongue

BEFORE long we picked up familiar
trails and soon came out of the woods
in front of Bergman’s forest lodge—
almost a rustic mansion—which stood on
an island midway of a lake in a re-
 mote part of the Adirondack
mountains.

I can omit details of the harrowing
incidents which followed after I had told
my host and his dozen or more guests
what lay in the rock canyon. There was
a delay while a motor boat went across
to the mainland. No one was around upon
whom we could call for help. Bergman’s
house was the only one on the island.

Then came arrival of the local police,
the investigation and endless questionings.
I kept silent regarding Nora’s story of
Avedis and Lucy. I would have died be-
fore I would have confessed to anyone
that my darling had been meeting him
there.

It was almost dark when the authorities
finally departed to look into stories of cer-
tain rough characters who had been seen
in the vicinity in power boats. I could
have taken Nora out with them. But I
missed that chance. In my blind folly I
discounted the menace that was weaving
around her. I thought that I could take
care of her.

During the afternoon hours, my dar-
ing’s behavior grew still more strange,
more alarming. I could see her manifest
fear. Yet that fear did not keep her from
feeling a dreadful—anticipation is the
only word.

Anticipation—God! What she kept
doing was trying to slip away from me
and go to the side of Avedis. I had a
vision of Lucy; of what she had told me
about his effect upon women. I realized
now that it wasn’t safe to let Nora out
of my sight for a moment. I kept telling
myself that she couldn’t love him. It was
that unearthly something, like a current
of evil magnetism drawing her. She
seemed almost—bewitched.

Bergman was an odd character, a mid-
 dle-aged man whose hobby was in gather-
ing eccentric persons around him. He
took a morbid delight in placing his guests in
trying situations and then watching their
antics as though they were bugs under
a microscope. I hadn’t been anxious to
bring Nora here, where the very air
seemed tainted. Incredible stories were
told about the excesses that took place
during wild get-togethers on the remote,
lonely island. It was rumored that people
had come here and never been seen again.

But Bergman—a rotund little fat man
with weasel eyes and a steel-trap mouth
in a face round and pink as a baby’s—
had asked us three or four times, kept
eternally urging us. It had been a hard
summer. Nora was worn out with work
in the city heat. I thought that the change
would be a life-saver for her. I thought
that when I finally accepted. A life-saver
—God!
The girl I was going to marry was a sculptress. She made little clay or wax figures and then dressed them up and photographed them in groups for magazine advertisements. She fairly bubbled with talent. Made three times the money that I did at my fiction writing. That had always been a source of dispute between us, our only conflict—that I had insisted on supporting my wife on my income. It had delayed our marriage.

Bergman affected a Bohemian atmosphere. The electric lights were extinguished. Candles illuminated the library and the hall into which it opened through a wide doorway.

The dim glow brought an eerie feeling. The wind that soughed in the pine trees wove a mournful strain. The guests, standing around with cocktails while they waited for dinner to be announced, murmured in whispers.

And then it came.

It commenced with a queer noise arising, it seemed, in the rear part of the house where there were several unoccupied and unlighted rooms. It was at first a vague hollow thudding. It brought me up with nerves tingling oddly. I felt Nora start at my side. One of the women exclaimed: "What was that?"

"Just the wind slamming a door," someone replied. I heard Nora's tight cry: "No, that wasn't a door—"

The woman looked scared. She murmured:

"It sounded for a minute like—but no, it couldn't have been a—"

And then we were all standing not speaking, scarcely breathing. For the sound swelled in volume as it approached. We knew now that it was a drum beating. It throbbed a pagan tempo that captured the silence and made it vibrate like a gigantic heart; made it billow and tug at our ears.

Rising above it could be heard strains of a flute. Pipe of Pan, its wailing laughter chilled me with inexpressible fear. It seemed to be the voice of those uncanny terrors which I had sensed, become audible, become alive; come close to us, snatching at Nora. I muttered: "Put on the lights!"

Then my fear leaped. For now Nora was fighting to get out of the arm which I had slipped about her. She was crazy to go where that drum was beating! Her face in the vague light had gone vulpine, unnatural.

A voice gasped: "Listen! For God's sake listen to that!"

From the darkness there at the back of the house a voice could be heard. I recognized that Avedis was talking but I could not understand what he said. None of us could understand him. In a singsong he intoned a gibberish of words without meaning.

It was not the fact that he spoke in a foreign tongue that brought the miasma of terror working under my scalp. It was because my instinct told me that the language I heard was extinct. That it was the talk of men who had vanished ages ago from the earth!

I could not understand, I repeat, a syllable of what Avedis was saying. But Nora understood! Her lips parted, her face became flushed. I felt her tense as she drank in the meaning of that rigamarole which made sense to no one else in the room. Like that magnetic current weaving invisible tendrils about her I felt again the surge of weird power that affected her like some spell. Urging her to do—what?

She moaned—and then, before I could stop her, she had wrenched herself out of my clasp. She leaped toward the doorway. By the time I had recovered myself enough to dash after her she had vanished in the maze of unlighted passages and rooms. With a tongue out of the past
Avedis had called her and she had gone to him!

There followed a space of confusion while I raced from room to room, hunting for her, shouting her name. I couldn’t find her. What had become of her I couldn’t guess. Had she kept that dreadful promise that she had made to me? Had she gone to elope with Avedis? Or—

—I had another vision of Lucy and my fear was a whirlpool that undermined my brain, washed away at my sanity, terrified me.

From the library came sounds of commotion and I hurried back there. I wondered if Nora had returned. Or if someone had found her dead as Lucy had been.

But it was not Nora I saw when I dashed into the room. Nora was not in sight. Brenda West had just entered the library. She had come from the back part of the house where I had been searching.

Brenda was a streamlined blonde with skin of that odd skimmed-milk whiteness and masses of hair that looked like pulled taffy. She stood there with her hands crushed over her bosom. Brenda’s meticulously tended soft hands had been the whitest of those of any women here. But now between her clenched fingers a brood of little red snakes came wriggling.

Brenda had been stabbed the way Lucy had been. But only deep enough to wound her, not kill her. She leaned against the doorframe, panting and desperately trying to speak.

I stumbled toward her. I gasped out: “Have you seen Nora?” Brenda was another girl who had manifested that infatuation for Avedis. That made two who had come under his spell and been stabbed. And Nora had said she was going to marry him! She had gone to him at his call and she hasn’t come back.

Brenda licked her lips. They twisted without any sound coming out. Then running feet sounded and Nora was there.

WHIRLED to my darling. I cried out my thanks to God that she was safe. And then coldness rolled over me, slowing my heart. For something had happened to her while she had been away. Nora was wildly excited. Her lips were quivering scarlet whips.

There followed silence stark as a breaking heart. For those others all heard what I did. Nora’s lips moved and then she spoke. I couldn’t understand what she said. The gibberish that came from her was in the tongue that Avedis had used!

I had a sick lost feeling as though I had stepped out of an airplane without any parachute. I had told myself that my watchfulness and my fists could protect my dear girl from that man that I hated and feared. But in a tongue that no living man knew he had sent his enchantment about her again. He had called to her with a voice from another world and she left me to run to his side. And while she had been with him he had tried to kill Brenda as Lucy was killed.

Had he spared Nora this time because he was going to marry her? Had he bewitched her into promising to do that, postponing her death till after she had become his? Through clenched teeth I ground out to the circle of awed white faces: “Avedis did it. He killed Lucy Marston, too.”

The group scattered. Some of the women went to take Brenda up to her room. They tried to get her to say who had stabbed her. They asked her if Avedis had done it. She couldn’t speak because of blood which overflowed from her mouth. But she shook her head.

Avedis hadn’t done it.

I didn’t begin until later to realize the ultimate terror which that denial of hers was to bring to Nora and me!

Nora had slipped away. I saw her ascending the stairs to her room. I turned to go in search of Bergman; to ask him
for the loan of a motor boat. I'd seen enough to freeze me with fear. I was going to get Nora out of here now.

In shadows beyond the group that stood at the foot of the stairs I caught sight of Avedis. He stood there in semi-darkness, watching Nora, saturnine dark face contorted, beady eyes glittering. He made a figure inscrutable—diabolical.

I left the bottom step of the stairs in a leap. With arms and elbows I bored through the ring of forms. If I could get my hands on him I'd beat the truth out of him! But he slid off into darkness before I could reach him.

I spent a few minutes in vain pursuit, then started looking for Bergman. There would be time enough to deal with him later. What I had to do now was get Nora out of here before he called her again. I knew that if his evil spell touched my darling only once more I would see her—I had another vision of Lucy.

It took quite some minutes in the confusion to locate my host. He agreed readily to do as I wished. In fact he offered to ride us two miles across to the nearest town himself as soon as she was ready.

Perhaps seven or eight minutes in all might have elapsed before I ran up stairs to get Nora. With my hand lifted to knock I suddenly froze, my fear stabbing again.

For an instant I thought she must be crying in there. Then the sobbing ceased. There came a short space of silence more pregnant with suspense than any sound could have been. Then her voice came again.

Now she seemed to be laughing. Or perhaps it was singing. Over and over she was humming a snatch of some melody that I had never heard. I had the crazy thought that no living person had ever heard that refrain full of weird intervals and discordancies, for, like the tongue in which Avedis had called to her, it suggested creatures who had vanished from the earth ages ago.

But the thing that gripped me in frigid terror was the fact that the voice mewing on the other side of the door was not Nora's voice at all! She was the only one in the room. But that throaty drawling came from some girl I never had known!

Without knocking I opened the door an inch.

CHAPTER THREE

Priestess of Blood

NORA stood in the middle of the floor, under the overhead light which was glaringly bright as the sun. Her face uplifted, she raised her clasped hands till they were over her head. She turned with indescribable grace to face the thing which till that moment I had not glimpsed as it stood in a corner. One look at it twisted my throat.

The thing over there was a pagan idol, life-sized! It stood bizarre and repellent in pagan robes, with its malign knotted face and outthrust arms. A weird phosphorescent glow overspread it.

What brought cold fingers working in the roots of my hair was the fact that its face was the face of Avedis! A resemblance so life-like that for an instant I had the macabre fancy that it was the man himself.

Nora had removed a sheet from the bed. She had doubled it lengthwise and then spread it upon the floor till its form suggested the top of a stone altar. Around its edges she had arranged a collection of trinkets: bangles and charms and small half-human, half-animal images.

And now she moved swiftly to kneel upon that sheet. With hands clasped over her head she swayed back and forth as she made obeisance to the idol. She bowed her face to the floor, humbling herself in
subservience, it seemed to—to Avedis!

For an instant I stood transfixed, my body robbed of all motion. Something wild and hysterical knocked at my brain. Then I pushed open the door to go rushing in.

Nora came to her feet with a cry. She wheeled to confront me, her face growing ashen, then scarlet. She dodged around me to run to her bureau. She yanked open a drawer and thrust in among clothing some object which she had hidden behind her as I had entered. She cried out indignantly: “Bill, what do you mean by coming in here like this?”

I said: “I’m sorry. But I heard you. I saw what you were doing.” I exclaimed: “Nora, for God’s sake what is this? What it that idol doing in here? What were you—” I reached out for her hand. I said lovingly, tenderly: “Darling, what has got into you?”

She only stared at me. Red centers splashed her white checks. She murmured stubbornly: “I haven’t got anything to tell you, Bill. Please go.”

I said more gently then ever: “Pack your bag, Nora. We’re getting out of here.”

She shook her head. She murmured: “No, I’m not going. I’m going to stay here. He wants me to.”

I knew that she was out of her mind. That was the only explanation that would account for what I had just seen her doing.

But that didn’t account for the rest of it; her understanding Avedis’ weird language, her power to speak it herself. Where had she learned to do that? It could be due only to that something unearthly and diabolical, the spell in which he had enwrapped her.

Enchantment, sorcery—I thought that I myself must be going mad to think of such things seriously. But then what was it that had caused her to speak Avedis’ old pagan tongue, to worship the idol that looked like him? And what even more dreadful thing she would do next.

Nora had cried that all women who were attracted to that man must die. This must be the way that Lucy had felt about him. And Lucy was dead!

Faint with oncrowding dark fears, I made another effort to induce my darling to leave with me. But she wouldn’t listen. She literally pushed me out of the room. All she would say was: “You remember I told you that it was all over between us.”

I walked a few steps down the hall, stood looking out of a window and seeing nothing while I tried to get hold of myself. Only one fact stood out clearly amid bewildering terrors. As long as Avedis lived Nora could not be safe.

I started back toward the stairs to find the man whom I ought to have killed in the rock canyon.

MY WAY led past several closed doors. The guests were still downstairs, the hall deserted. Before one of those doors I came to a standstill. In that room someone was moaning. I twisted the knob and then propelled myself over the threshold.

Brenda West lay on her bed. The work that had been commenced on her downstairs had been finished while she lay there.

Brenda was dead.

This only brought my terrified conviction the starker. Brenda must have been stabbed the second time after she had been left here by the women who thought she was going to be all right; while Nora was close by, with her door unlocked. Avedis could have killed her. And the next time...

Closing the door softly behind me, I hurried downstairs. I needed only to tell the others what I had found, what Nora had said about Lucy’s hanging around Avedis out in the woods.

First, however, I made some guarded inquiries. And knew myself baffled when
I discovered that the man I suspected had been in sight of several of the guests ever since Brenda had been taken upstairs. So he couldn’t have done it. And I recalled now how Brenda herself had cleared him of responsibility for the first blow.

I was bewildered with a sharp new fear that as yet I couldn’t make definite. And I sensed the changed attitudes of the guests. They manifested a wary tautness. They were asking themselves who could have attacked Brenda in the back room. A killer was loose in the house! With their cruel faces and their crafty, sight eyes they made me think of cornered beasts watching for a victim upon whom to wreak their revenge. For terror turns men into beasts.

I didn’t guess how soon their viciousness was to lash out at Nora and me!

In a few minutes Nora appeared. She had dressed for dinner. Smiling winsomely, she circulated among the guests.

Her carefree behavior shocked me. That she could appear so undisturbed in midst of horrors! Suddenly, on impulse, I slipped away to hurry up to her room. I pulled open her bureau drawer and rummaged till I found the object that she had hidden there when I came.

That thing was a knife! It was the kind of knife that it was which brought visions of awfulness more racking than any which I had yet experienced.

For the blade of that knife was not metal. It was of polished obsidian. The golden haft was worked in pagan filigree and studded with gems.

I knew that knife was older than I was. It was older than civilization. It was a weapon out of the stone age when mankind lived in caves and killed his enemies with axes of flint. And the brown stains on it were still fresh and moist.

My body palsied, I sank into a chair. Why had Nora been clutching that thing when she bowed obedience to the idol? Where had she got hold of it in the first place? What had she been doing with it during the ten minutes while she was alone there upstairs?

Those were questions whose answers were as yet only imp-figures biting my brain. They were to grow into monsters of horror!

When I finally went back downstairs, the guests were seated at dinner. Nothing happened during the meal, save the way in which Nora flirted with Mr. Campolio. He was a middle-aged and prosperous appearing manufacturer from up-state whom I had met here for the first time. I had figured him a big cheese and flour man doing a little adventuring while well away from his home town.

Nora purred at him like a cat. After dinner they went into the library and danced to the radio. Then suddenly they weren’t anywhere around. One of the girls told me with a malicious sort of pity that they had gone outside to take a walk in the dark.

I don’t know whether it was fear or just raw jealousy that sent me out trying to find them. Avedis, too, had vanished. The air was charged with million volt pressure as though something was getting ready to explode.

For some minutes I prowled through the shrubbery without seeing anything. Then suddenly I came to a standstill, my heart stopping too. From the other side of a bunch of tall bushes had rung a scream. That long-drawn cry was being torn from a soul ravaged by agony! It rose again, knife-like, horrendous—died away in sobs stifled by gushing blood.

I knew that my legs were taking me around there in leaps. But my body seemed root-fast. I had another picture of Lucy. If my next sight of Nora was to be—

But it was Nora herself, standing alone and unharmed, that I saw as I swung around the corner. I slackened pace,
straining my eyes to make out what she could be up to.

A long flat stone stood raised on supports for a garden seat. In the moonlight it shone spectral gray. Nora bent over it; over something struggling that lay on it. That throaty coughing sounded again. And then there was silence, broken only by monotonous tappings of some fluid which was trickling drop by drop.

I jumped to grip Nora’s shoulder and spin her around. I gasped: “What are you doing?”

“It was suffering. I only put it out of its misery,” she muttered. Bergman has been talking about killing that sick dog for three or four days.”

A dog—yes. I saw that the curly haired form on the bench was the puddle which had been suffering from some obscure ailment, which Bergman had said he was going to poison. But why had Nora killed it this way, why had she cut out its heart with a knife? Why had she collected the blood in that white kitchen bowl?

And that other knife with its bloodstains that I had found in her drawer! That knife had been hidden only a few yards from the room where Brenda lay dead. Its picture danced in my brain till my whole consciousness was a sea of hideous questions. They whispered and chattered, they mocked me with their insane echoings.

For Brenda had testified that it was not Avedis who had stabbed her. I remembered how, just before that, Avedis had said something to Nora which she alone understood. She had gone to him; and then Brenda had come from that place bleeding. Was this the way that Avedis’ sorcery was working upon her? And after she had married him, it would be her own turn to die!

I wiped gelid sweat from my forehead. And then I cursed myself for those thoughts bred in my fevered brain.

Yet I had seen her kill the dog. And what next awful thing.

I removed the knife from Nora’s hand and dropped it into my pocket. With my handkerchief I cleansed her fingers as well as I could. With my arm about her I turned her back to the house. I’d get her out of here now if I had to knock her cold and carry her in my arms.

But we were to find that was impossible. For we reached the house to discover it in a state of upheaval. Brenda West’s body had been found. Till the question of who had killed her was cleared up, no one would be permitted to leave.

I saw Nora’s face drain drop by drop of its blood till it seemed that her very life was ebbing away. Avedis was watching her. His eyes held a ghastly exulting. Others were watching her too. I saw suspicion leap in their faces. “Where is that man she went out with?” a voice muttered. “Where is Campolio?”

Campolio—I didn’t know. A search party was organized to scour the grounds. He couldn’t be found. I know if those others should see the red stain on my darling’s fingers, if they should find that knife in her drawer.

Bergman appeared and announced his intention of going across to the mainland to get the police again. He disappeared; was gone for a short while and then came back panting and breathless. If I have ever seen mortal terror graven upon any human countenance it was on his. He burst out:

“They’ve been sunk! All the boats on the island are sunk. No one can get off this island tonight!”

CHAPTER FOUR

Master of Souls

I HAVE said that Bergman’s guests were a queer lot, eccentric and wild, some of them actually crooks. They all
had a streak of crazy lawlessness. And now their terror was bringing that to the surface. They were looking at Nora again. They were whispering that she had been with Brenda when she had been stabbed. She had acted strangely. Campolio had gone out with her and then vanished.

I knew that if they should see that something red had been wiped from her fingers they wouldn't wait for the police! Dark dreadful deeds had been done and hushed up on this island before. I watched her tight-clenched hands while I wondered what in God's name I was going to do. I wanted to shout to her: "Don't open your hands!"

Into the circle came pushing Ben Coleman. He was an attorney with whom I had been friendly for a number of years. Cool and resourceful, he was a welcome help in a jam. It had been his influence that had got Nora her start three years before. But his opening words only heightened my fear. "We can get one thing out of our heads. No wandering ruffian killed Lucy. It was one of us. It was some one who is with us right at this moment."

That was true enough. But for him to say it when they were all looking at Nora that way! I drew a long breath when he pointed at Avedis. Make him do some explaining. Two women were wild about him and they are both dead."

"Do you remember what we were talking about last night?" a voice suddenly exclaimed. "About reincarnation?"

Everyone turned to look at the speaker. It was an odd thing to hear mentioned now. Reincarnation—the ancient idea that the soul lives in one body after another, sometimes human, again animal. It had started the night before with someone telling how cows are sacred in India because they are supposed to contain the spirits of departed humans.

Coleman said to Avedis: "That's right. Last night you told us not only that you had lived in a previous life but that you remembered who you had been in that life. You said that you had been—"

"He said that he was a priest of the sun. He said that he was head priest in a temple of Quich'a, once a Maya nation in what is now Central America!" Paula Charles exclaimed. She was a wilted celery blonde with pinch-on eye glasses on dangling black ribbons. "Those were his very words!"

I heard Nora gasp at my side. Her face had gone even whiter. Last night I had thought the man spoofing or crazy. I still deemed his statement the bunk. Modern science had exploded all those crazy old superstitions. But Nora acted as though she believed it!

Coleman's voice came again: "Those Mayas to whom you said you belonged made human sacrifices, Mr. Avedis. They tore the hearts out of their living victims at noonday. Lucy Marston was killed that way. Of course you never did live in any other reincarnation. But as long as you said that you did, and she was killed just like that—what do you know about Lucy, Mr. Avedis?"

A sort of hushed gasping went around the group. I wondered again why that mention of Lucy had made Nora's hand colder than death as it brushed against mine.

I saw Avedis' eyes narrow. Under his swarthy cheeks he changed color. Then he smiled indulgently as though confuting a group of impetuous children. "You forget that I was playing contract with several of you at the hour when she must have been killed. It is merely a coincidence."

"It's too damned much of a coincidence!" Coleman retorted. And then another voice came: "It is entirely possible that the old ideas about reincarnation of the soul may be true scientifically."

With a start I turned to look at the speaker, a Dr. Paul Bradford. I didn't
think much of his opinions whatever they might be, for he was only a young physician hardly out of his pin feathers.

"You mean to tell us that the human soul is something that can be shifted around from body to body like a baggage check on a trunk?" my angry disbelief impelled me to cry.

HE ASHED his cigarette with fastidious slim fingers. He was small and slight, had ice-cold eyes and blond hair that curled like a girl's.

Bradford said: "Of course no one has ever taken a photograph of a soul. But you will have to admit that there is something that isn't body nor brain which makes you different from me and me different from anyone else. If dogs with their loyalty and their love for mankind don't have souls like those of humans, what do they have?"

"That sounds reasonable, Bill!" Nora exclaimed. She was leaning forward tensely, eyes shining. "Why is a horse gentle to train while a lion is savage? Since we don't know what the soul really is, how can we deny that in its everlasting life it may pass from creature to creature, live again and again?"

I looked at her. "You can't really mean that you believe in that stuff!"

Bradford was going on: "In certain rare cases, as Mr. Avedis says, persons actually do have dim memories of their other lives. I myself have been able to bring those memories out sharply in two instances. The subjects were able to tell me where they had lived and when; who they had been."

"You can bring those memories back now?" I exclaimed. I couldn't have told why I was becoming more terrified than I had ever been in my life. At my side Nora's breathing became labored. I wondered what all this could be meaning to her.

"Through hypnosis," Dr. Bradford answered me. "Suggestion sets the memory free from fixations of present consciousness."

Hypnosis I knew what he meant, for it had been an almost regular performance for him to hypnotize two or three of the party each evening. I had been surprised to see how easily it could be done.

And now Coleman looked again at Avedis. "It might be interesting to see if your recollections of that other life are correct," he said drily. "If they will throw any light upon what happened to Lucy."

Another buzz of excitement went around the group. That was a challenge, all right.

I don't know whether Avedis would have had the nerve to take up that challenge or not. He had no opportunity to reply. I was thunderstruck when Nora cried tensely: "No, Dr. Bradford. Don't take him. Take me! Let me find out."

I WHIRLED to her with the breath knocked clean out of me. "Nora, for heaven's sake!" I exclaimed. "Why should you want to—you never had any other life!"

"How do you know she didn't have another life?" It was Bergman's question. He leaned forward, cruel eyes avid. "If she want to find out, it's surely her business." And then he added: "There isn't anything to be afraid of. He can't make her do anything she doesn't want to."

I muttered: "I'm not so sure about that." I remembered the questions I had asked myself when I had found her with the dog in the garden and a black worm crawled over my brain. Under hypnosis, what damning confession might be wrung out of her?

"I won't have it!" I cried. "You're not going to do such a mad thing—"

She snatched at my fingers with a nervous spasm that only terrified me the
more. Her whispering came in dreadful urgency. “Bill, I’ve got to!” And then she sobbed: “Oh, I can’t go on! I’ve got to find out, no matter what happens!”

“Find out what?” I echoed. “You haven’t anything to—” But as I said that I remembered her grief-stricken cry that we could never be married. What could be the question that my darling had to have answered at cost of anything?

I knew that was a question that must never be answered! For in the moment when it should be, I would lose her forever.

“You’re getting out of here!” I muttered thickly. “You’re going up to your room—”

Chairs clattered and then they were all surging up to their feet. Blocking us from the door loomed two forbidding figures. Mario Santusso, oily and weasel-hipped, with the name of being hell with a knife; Red Moran, the gunman whose price for a rubbing-out job had dropped in lean times from a C to a sawbuck—before Bergman had taken him on. I knew those two thugs were here to back up Bergman in whatever he wanted to do.

With one hand under his coat Moran shouldered me backward. Through tight menacing lips he hissed: “Get onto yourself, chump. Let the gal do like she wants to. Or they’ll lug you out horizontal.”

I glanced around desperately, knew that we couldn’t escape. Santusso and others came hemming us tightly. Bergman, the doctor, the thugs, they were all in this together. They wanted a victim to blame for the deaths of the two girls. They wanted to do what still darker horror to the soul of the girl I loved?

They flocked past me into the library, sweeping her out of my clasp and along with them. There was nothing for me to do but to follow.
CHAPTER FIVE

"I Am Tara—"

NORA had lain down on a couch. Bradford sat in a chair at her side. The others stood around in a tense silent ring.

The doctor murmured soothing words, passed his fingers over her forehead. Her eyes closed. Little by little the rigidity flowed from her body till it lay perfectly relaxed.

Bradford's questions began in low quiet tones, almost casual. He asked her if she remembered that she had lived once before. Her answer came faintly. Yes, she remembered. How long ago? he continued. And her reply was: "Oh, long, long ago—thousands of years."

Now he asked her if she knew where the place was in which she had lived. She murmured: "Somewhere so far away! In a place where there were mountains beyond the green jungles—"

This was preposterous! I thought that Bradford must be willing her what to say. I felt a queer emptiness in the pit of my stomach while pressure was building up in my brain.

"And what was your name in that place, my dear?" the remorseless soft questioning droned on.

At that Nora started sharply. Her face altered expression till it became the face of the girl I had seen worshipping the idol Avedis; pagan lips sullenly twisted. "My name was... Oh, my name was—" She moaned in torment of effort to bring memory shadows into focus. "I can't remember—"

For a moment there was only the heavy breathing of the circle of onlookers. We didn't know what was going on there before us. Then like a sound uttered in space by a bodiless voice I heard a single word muttered:

"Tara—"

What took place next was a thing so macabre, so unbelievable, that even now my heart stops as I think of it. For Nora's cry tocsinned swiftly: "Yes! Oh yes, that was my name. I was Tara—"

Tip by tip my hair was lifting on the back of my neck. Avedis was the one who had prompted her. But how had he known of that name which I never had heard? Why had Nora responded to it with that cry of welcome? It was like a person in fog of amnesia recalled to memory of their life by a familiar name. Nora's life—merciful God, what kind of life?

"And what did you do in that place where you were Tara?" Bradford asked his next question.

"I was dressed in gold," Nora whispered. "I stood in the sunshine. In my hand there was a—" Her voice broke in a scream. "Oh, in my hand there is something horrible!"

With a yell I sprang forward at last. "Damn you!" I raged at Bradford. "Stop it! Bring her out of it!"

Before I could reach her side Nora had leaped to her feet. An intense emotional storm was sweeping her. Her eyes bulged open but their sight was blind. She wrung her hands and moaned piteous incoherent cries.

Then in another moment she came back to herself. She gazed around in bewilderment. "Why—what—where was I?" she murmured. "It seemed as though I—" And then she burst into hysterical sobbing.

The room was an uproar of shouting white faces. "She said that she had a knife in her hand!" Somebody cried. "That girl's heart was cut out with a knife. Look at her hands now—there is blood on her hands!"

I ran to her side. I got my arm around her and I faced them as they surged toward her. This was it! Another voice came: "She was with Brenda when she
was stabbed. She was upstairs alone with Brenda when she was murdered."

They came thronging forward, menacing hands outstretched. Their pale faces and their red-shot eyes glared into mine. Their countenances were those of beasts. And they smelled like beasts. I quailed before that animal odor of hatred and fear.

"She's a witch," Red Moran cursed. "She's a she-devil come back from hell. Get her and kill her." A killer himself, he scorned to wait for the slow course of the law. And the others felt the way he did. They were all capable of staging a lynching party.

I let go of Nora and pushed her behind me against the wall. Moran and Santuoso came stiltling forward like a pair of vicious dogs. They would have to kill me before they got hold of her! And then, when I thought that we didn't have a friend in the world, Ben Coleman, his face white as his collar, came pushing out of the pack to place himself at my side.

The thing hung fire, for an instant that seemed eternity. And then, without a sound, Nora dropped in a faint. I managed to get her into my arms as her knees gave way. I clasped the limp form of my darling against me while I faced them at bay.

What kept them from killing us then I never shall know. Perhaps they hadn't quite worked themselves up to cold-blooded massacre. That was to come later! Seeing their indecision, I sidled around to the door. And then I was rushing upstairs, carrying Nora.

I got her into her room. I laid her down on the bed and then spun around to meet the attack which I expected would come then. But no one had followed us. I ran to the bathroom for cold water and then I sat down beside her to bathe her face and her limp icy hands.

Two or three minutes might have passed. The door had opened so silently that I hadn't heard anything. It must have been consciousness of a malign presence which caused me to look up suddenly.

The man who stood looking down at us and laughing silently was—Avedis.

I CAME to my feet with a curse. "Get out of here before I kill you!" And then I said—for I had made up my mind to kill him anyway. "In the devil's name who are you? What are you? You and Nora—your crazy reincarnation stuff—"

He looked down at her and his smile mocked me. "Crazy reincarnation, you say? It is you who are the fool. A thousand years ago when I had charge of the sacrifices on the altar of the temple she was my helper. A thousand years ago she was my wife."

The man heard my grunt of rage and laughed tauntingly. "She was my wife before you ever saw her. But in that nation was one man even greater than I, the high priest. He was the king, the chief of the tribe. He had seen Tara's loveliness and he desired her. He had appointed the day when she was to go to him."

"But she did not go. For on the midnight before that day I myself killed her. I laid her on the altar, kissed her and stabbed her. Our bodies parted but the flames of our spirits lived on through the eternities till they should find one another again."


He only said: "Look, and you will know that it is you who are mad to think you ever can have her." He came to sit opposite me on the bed with my darling's helpless form there between us. His long fingers pulled down the shoulder of her dress.

And then everything inside me seemed to go dead. For there over her heart was a thin, blue knife scar!
As from miles away I heard the voice of Avedis: "There is where I stabbed her that night a thousand years ago. It was Tara who came back from the past in her reincarnation as I too am reincarnated—a woman who loves to kill. She killed the girl in the canyon and that other one also."

I stumbled up to my feet, stammering, shaking. "You're lying again! She never killed anyone. The doctor willed her to say those things while she was hypnotized."

"No. The hypnosis only made her remember. When she went with me to the canyon and we talked in the sunshine she knew that I was her master. How else could she have understood the tongue in which I spoke to her, the language which she and I used to use?"

A fuse blew in my brain. I screamed and flung myself on him. Came to a sudden standstill as he whipped out a pistol and jammed it into my stomach. "Get off! And stand right where you are if you want to keep on living!" was what he growled.

With the gun covering me I could do nothing else. He backed away to the door. "There is one more in this house who must die. Nora will kill him during the night. Then she and I will go. I have a motor boat hidden where no one will find it. Away from here, we will be married again. Nora will be my wife; and then she must die, for it is fated that her soul and mine are to be united forever."

He read what was in my mind and his lips twisted. "If you have any foolish thoughts of killing me, give it up. For if you kill me I shall only live again to claim Tara."

He was gone, leaving me sweating and sick, wondering whether I had really heard those monstrous things or whether they had been the hallucinations of a nightmare.

In my awe which washed away at my sanity I asked myself if this awfulness could be a fact, if Bradford's claims about reincarnation were the truth. It was old as the human race, this Theosophy of successive lives of the soul. The American Indians believed it; the Hindus and Mongols of Asia; all primitive peoples, the wise Chinese most of all.

Those ancients lived in ages when men were closer to spiritual verities than they are today. Could it be truth that they knew deep sublime secrets hidden from modern minds? Was it a fact that the soul does live over and over, fundamentally pagan under its veneer of civilization, responsive to call of powers summoning it back to its former life?

Had Avedis' voice, the touch of that stone-age knife in my darling's hand, roused in her forgotten impulses that she could not withstand? Had she answered his sorcery to become again a priestess of blood? Had Avedis compelled her to commit those crimes in order to bind her to him so inescapably that she would reject me and marry him?

I asked myself those things in my torment, and God help me, I didn't know. That scar on her bosom brought hideous conjectures to unseat my mind. But of one thing I was sure. At the end, when she had married him, Lucy Marston's face would be hers, her throbbing heart cut from her body to sate his madness.

I got up to pace the floor. Now, while I had time, I must get her away from here. But how could I do that, when all the boats were sunk? How could I, how could any man, find safety for his loved one in this night of fear?

Then came an idea. If I could not carry her off the island, at least I would take her out of the house. In the wild wooded country which surrounded it we could hide during the night.

But again how? For those people downstairs were only awaiting another sight
of her to kill her as a woman in league with diabolical powers. Avedis on one side, they on the other—

I went to the door to stand listening. Loud voices were audible, sounds of feet moving about. I looked around in despair for some kind of a weapon. Were they coming up for her now? I recalled those dark stories of other guests who had disappeared here without trace.

They didn’t come, though. There was nothing to do but wait for them to go to bed, if they ever should, and then try to escape without their hearing us. But before that, Avedis’ call might come to Nora again and she would go to him in spite of anything I could do.

Without recovering consciousness, Nora had drifted into slumber of nervous exhaustion. Finally I put out her light and went back to my own room. I opened my door and put a chair where I could see anyone who went down the hall.

For what seemed ages I sat there, listening to the drone of conversation coming up from below, waiting for I didn’t know what. Every creak of the house in the wind, every sound of a footfall, brought me up with my heart stabbing and cold sweat gushing over me.

I was worn limp from strain and fatigue and I must have dozed off. It was the sound of a scream cutting the silence that brought me erect, gasping and rubbing my eyes.

I saw a face, terror-white against moonlight, bending over me. Someone was standing there cursing—shaking me awake.

CHAPTER SIX

The Idol Walks

IT WAS the face of Ben Coleman which focused at last out of the blur. His fingers biting my arm drew me up to my feet.

“You fool!” he muttered. “Sleeping! Do you know what they are doing to Nora?”

I stared at him. I ran my tongue over cold lips. “Nora—”

And then as the fullness of horrified realization arrived, my hand gripped his arm. “What is it? Was that Nora I heard—”

He muttered: “I don’t know.” I saw his face a white rag in the dark, eyes staring pits in the whiteness. “What is going on in this house isn’t—human.”

His hand was sweat-cold upon mine as he pulled me across to the door.

The echoes of that scream still vibrated in the dark when we stepped into the hall. Dear God, had that been the voice of Nora?

“I looked around a little before I came for you,” Coleman whispered. “She isn’t in her room—”

We stood for an instant longer, motionless, listening. The silence crawled in our ears. Finally, at my suggestion, we separated, Coleman to take the lower part of the house while I made more extended search of the upper floors.

I groped through miasma of terror. God, what was my dear girl doing at dead of night, when I had been false to my trust?

Had she gone to Avedis, or had those others—

I didn’t find her. But as I turned into a side passage there was something sodden and inert on the floor against which I stumbled. My shaking hands could scarcely strike the match against the paper folder. When that light came would it show me my darling like Lucy?

I sagged against the wall, weak-kneed in reaction. It wasn’t Nora. It was Bergman, our host. He was dead. Dead the way Brenda had died. His heart lay on the outside of his body.

The match flame went out. And then a chill rolled over me from my heels to
my throat. From darkness close to the
dead man came a low feminine voice. It
crooned the pagan melody that Nora had
hummed. Nora was over there!

I straddled the hulk on the floor to
charge toward the spot. But no one was
in the corner when I arrived there. For
another moment I stood cracking my eyes
into blackness. Why had Nora been here,
where Bergman lay with his blood spider-
webbing his shirt front?

And then I shrank back into the angle
between the walls to stand hidden and
waiting. Someone was approaching from
the farther end of the passage.

As the man came abreast, a ray of
moonlight seeping through a window at
the end of the hall showed me—Avedis.

My lunge from my hiding place brought
me upon him before he could move. I
got my hands around his throat and my
rush slammed him against the wall. “You
killed Bergman. You killed them all,”
I grated. “Trying to make them blame
Nora. Where is Nora now? Come clean
or I’ll break your neck.”

He laughed with writhing of venomous
thin lips. “To break my neck would be
useless, my impetuous fool. I should only
live again, as I have lived before. My
soul and Nora’s together—”

With a blow to the jaw I dropped him
cold on the floor. Using his belt and my
own as well, I trussed him hand and foot.
I left him there and started on, still search-
ning for Nora.

I had moved only a few steps down the
hall when another shift in the pattern of
horrors brought me to a standstill.

FIVE or six yards from the spot where
I stood moonlight spread misty bright-
ness against the wall. As I moved slight-
ly I could see that in that light a figure
was standing. I gasped; for it was Ave-
dis’ face that I saw there! Avedis in two
places at once. . . . Then I realized that
it was only the idol which I’d seen in
Nora’s room, which looked so uncannily
like him. Someone must have brought it
out into the hall.

From close beyond it swishing sounds
could be heard. Feet pattered. And then
Nora came into the moonlight.

Nora! Save her little white feet
which were bare, she was clad in a dress
of gold. She came tiptoeing forward, her
unbound hair a cloud of black light about
her bloodless rapt face.

She came—dancing. On slim pearly
toes she whirled and pirouetted in front of
the idol. The bronze bells on her ankles
jangled cacophony to the beat of her foot-
steps.

The uncanny beauty of that sight
clutched at my throat. And then I start-
ed toward her. I knew that if those others
should waken and come to find her with
that wet knife in her hand and Bergman
lying there, there would be nothing that
I could do for her.

I took a step; froze in my tracks with
everything inside me turned to ice. For
suddenly that idol moved! It grinned
and then it swept out a hand to hook at
Nora’s arm as she passed.

I pawed at my eyes. Those eyes were
making a fool of me. It must be the ma-
cabre light and the shadows.

I let out a croaking sound. From now
there could not be any doubt. That in-
animate wooden thing lifted its arms, took
a step after Nora. It grinned and then
its hand swept out to clasp hers.

For an instant as I struggled in the
noisome tide of my horror I tried to tell
myself that Avedis must in some way have
escaped from the belts and got past me.
But looking over my shoulder I could see
him still lying there where I had left
him.

And that tied it. He had said that if
killed him he would come back from
death to claim Nora. And now, reincar-
nated in that statue, the idol of himself
come to life, he was...
Nora rippled laughter and danced away from the thing. It jumped for her, crimson robes swishing, and they danced there together.

I stood staring at them, stricken, my body robbed of all motion, while in their spinning they moved down the hall. At last I managed to tear myself out of my palsy. I took a stride forward. I had to get hold of that creature and kill him. If it were any use for human hands to try to kill such as he!

A noise from the other direction, behind me, brought my eyes around. Running dark forms could be seen; some one bending over Bergman. And then they were all there, the guests wakened and brought from their rooms by the commotion.

"She did it, she killed Bergman!" a woman shrilled. "And Campolio. They found Campolio dead." Someone else yammered: "She bewitched Campolio to get him out there where she could murder him."

The cries tocsinned louder and I knew that they had caught sight of Nora at the farther end of the passage. "Get her and burn her to death!" the Charles woman yelled. "That's the only way to make a witch-woman stay dead."

I heard their clattering rush. Hate-charged faces and burning eyes bore down on me. I turned my back upon Nora and Avedis to confront them, tense on my toes as a cornered beast. "I'll kill the first one of you that tries to get past me!" I snarled.

For a moment my swinging fists held them at bay. Then I saw them turning the other way. They were running down the front stairs.

I shot a glance over my shoulder and I saw why. Nora was gone. While I had kept the would-be killers in front from getting her, Avedis had taken her away by the rear stairs. They were rushing around to cut them off.

My terror hit the top of my skull. I had saved her from them for Avedis! Of the two horrors between which I had been forced to choose for her, I didn't know which was worse. For Avedis had told me what he was going to do.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Man from Hell

The chase whirled through the house then streamed out over the grounds into the woods. That was where they had gone.

I got away from them as soon as I could and hunted alone. I had to find Nora before they did! Dear God, was there still time for that to do any good, or when I next saw my darling would she be lying somewhere, like Lucy?

Minutes dragged into centuries while I searched woodland solitudes. At last I turned my steps upon impulse toward the rock canyon where I had found Nora and Lucy.

I had been running for only a few minutes after that when I swung around the foot of a boulder. Nora was there.

To my surprise it wasn't Avedis but Ben Coleman who was with her. I muttered thankfulness that he had been the one to find her. I had an instant of wondering what could have become of Avedis.

Then to my horror I saw Nora's hand rise in the air. That hand clutched a knife!

It fell with savage force. Coleman's yell was swallowed up in the vacuum of my terror. For now I had to accept all that Avedis had said. I had to accept all that awfulness about Nora. With my own eyes I had seen her deliver that blow!

She had managed only to wound Coleman, not to kill him. He wrrenched himself out of her grip and jumped out of sight into underbrush. I rushed toward the spot where she stood. I knew that now
more than ever I had to get her and hide her somewhere before the gang from the house caught her red-handed. I had to keep her from them somehow till I could smuggle her off the island to a reputable doctor who would protect her from the police while he ministered to her unseated mind.

Nora heard my feet on the stones. She looked around. Slowly she started to walk toward me.

She stared at me with eyes that saw my figure but didn't know who I was. Her face was drawn in that vulpine hunger. It was Tara, the killer girl, who came to meet me! Then she started to laugh. Her voice rose in unearthly echoes that wailed from wall to wall.

I looked into her eyes and my soul seemed to die. Where had this half of my darling been when she was Nora, her faithful hand clasped in mine? Where had Nora gone now? Where had Tara been then?

Tara shrilled again and came leaping, her uplifted knife slashing down at my heart.

I JUMPED to grab her arm. I wrenched the knife out of her hand. "Nora!" I gasped. "Nora, for God's sake! Don't you know me? I'm Bill. You love me—you used to love me. Or do you really want to kill Bill?"

The words died on my lips. For before me there was taking place a thing unbelievable.

As my voice cried out her name, Nora's tense figure went suddenly limp. She stared at the knife. With a scream she flung it away from her. She looked at me and her face grew bewildered as that of a person roused from unconsciousness. For the first time she knew who I was. Her moan came strangled with horror: "Bill! Bill, darling! Merciful God, where am I, what have I been doing?"

I took her into my arms. "You're all right, sweetheart. You're here with me." In my awe I could scarcely speak. Tara had been there a moment before, pagan and murderous. Now the same girl was my Nora sobbing and trembling as she clung to me. It had been the sound of my voice that had banished the enchantment which Avedis had placed on her. Her soul was free now! "Bill, take me away," she begged.

"Yes, we'll go," I muttered. But where? Back in the woods I could hear the shouts of the crowd from the house. Consequently I started the other way, along the bed of the rock gulley that led into the canyon.

We hurried faster but we couldn't escape. In a minute a figure appeared around the corner behind. It was the idol which had stood in Nora's room!

The idol that seemed to be Avedis, it came running on short stubby legs, hideous face snarling, a thing whelped from night's horrors. Nora shrilled, her hands pawed at my shoulders. She gagged: "Bill, don't let him get me! Don't let him touch me!" She flung herself into my arms. Over my shoulder she screamed to him: "Go away! I don't ever want to see you again."

He came clattering up, features contorted in fury. To me he snarled: "She'll never live for you to have." And then through the air he came leaping. His hand clutched a stone.

I had just time to pull her away. The rock struck me a glancing blow. And then he and I were locked in struggling embrace.

I sluggéd him with everything that I had. I knew grim relish as I felt his flesh pulp under my knuckles; grunted in agony as his stone battered my skull. Twice he broke away to leap at Nora. It was she he wanted to kill! I raced after him to grab him again. His reptile face and flaming eyes glared into mine. I thought of the man I had left tied up—
It must have been my horror which numbed me for a second. It was long enough for him. His rock caught me and then I was down. I lay half-stunned on the stones, helpless, while he flew to crash down with his knees on my chest.

"And then Nora!" he muttered.

The next instant the rock would have splattered my brains over the stones. It was the sound of a pistol shot from the rocks that halted Avedis. He reeled backward, threw up his arms. He toppled off me, dead.

I stumbled up to my feet. It was Coleman who came running into sight; who must have shot Avedis. I saw his white-angry face and his shirt stained with blood. "Coleman—thank God!" I muttered. And then I said hurriedly: "Nora wasn't responsible when she stabbed you, she wasn't herself. She's all right now."

He didn't reply. He gripped Nora's arm and started to pull her away from me.

"See here, Coleman, what's eating you?" I exclaimed. "I tell you she wasn't responsible for what she did to you. Let go of her or I'll take her away from you."

Coleman said thinly: "I don't think you will." Another step sounded and Red Moran appeared at his side. The man's hand levelled a gun at my heart.

"What is this?" I harsessed.

"They say that a man about to die rates one last boon," he replied shortly. "Because of our long friendship I will do you the favor of explaining a few things that seem to be puzzling you." He glanced over his shoulder. "But I've got to hurry. That mob will be here pretty soon."

While I stood appalled he handed Nora over to Moran.

Coleman and Bergman, the former's story ran, had been partners in business. They ran a bucket-shop where worthless securities were sold to gullible investors. They conducted it through straw men; neither of them ever appeared at the office.

Now and then one of their victims turned out to be stubborn enough to insist on their rights. The game then was for Bergman to scrape up an acquaintance with him or her, followed by an invitation to one of the parties. Once there, they were silenced.

"The West woman was one of them. So was Campolio. As for Bergman, why should I go on splitting profits with him? Red killed all three of them for me. It didn't cost much to buy him from Bergman over to my side."

I simply stared at him. I still couldn't credit that my old friend was a murderer. Over beyond, Nora was struggling in Red Moran's grip—while Coleman's gun kept me from going to her.

Coleman went on: "Of course Avedis was crazy. But he really believed that he was the reincarnation of some old priest and that your girl really had been married to him. He had been trying for months to get a chance to work on her.

He and Bradford were two of a kind. I happened to overhear them making plans one day. It was made to order for what I had been trying to figure out how to do. They agreed to try and get Nora to let herself be hypnotized to see if she would admit that she had lived hundreds of years ago. She saved them trouble by insisting on doing it herself."

Nora moaned in Moran's grip. "Make him let go of me!"

How could I get past that gun? And any time now those others... I knew now why my dear girl had cried out that time that she had to be hypnotized. She had been thinking of that mark on her body, wondering if what Avedis had been telling her could be true.

And Coleman, seeing how things were shaping up, had seized upon the plan.

"So it was you who killed Lucy?" I muttered. "You knew that in the evening..."
they were going to hypnotize Nora. The similarity of Lucy's death to what she and Avedis would probably say would throw suspicion on them. Was it Santuosso who put on a mask of Avedis' face and let himself be seen near where Bergman was killed to direct more suspicion on Avedis? Santuosso whom I tied up, believing in the dark that he was the other man?"

Coleman nodded. "Avedis had taken the idol out of Nora's room. In his madness he dressed himself up to look like it. It was he himself you saw in the hall when you thought the idol had come to life. But there was a hitch somewhere. Avedis must have been hanging around when Red and I were planning our moves. In some way he found out that we were doing the jobs and trying to frame them on him. That was why he sent Nora to kill me."

"And now what?" I managed.

Coleman shrugged. "I've liked you, Trenholm, but business is business. I've got to be sure that neither you nor Nora will ever tell what you know. This business runs to a quarter of a million a year. Red will take care of her."

"God, what kind of a thing are you?" I croaked. Groggy, almost out on my feet though I was, I made a hobbling lunge toward the spot where my darling's sobs were calling me. I shrank back as the club in Coleman's hand swung aloft.

It was Nora who saved me! In tigress fury she whirled to drive her thumbs into Red Moran's eyes.

He yelled and let go of her. While he stood cursing and pawing his eyes, she came flying up behind Coleman. She flung herself onto his back. From behind she reached over his shoulders. Her fingernails ribboned his face.

He staggered off balance, whirled to drive her away. In that split instant I leaped like some clumsy one-legged bird.

I stooped to snatch up the stone with which Avedis had battered me. Its smash against Coleman's jaw broke his neck.

As he went down I wrenched the gun from his hand. Over his shoulder I put a slug through Red Moran's heart.

I'll pass over the events of the next half hour when I stood between Nora and the crowd from the house; held them off with Coleman's gun till I at last convinced them of the truth. On their return visit in the morning the police took charge at the island.

Back in town, the doctors to whom I told Nora's story talked learnedly about split personality and post-hypnotic suggestion. They declared the scar on Nora's bosom to be a birthmark. Probably it was. They said it was pure coincidence that it was in the exact spot where Avedis said he had stabbed her a thousand years before. Probably that was true, too.

We figured that she must have mentioned it to Avedis some time during that summer at the beach. It had started the train of thought in him that had culminated a year afterward in those horrors. Whether he actually believed that she had killed those three as he had told me, or had just said that in order to bind her to him, will never be known.

Yes, judged by all rational standards, Avedis was certainly crazy. But nights when I lie at my wife's side unable to sleep, I wonder if that was all there was to it. Or if there does exist another world hidden from most mortals in which Nora as Tara had been Avedis' wife in the temple of Quicha. When I see her hands clutch over that scar on her bosom, when I watch how she handles a knife, with her fingers curving about it so hungrily— I wonder whether in the secret parts of her soul he still lives, a memory more real to her than I shall ever be in the flesh.

THE END
I told Jean that my scarred and useless hands, the unfinished masterpiece that would know the touch of my brush no more—made no difference in my love for her. But was I lying? Was I going to take a chance and open the doors to hell ... open them through the pages of that ancient Book of Doom?

Sometimes the morphia helped. I was using a lot of it in those days, for it is a thing easily obtained if one is mad enough to look for it and wealthy enough to pay for it. I was both.

A drug addict? No: from a clinical point of view I don’t think I could have been called that, though doubtless I would have become one soon enough. I don’t believe there was ever a time when I knew any actual physical desire for the narcotic; it was simply a mental anodyne, a route of temporary escape from a world grown flat and meaningless to me. So I used the needle, and the strange dreamy days flowed one into another, and now and then I was surprised, frightened—even a little ashamed—when I looked too closely at my right forearm. There was a terrifying
number of tiny white pits where the fang of the hypodermic had bitten.

Jean never knew. I took infinite precautions against her learning the truth, for I was not yet so far gone as to have the chronic drug slave’s utter imperviousness to the world about him. I kept the hypodermic layout locked away in the wall safe in my den; and when the black mood was on me I went to that wall safe as furtively as a thief in the night.

Sometimes, under the influence of the drug, I would suddenly grow conscious that Jean was watching me—was regarding me oddly, obliquely, her eyes round and dark with heartbreak. But not because she had guessed at the hidden truth. She was simply remembering the thing that had happened and blaming herself, illogically, for all the terrible changes she read in me.

It was at the hospital that I had first become acquainted with the powers of morphia. They had given it to me there to ease the intolerable pain of my wounds. And now, months out of the hospital and as nearly whole physically as I would ever be, I used the drug for a kindred reason: to anesthetize those deeper, more agonizing wounds that would never be healed. Subjective ones beyond the reach of surgical skill.

As I say, sometimes the morphia helped. Not always. It is an unpredictable drug at best, and there were times when it keened my senses instead of blunting them—when it did nothing more for me than to heighten my capacity for bitterness. These were the times when I would mount the stairs, step by heavy step, and go to the room where I had stored all the mementos of my past. My brushes, my oils, my easel. A few of my finished paintings, colorful but mediocre daubs for which my agent had not even tried to find a buyer. And, finally, the dusty canvas that still stood on the easel—the unfinished painting that would never be finished now.

The picture that would have made me great.

THIS was one of those dark afternoons. I had gone to the storeroom and I was sitting there in front of the picture—staring at it, tormenting myself as a famished man torments himself with the sight of food in a delicatessen window. So near, so unattainable. I would look at the canvas, a static thing that wanted only a few essential touches to become mobile and alive, and then I would look down at my hands.

My horrible hands.

Even now, it was hard to believe they were actually mine—these alien, insistent things that rested like pieces of gnarled driftwood in my lap. Once they had been beautiful hands, lean and smooth and muscular; tapered hands as steady as a surgeon’s, as facile as a pianist’s. When they painted unimportant pictures, it had been only because the eye and the brain they served so loyally had not yet mastered the true elements of art. Even then—even when I was creating what Brennerman, my agent, called “calendar daubs”—I had been confident that those responsive hands would some day achieve real art. Brennerman himself had been confident of that.

And now

They were hands out of a nightmare now. They were grotesque hands that might have been chiseled by an Epstein—knotted with crimson bunches of scar tissue, striated with swollen veins, the mained fingertips curling inward like claws. Paint with them? Hold a brush in those wooden fingers? It took long minutes of heartbreaking effort even to turn a doorknob with them.

I had suffered other injuries in the fire that burned away the foundations of my life. My legs were scarred from knees to ankles. The left side of my face was a livid horror. I did not greatly care; I had
never been a handsome man, or a vain one. But my hands—my beautiful lost hands. . . .

Sick, I raised my eyes to the canvas again. If I had only hurried the afternoon it happened, I thought. Oh, God, if I had only foreseen it and had painted a little faster!

Sometimes an artist's eye functions exactly like a camera. It snaps a picture; it tucks the film away in the dark room of the subconscious; and later—months or even years later—the developed picture is projected into the foreground of his mind. He sees it there, a frozen memory so crystal-clear that it can be transcribed to canvas without the use of models. Colored with mood and imagination, such a picture can become great—and such a picture was this.

A simple idea, really. Starkly so. It was a scene on a trolley car, the background in shadow and the perspective subtly distorted so that it seemed less like a trolley than a kind of cosmic tunnel packed with lost, bewildered people. In the foreground some of those people were to have been sharply delineated: a nodding workman, a wistful young girl, a harried husband, a tired woman with bundles. And I had meant to paint the contrasting faces with a gentle and a compassionate touch, stressing delicately the one thing they held in common. That look of weariness and confusion—the hallmark of an era which sweeps us along so fast that no one has time for serenity.

So different from my other efforts to capture the spirit of the machine age. So different from my earlier works—the photographic pastorals, the uninspired nudes. Brennerman had said so, narrowing his shrewd little eyes at the picture and rubbing his fat little hands with delight.

"That's it, Alan! That's the one that goes to the Metropolitan. You've got an Idea there—" his voice capitalized the word—"and you're handling it like an artist. Finish that picture, Alan, and it will make you famous."

Fame? I did not particularly want that. Nor money—I had been born with that. I had wanted only to achieve something worth while at last—to articulate the fierce creative urge that had been fighting for expression in me. And it was the most savage of all jests that this thing should have happened to me at the moment when fulfilment was so near. Now... now I was like a canary without a tongue.

"God!" I said aloud. "If I could only have finished it! If I..."

"It means so much to you, Alan?" Jean said softly.

I RAISED my eyes. She was standing there against the inner panel of the door—a slim, high-breasted girl whose oval face was as soft and tender as a Botticelli Madonna's under the dark flow of her hair. There was sadness in her eyes. I would not have spoken aloud if I had known that she was there—for it was in saving Jean's life that I had lost my hands.

Thick with morphia, my tongue fumbled the lie. "No, darling. No, it doesn't make much difference—not really. After all, I painted other pictures..." I gestured emptily with my hideous fingers.

She moved toward me, the sadness still in her eyes. "Alan, don't lie. At least let me share your unhappiness with you. Sometimes you seem so far away."

The little white pock-marks on my forearm they were the barrier between us, if she but knew it. "No, Jean," I mumbled. "No, darling. You're imagining that."

She touched my shoulder. "You used to say that you loved only two things in the world, Alan—me and your work. You have me, but I— I cost you your work. The question is, which of us did you love more?"

"Jean!" I said. "Don't talk like that! You know the answer!"
But does she? my brain inquired. Do I?
Her eyes searched mine. “If your work meant more, Alan, I wish we could go back into the past and change things. Remember the Old Book in your father’s collection—the one we used to laugh so much about? There was a formula in it for turning back the pages of life, if I remember. Maybe we’d all be better off if such things could really be done. . . ."

The Old Book. I had forgotten it until then—that mouldering volume with its arcana of midnight lore and superstition. I did not want to think of it now, for the book had never really seemed laughable to me. It had seemed more than a little horrible.

Jean’s wistful eyes were still on mine, delving into them as if to uncover all the secrets of my heart. Gently she said: “Because—because I sometimes think it would have been better if you had let me die in the flames. Better for you and for me. I’m not trying to be melodramatic, Alan—I’m only telling you the truth. I’d rather have died than to have . . . robbed you of something that meant more to you than I.”

I turned my head away. I shut my eyes against her probing gaze; and instantly the impressions of that frightful afternoon were re-shaping themselves under my closed lids. A series of flashbacks; quick, jumbled, unreal.

T H R E E months ago. It had been the fall of the year, and the maple trees that shadowed my country studio were torches of living russet. I was working in the renovated loft of a barn, a vast and vaulted room where the noises of the world did not intrude. The painting was nearly completed. Only the faces in the foreground—those essential faces which would give point and color to the whole thing—remained undone. And I knew exactly how I was going to paint them. The brush was poised in my fingers when I smelled the smoke.

I turned to the window, and the brush dropped from my hand. Through the screening maples I could dimly see what was left of our suburban home, now an immense firebox vomiting sparks and greasy smoke into the afternoon. We were never to know exactly how it had happened. It had happened, and that was enough.

Somehow I had managed to reach the house in time. Somehow I had managed to fight my way through that hell of smoke and heat—to find Jean’s limp body on the stairway landing where she had fallen unconscious. Spent, suffocated, I cradled her in my arms and staggered back through the flames. My blood had thinned to water before I got to the door. Somewhere I found the strength to toss Jean’s light body free of the building, but that was my final effort. Then I had dropped on my hands and knees to the blazing timber of the floor.

The neighbors had arrived by then, and one of them had saved my life at the risk of his own. Too late. The fire had already had its way with me . . .

I opened my eyes. I tugged them away from the lifeless canvas and looked at Jean again. Soft she was, and beautiful, and dear.

“Jean,” I said, “you don’t understand. It’s only that—well, I sometimes get to thinking about the way I dawdled over this particular picture. There was no need of it—surely I could have finished it that day if I’d only worked a little faster . . . But that’s my only regret, dear. I love you more than my painting—more than anything on earth.”

“You’re sure, Alan?” A world of longing in her voice.

“T’m sure, Jean,” But am I? Am I really?
She laughed a small, uncertain laugh. “Because there’s always the Old Book, you know. Who can tell?—maybe that formula would actually work.”
“If it puts ideas like that in your head,” I told her, “I’m going to burn the damned thing up. I don’t know why dad ever bought it, anyhow.”

But I did not burn the book. I did not even think of it again—not until three days later. Jean was visiting a friend that afternoon, and I was alone in the house, and the black mood was on me once more.

I had used the hypodermic layout half an hour before—a task at which I was growing skillful in spite of my nerveless hands. The slow poison of the drug had begun to crawl through my senses now, but again it seemed to sharpen rather than dull the harsh edges of reality. And suddenly I thought of the Old Book.

I cannot say exactly what was in my mind when I went to the library. Perhaps I was drawn there by simple curiosity, a desire to re-read the passage Jean had mentioned. Perhaps I honestly intended to burn the book. Perhaps, again, I had another reason—a motive so shameful that my conscious mind would not even admit its existence. I shall never know.

My father had been a fanatical bibliophile with the means to pursue his hobby on a princely scale. The room was walled with musty galaxies of books; permeated with the odors of worn leather and crumbling parchment. And on one of the lower shelves was the volume Jean and I had dubbed the Old Book, since its nameless author had not distinguished it with a title.

An old book it was, the leathern binding fallen into decay and the unnumbered pages grown saffron with age. From those pages there seemed to exude an almost palpable aura of antiquity. It was a book in the type and the phraseology of seventeenth-century England, but parts of its text had been old when that age was new.

Old sorcery, old evil. Formulae for

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OLD MR. BOSTON SAYS: “YOU’LL AGREE MY APRICOT NECTAR IS TOPS!”

IT'S SMOOTH, IT'S RICH, IT GOES DOWN SLICK.

IT GIVES YOUR TASTE A BRAND NEW "KICK!"

IF YOU WANT FRIENDS TO SAY YOU'RE SWELL, HERE'S THE DRINK THAT RINGS THE BELL!

Here's the luscious flavor of ripe apricots in a rich, hearty liquor! Drink Mr. Boston’s Apricot Nectar straight. A handy drinking cup tops each pint bottle. You'll agree it's "rich as brandy, smooth as honey!"


OLD MR. BOSTON APRICOT NECTAR
ALSO BLACKBERRY, PEACH, WILD CHERRY—70 PROOF
winning the favors of Asmodeus, of Belial, of Suggatt—of all the other dark angels men have worshipped. Instructions for the making of poppets and death-charms, love-philtres and poisons. These were the more innocuous passages. There were others, most of them in Latin, whose lewdness and sheer diabolism were almost beyond conception.

No, I had never found the book laughable. There was something so appallingly casual about the way in which it was written—a cold matter-of-factness before which the same realities seemed to retreat. From the very dawn of the world, apparently, men had believed in these things. Could the cumulative weight of that belief have given them some degree of substance? Even today, there were scientists who held that thought-waves exerted a palpable influence for good or evil.

I gripped the book between my wrists and carried it upstairs to the storeroom. As always, the sight of the painting brought a dry ache to my throat. I could have finished it if I'd only hurried. That was the thought beating in my brain as I sat down and began to fumble laboriously through the volume.

I came at last to the passage Jean had mentioned. It was illustrated with a symbol so faded as to be almost indiscernible—a curious pentagonal design enclosed by a circle. I shall not try to be more explicit. Under this odd symbol were words which I have translated loosely out of their archaic text:

There is a door into the past, and the past may be changed by those who make use of this door. But be you warned that it is a journey no man can take more than once in the span of his life and be you further warned never to open the door in a fever or thoughtless mood. For it is indeed a strange, an awful undertaking when man borrows the vestments of a god and seeks to change that which is ordained; and be you again counseled that not often is true happiness to be found in this way.

Fix, then, this symbol firmly in your mind, centering your thoughts all the while upon that day to which you would return. Look from the symbol to the wall, and in time your mind's eye will see it thereon emblazoned, and there will come a moment at last when you move through the symbol as through an enchanted door. For so it is decreed by the old ones, and so men have done before you. They were not always wise.

Self-mesmerism? The old principle of the crystal ball—something on which to focus the mind and thus liberate the subconscious? That would have been one way of rationalizing whatever magic the thing possessed. And yet... I read the words, I stared at the symbol—and suddenly I believed.

It may have been the morphia striking abruptly at the roots of my sanity. It may be that artists are peculiarly impressionable to such things, living as they do on a plane half-way between illusion and fact. Whatever the reason, I believed utterly and unquestioningly in the powers of that cabalistic formula.

And without a moment of hesitation I began to follow the instructions.

I STUDIED the symbol. I concentrated on it until its every angle and convulsion was carved ineffaceably in my brain. To this day I could duplicate it if I would.

I turned my eyes to the bare wall of the storeroom; and almost instantly, it seemed, the symbol was repeated there. I saw it without surprise, for I had expected to see it. Vague at first, flickering uncertainly like an image cast from a faulty projection machine, it gradually steadied. Sharpened.

Grew brighter and ever brighter until at last it was an intolerable ache in my eyeballs. Until my senses reeled deliriously and it seemed that that white-hot ideograph was the one reality in the world.

And then, as the filaments of an inca-
descent light gradually dim when the light is turned off, so did the lines of the symbol dim gradually into grayness. Into darkness. And the darkness lifted and it was day again, and I stood in front of my painting with a brush poised in one smooth, supple, beautiful hand, and I could hear the maple trees whispering secrets to the eaves of my country studio.

It was a day three months ago—and a place thirty miles away.

I do not ask you to believe. I cannot hope to make clear to you a thing that is not even clear to me. For though this was superficially the past, in one respect it differed from that other past which I had known. The transition had not been complete so far as my brain was concerned.

It knew that in a moment or two I would smell the smoke of the burning house—because, inconceivably, it remembered the future. A creature suspended between two worlds, I could not claim either of them for my own—and this was a bewildering, a terrifying sensation.

But I lifted the paint-tipped brush and began to work.

Instantly the smell of smoke came to me, acrid in the cool fall afternoon. Sweat slimed the palms of my hands. Hurry, hurry! my brain cried out.

I went on painting.

No one, I think, has ever painted faster—not even the buckeye artists who work in department store windows and astound passersby with their speed. Nor was this strange, for through those long, bitter months I had visualized every necessary stroke, every nuance of light and shadow. The first face appeared magically on the canvas; convincing, complete. And the second.

The third.

Not once did I look to the window. I turned away from the painting only long enough to snatch up the smeared palette near the easel and replenish—the brush with color. Hurry! my brain was screaming.

ing. You’ve still got time. You can finish the picture. You can save Jean’s life. Hurry!

The smell of smoke had grown stronger, heavier. My eyes watered from the noxious gusts that found their way into the loft, and in my ears there was the savage crackling sound of the fire licking its yellow chops. It seemed to me that I could see the shadows of those distant flames leaping in a mad ghost-dance upon the canvas. My sweat-drenched body shook and shivered as with the ague, but the hand that held the flying brush was utterly sure of itself.

I painted life into the last blank face, and the thing was done.

I dropped the brush. I did not pause an instant to glance at the finished work, for I knew in my heart it was good. It could not have been bad.

I ran from the building, the blood beating hard in my brain. In the shade of the maples I came to a sudden dead stop, stricken to stone by the horror of what I saw. The house. From roof to foundations the house that held Jean was sheeted in billowing walls of flame. Already I could feel the blast of its heat against my face.

A strange, an awful undertaking to borrow the vestments of a god. . . . The somber words of that warning dinned at me across the months. “Jean! I cried out in a terrible voice. Then I was running toward the house again, my beautiful hands outflung as if for alms.

And at that moment the timbers settled and gave, and the roof collapsed in a great shower of sparks, and the smoke of Jean’s funeral pyre made a turgid cloud against the sky.

“Jean!” I screamed again, and fell senseless to the ground.

THERE was darkness that seemed less like darkness than like a suspension of all life, a vacuum absolute and eternal.
"Unfinished?" Brennerman chuckled. "You artists—never satisfied with your work. Why, another brush stroke would have spoiled that painting. It's perfect—superb!"

Angrily I said, "Don't be an ass, Brennerman! The thing lacked a lot of being finished when I crippled my—"

I thrust the bedclothes away and lifted my hands. I stared at them—and at the smooth flesh of my right forearm where the marks of the hypodermic needle should have been. I raised my hands and touched my unblemished face.

"Brennerman," I said thickly, "I want to see Jean! Bring her to me! At once, do you understand?"

"Of course, Alan." He edged away from my bed. "Certainly. I'll get her right away. . . ."

The nurse followed him out into the hospital corridor. She could not have known the door was slightly ajar so that at that moment I was hearing their subdued conversation.

Hearing Brennerman say, "I'm afraid I disturbed him. My God, I—I thought he realized . . ."

Hearing the nurse say, "He's been that way ever since it happened—his mind simply refuses to accept the truth. It was such a terrible shock, you know. I suppose artists have to lose themselves in their work, but it's—it's heartbreaking that he could have been so engrossed in a silly picture while his own house was in flames. That he could actually have let his wife burn to death in—"

The voices retreated down the hall.

You may have seen some of my pictures. The trolley-car scene, the portrait called Memory of Jean, and that frightful study of a blazing house. Good work, aren't they? That is because of the cleverness in these hands—these sleek, facile, sensitive hands that I would give the world to see maimed and hideous again.
Seal Tight His Grave!

by W. WAYNE ROBBINS

I thought when I carried out the last requests of my uncle that his wishes were of no importance. But now I knew that the rituals he had asked me to perform above his cooling corpse—were resurrecting a vampire!

Finally he said: "Come on, John. You're supposed to hang, you know."

WHEN I went into the swamp that third evening to take care of Uncle Henry, it seemed I could hardly stand it any longer. I always had to go in just before dark, because Gholson's Swamp is treacherous in the night.

The candles were large, though, and I could hope that on these breathless nights they would continue to burn on past midnight.
I didn't think I could stand it much longer. Uncle Henry's lips were peeled back in a horrible grin, and his cheeks were gaunt and waxen.

"You always were an old fool, Henry," I whispered, wanting to beat at that brutish face. "You always were, and now you've made one of me. I'm a fool to be here, a madman, do you hear? I shouldn't respect the wishes of an old fool like you."

But of course Uncle Henry didn't answer. His half open eyes gave back a stare as blank and emotionless as did the red-rimmed bullet hole in his forehead.

It wasn't dark, but the murky twilight of the swampland seemed to be peopled with gibbering phantoms that lingered mockingly, just out of sight. The waters about the tiny island where I had Henry's body kept bubbling up nauseous gases from their depths, like the rattlings of a thousand dying throats.

I hastened to get the tall candles going, and felt some measure of relief at their company, in spite of the noxious vapors that they twirled about my face. It was odd that Henry should have chosen such poisonous candles for his bier.

Just as Henry had specified before he died, I had placed the cross over him, hanging down from a giant cypress. Hid- den beneath a root of that ancient, moss-garlanded tree was the bottle that Henry had said contained holy water.

It was all utterly mad, all those precautions. I didn't know what the ceremony meant, and didn't care. I had to go through with it, though. I kept thinking of what Service said:

"A promise made is a debt unpaid..."

With gorge lifting, I bent to make the dreadful examination that was part of it all. His half-concealed eyes had taken on a gruesome hue, and his cheeks were ghastlier than ever. It was three days now. Perhaps the bullet hole would be first to show the sign I was grimly awaiting. But so far there was no sign of dis-

solution. So I must go on, in spite of the screaming of hysterical nerves.

"A promise made..."

The body tonight seemed to be even further over on its side, although I had been careful to place it as serenely and respectfully as possible. An imaginative person might have been worried about that change of position; but it was just the settling of the island, or the wind, of course. Except that there had been no wind.

I was glad Henry wasn't alive to see that change, because he would have grinned at my bewilderment, and said: "I told you so, Cadge. See? I told you—"

HENRY had called me that for years.

"Cadger—chiseler." He was a mental bully. I left him there and worked my way out of the swamp toward home.

Our little house in the village seemed empty without Henry's shouting and bluster- ing. But it was nice, too. It was all mine, now. Not long before he died, when exacting that horrid promise from me, he had said: "Is it too much to ask, when you know I'm leaving all the property to you? About time you earned your keep..."

It had been as if he foresaw his own death. I suppose a person can, though, when he himself will be the instrument of that death. But a dead person's wish is sacred, no matter how he dies. Uncle Henry was bullying me even after death.

That night I had asked him what the reason for his weird commands might be. Before me were the candles, and the cross, and the water, and he was talking.

He spoke with an edge of tiredness upon his voice. "I'm getting along in years, Cadge. I've lived a wild, lustful life and I'm just a bit—a bit afraid. I've been a man consumed with one emotion: hatred. I know you've never taken much stock in that old feud with the Cartwrights."
The family animosity toward the Cartwrights was a thing of long standing. But it had become its bitterest during Henry's life. Mainly, it was because Joab Cartwright had taken Henry's girl, forty years before. Then, too, there had been a fierce squabble over property rights, in connection with our distillery. My uncle, years before, had foresight enough to secure a license, legalizing his own business. The Cartwrights were not so fortunate.

Uncle had prospered, enough so to send his nephew to college. The Cartwrights had sent Lillian, too; but on profits earned without benefit of revenue stamps.

"I thought that had all but died out," I said mildly. "It should have—"

A gleam of suspicious cunning came into his eye as he cut in: "Mebbe you'd like it too, eh? Mebbe there's some truth to what I been suspicioning about you ar' that Cartwright wench."

I felt my face grow sullen and red, but allowed him to go on: "Well, listen, Cadge! That hatred will never die out, see? Never! I hate 'em all, every one of the scum. Even that girl, Lillian. She may be only a step-sister of those devils, but she's a Cartwright all the same."

I switched him off all that, or tried to. "But this—about candles, and all."

He sighed, and his shoulders drooped lower as if with deathly weariness. "Yes, that—I was always a man who knew how to hate. But any ordinary revenge didn't seem enough, like—murder. I'd heard of a certain old Negro crone back in the swamp, long since dead and gone. But I went to her for revenge. It didn't seem, though, that the curse I asked down on their heads ever came to happen. I kept waiting and waiting, and now I think I know what it means, and I'm afraid—" His palsied hand came up suddenly as if to wipe cobwebs from his eyes. "I'm afraid."

I thought now that I understood. He feared death would take away all chance for revenge.

He sensed my thought. "Yes; I'm afraid of death, but not the way you think. I'm tired, so tired. I want to rest when I die!" He arose suddenly on tottering legs, and clutched at the weak heart whose recent throbs had brought all this on. "You won't understand, I didn't until recently. But the curse won't begin—until after I die. My body will return, to exact that revenge, and I don't want it. Not—Oh, God, not one of the living dead!"

Uncle, all his life, had believed deeply in such things. He'd had to, to go to the old crone. I sighed, wondering how to escape what I knew was coming. But there was to be no escape.

"I've done what I could," Uncle said desolately, "to prepare for death. You'll have to conduct the old rituals over me, the exhortations and all. Keep me in the swamp, as I told you. Don't let a soul know I'm dead, when I die, until you know for certain all danger is past. You'll know, when—when putrefaction sets in. That's real death, then, and not before."

It was terrible, to hear Henry carrying on so about his own death. Reluctantly, I made the promises I was later to regret. It would be years, I thought; and meantime he'd forget it all.

But he hadn't forgotten. He'd died only a few nights later. I had come upon him in his bedroom, with a little old-fashioned revolver clasped in his rigid hand.

And I had kept the bargain, and because he had said a few things more that night.

First, he rested his evil eyes on me, and muttered: "You'll do it, Cadge, for the fortune. And for this—if I come back, if I'm damned to living death—you'll be one of the ones to suffer." He had allowed that to sink in, although it hadn't bothered me. What was worse was the deeply sinis-
ter threat of his conclusion. “And remember—Lillian Cartwright will be among those to know my hatred!”

But I could laugh at it all, safely home here, in bed, and safe from the swamp. It was only back in there that I had doubts. It was just the settling of the island that had moved Henry’s body...

It was about nine, well after dark, when they came and pounded at my door. It was Shérif Hutchinson and some others. Raleigh Cartwright was there, too, and Reverend Knight.

“We want your uncle, lad,” the sheriff said gently, glancing about the room. “He isn’t here, so I reckon it’s true what’s been said, that you keep going back in with bundles every evening. Taking him food, of course. He must be crazy, though, thinking he can get away with it just by hiding.”

I stood there in pajamas, wondering what to say. Raleigh Cartwright stared at my collegiate sleeping garments with contempt that was all but hidden by his bleak, red-eyed hatred. “Spill it, you devil,” he muttered, his big hands clenching, with the red hairs seeming to stand out straight from them.

Hutchinson looked at him warily. “Don’t pester the lad because of his uncle,” he grunted. “Take us to him, Johnny.”

I began dressing. “What do you want of Uncle?” I asked, somehow wishing I didn’t have to ask it.

Reverend Knight rumbled sonorously through thin lips, “Vengeance is mine sayeth—”

They paid him no attention. Knight was still termed reverend with some contempt by the community. He had long since been unfrocked by the Southern Methodists, for the lack of conformity between his glib preachings and his dubious actions.

It was the sheriff who answered me. “What Knight means, son, is that your uncle should ought to have forgotten that old feud. He’ll hang for killing Raleigh’s father.”

“When?” I asked, nearly in a whisper. “Hour ago.”

My laughter sounded mad, even in my own ears. “How?”

“Bled him to death,” was the laconic answer. The laughter still twisted in my lips. To my questioning look, the sheriff explained: “Bled him to death—through the throat. Tore his throat out. He’ll hang, your uncle will. Too bad.”

They stepped back as if from a blow as my laughter wailed out again. “My—my uncle killed him! That’s good!” Then it sort of got to me, all at once. I wanted to curse them. It seemed as if they were in league with Uncle to make my mind grovel in madness.

“You fools,” I screamed, “Don’t you know that Henry is dead?”

I didn’t tell them any more. I began leading the way into the swamp. I’d let the corpse speak for itself. I didn’t want to tell them about the bullet hole, because they might not understand. They’d know soon enough.

Finally, Hutchinson repeated what I’d asked about Joab Cartwright. “How did your uncle die?” When I didn’t answer, he made the comment I expected. “I hope you’re lyin’, Johnny, I sure do. More reasons than one. If he is dead, I sure hope it’s natural causes.”

When I paused on a moonlit hummock to stare at him, he said, “Powerful lot of money he’d be leaving you, eh?” That was all, for the moment. My skin crawled; the sheriff hinting that way, when he didn’t even know yet about the bullet hole.

But I couldn’t win. After proving uncle’s death, they’d begin wondering who else would have killed Joab Cartwright. And they’d soon hit on the most logical answer. One of their enemies, the Nel-
sons. And there was only one Nelson left, now.

We could see the flicker of the candles before we reached the cypress island. We all began hurrying through the last steps of squishing mire.

I wanted, suddenly, to run. We could see the island were on it.

The throats of the swamp still gurgled, the candles still plumed sweaty vapors upwards. Lamely, I spilled out the story, praying frantically for belief. I told them of Henry's mad delusion, his fear of life after death; of my enforced ministrations.

They didn't believe me, any more than they believed in such things as dead bodies floundering out of fogs to reach skeletal hands for hated throats.

"I've got an electric refrigerator," Hutchinson muttered, for some reason. "I tune in short-wave every night. This is the twentieth century. I don't believe in such." He paused as he reached for my arm. "Come on, son."

I could explain all about the curse, and the candles, and all. But I didn't need to tell them about the bullet hole. They just didn't think Uncle was dead. They thought I was lying. Because Uncle's body was gone.

I had left him right there, just before dark. Then, just after dark, Joab Cartwright's throat was torn out. And now Uncle was gone.

"I—don't understand," I whispered. "He was here—right here."

"It's no use, lad," Hutchinson said wearily. "You must be as insane as he is, to try that line. I admit I don't understand the candles, and all—"

He paused as he eyed the unfrocked minister curiously. Knight had lowered his gaunt body over one of those candles, until his nostrils were all but in the flame. Then his graceful fingers loosed the cork of the bottle, which Uncle said contained holy water. And, lastly, he stared with silent, incredulous awe at the cross where it was affixed to the great, ancient cypress bole.

I didn't know what I had done... I never took stock in such things.

"I believe the story," Knight whispered, with all of his mystic, folk-lore nature in the words. "I believe it all, and even that the body has—risen. Because old Henry lied to you, son. This hideous ceremony you've been performing isn't to lay the dead. It's the horrible recipe for animating the dead!"

His gaunt hands tore the cross from the tree, and threw it like an unclean thing, far into the bog. "Devil worship," he muttered. "The inverted cross!"

Raleigh Cartwright looked sick and scared in the candlelight. But Hutchinson swore angrily, his voice charged with disbelief. "Why, you're all of you goin' crazy!"

I wanted suddenly, frantically, to believe the sheriff. "That's it," I cried. "We're all worked up, talking like fools. The water's just washed his body under—the water took him..."

They stared at me solemnly, waiting for my own mind to remind me that there was no wind, no ripple, no tide, here in the swamp. There was only an island where a dead man should have been, but wasn't.

"He isn't dead," Hutchinson said, slipping handcuffs about my wrists. "You're hiding him somewhere. I know, because tonight he killed a man..."

Yes, tonight my uncle must have killed a man. Oh, it was funny to remember how conscientiously I had carried out his wishes, helping him return. Indeed, my Uncle Henry knew how to hate.

IN THE village the sheriff stopped once more at the Cartwright's place. There were things still to be done, before taking me down to the little grubby local prison.

The house was a two story affair, looming against the star-spattered sky. Inside,
friendly furnishings told of a woman's hand.

Joab Cartwright had been laid out on a chintz-covered love seat. His overalled legs hung far out over the graceful arm of it, and his gray hair just peeked from under the white sheet. Joab was the oldest of the clan, the father of the two Cartwright boys, Raleigh and Sim. It was logical, of course, that vengeance should strike at him first, the most hated of all.

Sim stood solemnly eyeing me as I pulled down the sheet. The manner of the thin, sparsely whiskered boy seemed more one of penetrating wonder than actual hostility.

Sim, together with Lillian and me, was of the younger brood that had tried to keep the smouldering embers of viciousness from breaking into actual flame. He seemed to be wondering if I'd been bluffing all these years, if I'd been covering up with protestations of friendliness.

Joab's throat was mangled so badly that I began wondering about a weapon. Surely hands—even teeth—couldn't do that. But then I recalled that the thing we dealt with have unknown reservoirs of strength behind its thirst. There are no laws to govern the dead.

"Where's Lillian?" I asked of Sim.

A young woman hovering in the background spoke first. She was pretty in a corn-fed, buxom way. She was Raleigh's wife, Lena. "Sent her to bed," she said unemotionally. "Why?"

I shook my head. I would have given anything to see Lillian, to bask in the nearness of her. But I mustn't give myself away. Though Uncle had suspected, and surely others had their own suspicions, now was not the time to spill it.

I was glad that the sheriff suggested what I couldn't. "Bring her down, boys. I haven't got her story yet. Right away, will you, Raleigh?"

The red headed man nodded and turned toward the stairs.

A hail from outside called the sheriff back through the door, and I had to follow. Our wrists were locked by metal. Most of the posse had broken up and gone home. But a deputy was bending over near the house, with flashlight out, shining on the ground. He had found a footprint. We must have delayed there five minutes, even though the print couldn't tell much. A living man's print wouldn't be any different from—any other.

We hadn't heard anyone come down the stairs yet. "Listen, Hutch," I suddenly blurted, worried about that print. "You used to be a friend. Let me loose, will you? Let me go up and see Lillian. I'd kind of like to talk to her, alone. I couldn't get away, you know. The only way out of the second floor is the stairway, and you fellows will all be down there."

Sim had finally come out to join us. "So that's the way it is," he shrugged when he heard me mention Lillian. The sheriff let me go; I wish he hadn't. They crowded in after me, and stood at the foot of the stairs. They knew I couldn't get away.

"Bring 'em both down," I was told.

I KNOCKED at one door, and got no answer. I didn't know the house. But the second turned out to be hers. At once her familiar voice asked who it was, and the door opened. She was a beautiful sight, although I felt infinitely sad at the brooding unhappiness of her face.

"Oh—Johnny," she whispered, you all right?"

"I'm in a spot," I said. "But it'll be all right." My thoughts raced back over more welcome memories of her. Class rooms—swing sessions at college that certain bench in the shadow of the library building.

"Just hold tight and tell the truth," I told her. "You can't hurt me. Where's Raleigh?—he came up."
She shook her head, while throwing a wrap about frilled pajamas. "In his room, I suppose. I heard him come up. Someone was with him." She broke off perplexedly as I flung myself wildly at that first door. I knew. I knew!

Death's footprints may be no different from others; but they have hideous, secret ways of threading a path toward those who are the hated.

Raleigh lay in a giant smear of blood on his own bed. His outstretched hands were clawed into twin protests, and his dead eyes contained the echo of having seen hell itself opening for him.

His throat was like his father's.

"This ends it," Hutchinson said warily, replacing the handcuffs. "By God, you sure got nerve, feller."

Lillian was standing with white knuckles against her teeth. Her eyes were asking me to speak, but for a while I couldn't. Her scream had brought Hutchinson and Sim and the deputy and Knight, who had returned from somewhere.

The sheriff summed things up cautiously. "Mebbe your uncle is dead, at that. Mebbe you've gone berserk and are getting rid of them all at once, thinking you'll get his property, and get revenge on the Cartwrights, too."

I fixed my eyes imploringly on Lillian. We hadn't planned to say anything, for a long while. But I had to speak, now, because it would save me. I had an ace in the hole, and it should speak eloquently my plea of innocence.

"Look, Sheriff," I began easily, "I don't hate the Cartwrights, and I can prove it. First place, Sim will speak for me, won't you, Sim? And here's the clincher. Would I hate a family into which I'd married?"

I stared about me at the circle of bewildered faces. "Yes," I gloated, "it's true. Lillian and I—just before graduation a month ago." I stepped toward her, feeling that now at last we could stand side by side, man and wife. But the handcuffs stopped me. And so did Lillian's words.

She stared at me for a moment, while emotions warred in her face. I didn't understand why she hesitated, why she seemed to draw erect, with cool contempt entering her eyes.

"Is that right?" Hutchinson asked skeptically.

"Right?" she whispered; and then, in a loud and scornful voice: "Right—that I'm married to an enemy of the Cartwrights? I never heard anything more preposterous!"

Lena Cartwright giggled hysterically, and rushed out.

"Boy, you have got nerve," the sheriff said, and took me to jail.

It WASN'T a very good jail. I was the only prisoner; this was one of the town drunk's nights out. Half of the stone building was cell, the other half headquarters.

The sleepy deputy stayed on guard out there. I didn't want to talk and he didn't want me to. He wanted to sleep in his chair. He dimmed the lights, all except a shaded one over the desk, and began breathing heavily. I didn't feel like arguing with anyone anymore. It was hopeless. And it seemed almost disloyal, a sacrilege or something, to squabble and bicker about Lillian, to try proving her a liar, and why. And there wasn't any reason why. So even I began doubting the truth of it all.

She regretted her bargain. Blood was thicker than water. She was only a Cartwright through her dead mother's marriage to old Joab, but she was one to the core all the same. She hated me. She thought I hated her, and all the Cartwrights, and had murdered two of them.

It would have been pleasant, I realized, to be dead, to be one with absolute, cosmic nothingness.
I slept briefly, but a nightmare snapped me awake finally, after I’d fought myself from a land of midnight bogs and clutching hands and sneering lips; and I saw that the light was out.

The deputy’s silhouette hadn’t moved from the chair propped against the wall, so someone from outside must have doused the light by cutting the wires.

The outer door opened, and then someone eased through. I couldn’t tell who it was yet. He made no noise. I heard a dull thud as his fist landed against the back of the deputy’s arched neck, and I heard the latter’s heavy sigh as sleep merged with unconsciousness.

“It’s me,” a voice said at once. “Me, Sim. Where the hell’s the keyhole?” I could hear him rattling the deputy’s key chain.

“You’re getting me out? Why?”

“Aw, shucks,” he muttered, “I think someone’s lying, and I don’t think it’s you. I know how it is to be railroaded to the pen for something.”

Things straightened out for me when I realized what he meant. A while back he had glumly accepted a year’s stretch in a federal prison, for illicit manufacture and sale of alcohol. His brother and old man should have gone; but they hung it on him so they could stay home and continue things humming.

“Who do you think’s lying?” I asked as I shouldered through the opened grill.

“Why,” he grunted, “Lillian, of course. I’ve had an idea you were falling for her a long time. Shows how goofy you are, though. You don’t know her like I do. She hasn’t got the morals nor conscience of a—”

Damn you—” I muttered, but immediately regret my spontaneous anger. He had been kind enough to get me free. And in spite of all, it looked as if his remarks about Lillian were more than half true...

“It’s all right, John,” he said through thickening lips. “You’re gone on the girl, that’s all, and I’d act the same I guess.”

The deputy groaned from behind us and Sim hastily closed the door and we loped into the shadows of an alley.

“What if they know you got me out?” I asked.

“Don’t tell them.”

“Well, now what? What’ll I do?”

He had hold of my arm, was guiding me resolutely back toward the Cartwright part of town. “Why, hell, that’s easy. Prove you told the truth about being married to Lillian and you’ll make her out a liar. Once you’ve done that she may tell what she knows. Maybe even tell it so’s you have an alibi. Who has your marriage certificate, you or her?”

“She has,” I said. “By damn, we’ll do it, Sim. She’ll have it in her room, and we’ll look till we find it.” I added finally; “But, Sim, if you don’t think I did it, who do you think did?”

We were pressing open the front door. “I’m not thinking,” Sim said in a whisper. “Remember—you’ve got an education that I haven’t. Maybe you think like the sheriff does. But me—all I know is that your uncle hated us powerful bad. And I want to find out if—if he’s still hating us.”

I supposed that Lillian would be alone in the house. Sim and she were all that remained now of their clan, since Lena’d spoken of going back to her parents’ house. But the moment the lights in the little parlor flashed on, I saw that I was wrong. While they had removed old Joab’s body hours before, there was another occupying its place.

It was that of Lena Cartwright, Raleigh’s wife. Mad fury had stalked her,
had swooped gleefully, had plucked out her throat as easily as breaking a well-stewed chicken's wing. Blood was everywhere.

But, hideous as that revelation was, it wasn't the worst. In the hall that turned toward the kitchen we found another body. This one's throat wasn't torn out. Blood was all over the cadaver's face, but especially was it congealed about the hideous, grinning lips. Swamp ooze lay thick about the legs. The eyes were still as mockingly blank as the bullet hole there in Uncle Henry's forehead.

"Merciful God," Sim whispered. "Get—let's get a willow stake and get it over with!"

"Wait!" I almost shrieked the word. "Lillian—what about her? Great God, do you suppose...?"

"NO MATTER what's happened," Sim warned grimly, turning woodenly back to the living room with me, "you better find that marriage certificate, or you'll hang sure as anything." Hysteria was rising into his heretofore placid voice. "They'll claim you did it after you got out and." He stopped to swear methodically. "Why did I help you? Don't you see—they'll claim I was in on it! Find that certificate!"

He wouldn't go up with me. His frightened eyes shifted toward the dark hallway where Henry's corpse lay. Someone must stay on guard, lest that fearful monster once more assume its dreadful simulation of life.

I didn't argue with Sim. I mounted the stairs, twin impressions warring for my senses. The one picture was of uncle down there, slumped over after the kill; blood smearing his lips, inert with contentment, wanting to rest briefly before again rising to fatten on the warm blood of vengeance. Sim had better be careful...

The other was of what I might find in Lillian's room. She had lied; she had tossed me to the wolves. But, God, how I loved her.

She wasn't dead. She came upright in bed as I plunged through the door. Her hand remained on the switch of her bedlamp while I dropped moaning beside her bed. "Lillie—"

"Johnny, darling! What—"

Then it all came back again, and bitterness was a lonely wolf-cry within my tortured heart.

"Darling! You call me darling, after...?"

Suddenly she threw herself against me, and a wild cry of pleading burst from her lips. "You don't understand—I couldn't explain; even now I can't be sure...

It was then I became conscious of voices below, rising in heated anger. I cautioned Lillian to silence while I strained for hearing. All I could think of was that once more that thing down below had risen, was hammering out its gleeful, mocking kill-just at poor Sim.

Even as I jerked upright and headed for the door, footsteps began mounting the stairs, fast. I met Sheriff Hutchinson in the door.

He was a man who had reached the end of inventive powers. Unused to prolonged emotions, he tried unsuccessfully to frame some comment bitter enough. Finally he shrugged, said, "Come on, John. You're supposed to hang, you know." Then he looked at Lillian pityingly. "Lucky for you, young lady, that I got here. He'd have killed you sure, for giving the lie to what he claimed. Damn Sim, for getting him out—"

The sheriff was again reaching for my wrist. Lillie whispered, "Sim...?" and just then sounds arose below. There were no words. There was only a scuffle, prolonged and somehow utterly terrifying, followed soon by the ghastly gagging groan of a throat spewing blood from tortured lips. There followed another sound, so namelessly alien that for long moments
I didn’t realize that it was meant as laughter.

HUTCHINSON’S face showed bewilderment at first, and then drained to sickly saffron as he realized all the implications. His jittering hands all but loosed my handcuffed wrist, which hadn’t yet been joined to his own. He was a man gone mad. He wanted to go below, but he still couldn’t bring himself to let me free. He turned to the foot of the bed.

“No,” I groaned, “you damned, blundering fool—don’t do it! You need me!” But he fumbled around and finally got the second cuff snapped onto a bed post, below the cross bar. I was helpless.

“I got to go,” he muttered to himself, “I got to—”

He didn’t go, though. He had just disappeared around the door and into the darkened corridor, when his voice arose again, in a startled shout that merged at once with mortal screams. Then his voice gurgled off and we heard him fall.

I began trying to swing the bed around in order to jam it against the opening, but the room was too small to turn it in. Lil- lian was too paralyzed with fright to shut the door. I began going, bed and all, toward it, thinking that my own body might serve for a moment.

“Oh, don’t be so damned heroic,” Sim snapped as he entered.

“You? You, Sim?” I shouted, experiencing a wild jumble of ideas. Sim had bested the monster Sim was here to help.

It was hard to realize that Sim was the monster.

He had a blood-smeared garden trowel in his hands, and it made a vicious swipe at my head. It bit into my cheek as I ducked. My head struck the side of the door and Sim hit me with his fist.

“You’ll not die for a while,” he consoled, as my senses reeled. “I still want that marriage certificate.”

I was near the floor as I could be, with my arm fastened above me that way. I looked up at Sim, and pleaded: “Look, guy. You’re nuts, see? We’ll both swear we knew you were unsteady; we’ll save you—”

“Skip it,” he snarled. “I’m crazy—like a fox. Isn’t that right, Lillian, my pet?”

“You knew it all along?” I asked of the girl as I came cautiously upright.

Her eyes were fixed with brilliant fascination on the trowel that had torn out so many throats, and that too soon would be at her own. “I—Johnny, I didn’t know who. I couldn’t accuse anyone until I was sure. But I knew it was something to do with our marriage, because someone had gone through my stuff. I was sure it was to get the marriage certificate. I couldn’t admit you had told the truth, without having to produce the paper—”

SIM threw the quilts to one side and jerked her from the bed. “You’re damned right,” he gritted. “And if you want a quick, easy death, you better produce that certificate, see? I can take a long time killing you, and still make it look like a monster.” He grinned to himself.

“I didn’t like to kill the sheriff, but I had to. He barged in too soon after my getting you here. I can manage some way, though, to make it confusing enough to these damned yokels.”

Sim lowered over Lillian with anticipation in his demeanor. He placed the trowel against the waxen pallor of her throat, and shoved gently. “The certificate,” he repeated.

“Why are you doing this, Sim?” I asked. I got as near him as I could, but the bed was wedged in the room, and all I could do was watch.

“Why?” He shrugged. “The oldest reasons in the world, Johnny. First, of course, is the same thing that was sup-
posed to bring a dead man back from hell—hatred. I killed your uncle first—had you guessed?—and made it look like suicide, to you at least. I didn't know anything about his idiotic superstitions, but when I followed you taking him into the swamp I doped it out and used it. I recognized that ceremony for raising the dead.

"But he had to die first. You inherited, see? And you were married, I had found out, to dear little Lillian here. That didn't set right, anyhow, because I always sort of wanted her. Too bad. But when you die, why she inherits. When she dies, why I inherit, because I'm the only one left of all the blessed Cartwrights!"

I had discovered something about that bed as he spoke. It wasn't a particularly sound one; loose jointed. "You didn't seem to mind having to kill your own father and brother," I said.

"Shut up," he snapped, "I'm sick of this. Talk, Lillian, damn you. I need that certificate, or no one inherits anything."

I saw the sharp prongs of the trowel sink deeper into the girl's flesh. He watched her struggles interestedly for a moment, before once more turning to me.

"No, I didn't mind a bit of revenge, myself, on the two that sent me to prison for a year. It's been fun—"

Lillian was sobbing desolately, but by degrees the sobs were turning to gagging cries as her torture deepened. She knew, I realized, that the moment she spoke the end would be at hand. If she would only delay another minute... .

The toe of my shoe had lifted one of the spring-supporting bars free from the notch in the end of the bed. I was working at the other. When it, too, came free, I wouldn't be loose; but would be impeded only by the foot of the bed itself.

"Sim, don't—don't," Lillian was choking. He began swinging his head around to grin at me, and I knew he'd see what I had done.

"Tell him, Lillie," I commanded, and he glanced back expectantly at her. He drew the trowel away so that she might speak more freely. That was my chance, because the foot of the bed was free in my hands, and it didn't endanger Lillian as the metal whipped down onto Sim's head.

One of the flimsy bars gave with the impact. No more than momentarily stunned, Sim came tearing upright, inside of the frame. I jerked, and he sprawled heavily to the floor. I brought the frame into direct contact with his skull once, and he quit struggling. I was turning the thing for a better grip, and it's a good thing the others arrived just then, because I imagine I'd have killed him.

The deputy was the one who suggested I shouldn't. "You'll need him, if I see things right. And anyway, the state likes to kill its own, you know."

Tall, sepulchral, was the Reverend Knight in the background. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," he reminded. "Your uncle exacted a terrible vengeance, indeed, son."

"It wasn't my uncle who did it," I muttered, without thinking, to the debarred minister.

"Directly, no," he replied drily. "But the dark powers work in devious ways, my friend. Didn't he go to a practitioner of evil, didn't he sell his soul for vengeance? Where are the Cartwrights today? Wiped out, by a dead man's curse."

"Why, that's right," I said, against the pressure of Lillian's brown locks. "Or, almost. Sim soon will be." That wasn't a very cheerful thing to say before Lillian; but this was better:

"And Lillian, here, isn't a Cartwright at all. She's a Nelson—Mrs. John Nelson."
The Body I Stole
by RUSSELL GRAY

In a fit of angry annoyance I purchased the parchment which that hollow-eyed stew-bum called "The Key to Hell." Then, when Vincent Armen won my sweetheart, I translated the sinister document and availed myself of the weirdest, most horrible knowledge ever disclosed to mankind! . . . A new-type confession from the Pit of Doom!

CHAPTER ONE
The Key to Hell

EVEN now I cannot bring myself to feel bitter toward the thin, timid man who called himself George Dobson. He warned me that he was opening the gates of hell for me, but I doubt that, however close he had come to the brink himself, he really believed his own words. Perhaps he was an emissary from that being with the curious name, Wat Zurl, whom I never met. Although why Wat Zurl should have sought to damn me I cannot imagine. No, it must have been only George Dobson whom Wat Zurl
hated, and that evening in the saloon I was foolish enough to let that hatred be transferred to me.

I had stopped off for a pair of beers to fight the heat and my nervousness. That afternoon Rita Baldwin had told me by telephone that she wanted to see me at her home at nine that evening. Her voice had been softer than usual; and as I sat in the beer joint to kill an hour until nine o’clock, my heart pounded with the hope that at last my persistent courtship would prove successful.

A shrill argument at the bar caused me to glance up and, for the first time, I noticed the thin man. The bartender was telling him that he wasn’t getting another drink until cash was forthcoming, and the thin man, with tears in his eyes, was pleading for credit. Then, narrow shoulders drooping, he started unsteadily for the door. On the way he had to pass my table. He stopped, appraised me carefully, and his watery, timid eyes lit up.

“You’re Professor Alfred Coates, aren’t you? The man who teaches ancient languages at the university?”

He took my nod for an invitation to sit down.

I said: “You’re wasting your time. I never buy drinks for strangers.”

“Who wants a drink?” he retorted haughtily. “I have something that will interest you.”

From a pocket he gently removed a parchment scroll. With great deliberation he slid off the rubber band and handed the parchment to me. He didn’t say a word; simply kept his watery eyes searchingly on me.
The characters inscribed on it were those of no language with which I was familiar. They consisted entirely of straight lines in composition, vaguely resembling the Runic Alphabet of the ancient Northern European nations.

I tossed the scroll back to him. "I assume you want to sell it to me. I'm afraid I'm not interested. The parchment is too new for this to be anything but a hoax."

"That's because Wat Zurl made a copy for me," he protested.

"On parchment?" I said skeptically.

"Yes. Wat Zurl abhors paper or any modern inventions. I saw the original parchment. It was older than time."

I laughed and lifted my glass.

"LISTEN," he said urgently. "Let me tell it from the beginning. My name is George Dobson. A year ago I came in contact with Wat Zurl. Never mind exactly where; it is enough to say that it was in a rugged, northern Scandinavian valley where few mortal men have stood. I came upon Wat Zurl's lonely hut during the day. A girl was there. Later Wat Zurl told me that she was his daughter, but I cannot see how that could be. She was scarcely more than a child and he was older than any living thing has a right to be. Anyway, she was very beautiful, a creature of gold and white, like the Northern sun and snow. Wat Zurl was not there and I was lonely and I—well, I wasn't quite responsible for what happened.

"That night Wat Zurl appeared, and I thought that he would kill me or that I would have to kill him. I had a rifle and there was no weapon of any kind in the house and he was old and wizened, so I should not have been afraid. But I was, all the same. He looked at the girl cowering in a corner of the room and then he looked at me. I felt myself shrivel up under the terrible intensity of his aged eyes. But he did nothing. Instead, to my astonishment, he told the girl to prepare food and a bed for me.

"When I started to leave the next day, he copied out what you see on that parchment and gave it to me. He said: 'I give you a dreadful power over yourself and others. Why I do this is my own concern.' I put him down as a crackpot and, thanking my stars that he hadn't raised more fuss, I departed.

"A month after I returned to America I realized why he had given me the scroll. That was his vengeance. I had occasion to use what was inscribed on it, and—"

"Just a minute," I interrupted. "Do you mean to say that you can read that?"

"Yes. Looking at me now, you would not guess that I was once a strong and courageous and well-educated man. I was an adventurer and a scholar. I did what was stated in that manuscript. You see me now, a shell of a man—ruined and broken, whining for a drink. I can go on living only because I dull myself with alcohol."

Again I laughed and drained the rest of my beer. "Do you take me for an utter fool?"

"Frankly, I do not except you to believe my story. It is true, nevertheless, but I will not try to overcome your conviction that it is the jabbering of a drunkard. You are a scholar. Whether or not my story is true, you realize that this manuscript must have immense value as an object of art—a curio. In my despair I am willing to part with it for one hundred dollars."

"I'll consider its value if you translate it for me into a known language."

His gaunt face turned a shade greener than it already was. "God, man, you don't know what you're asking! I could not sell you the message itself. No man is vile enough to deserve possession of that knowledge. And I alone could translate it."
“I’m afraid I’m not interested,” I told him, and looked at my watch. It was twenty to nine. I rose to go.

He lunged across the table and gripped my arm with skeleton fingers. “I’ll go mad if I don’t have a drink. Fifty dollars. It would be worth that to you even if there were only a remote chance that it is genuine.”

“Sorry. Please let go of me.”

But he held on. The frantic pleading in his drink-sodden face touched me. Even as a clever hoax the manuscript might be worth something. He was talking rapidly, coming down in price with every sentence. When he had reached ten dollars, I took out my wallet. Eagerly he snatched the money from me, and without another glance in my direction he rushed to the bar. I stuck the roll of parchment in an inside pocket and set out to keep my appointment with Rita Baldwin.

The door was opened by Rita herself. As always in her presence, my pulse started racing. Smiling wanly in the half-light coming from the foyer behind her, she was like a girl one dreams about but never hopes to see in the flesh.

Side by side we went into the drawing-room. Vincent Armnen was there. He was leaning nonchalantly against the grand piano, and there was a half-triumphant, half-pitying smile on his strong lips. My confidence wavered.

Vincent Armnen was much that I was not. Looking at myself objectively, I was a lean young man with rather plain features, shy in the presence of women. I was living modestly on an income which permitted few luxuries. Armnen, on the other hand, was athletic and as handsome as a movie idol. He was at ease with women and certainly not one-tenth as clumsy as I was in making love to them. And he was rich. I surpassed him in intelligence alone, but he made up for that with a nimble, clever mentality. So it was no wonder that I feared him.

Rita was saying: “Alfred, I asked you and Vincent here tonight so that I could tell you in his presence.” She flushed and bit the rest off. Obviously she was finding it hard to go through with it.

The expression on Vincent’s face told me plainly enough what she was trying to say. I felt myself shriveling up inwardly. For the last six months Rita and thoughts of my future had gone together. Without Rita there would be nothing worth planning or even living for.

Vincent said: “Rita has consented to become my wife, Alfred.”

I stared stupidly at her, wondering how I could possibly go on while another man possessed her. My eye dropped to a slender finger of her left hand. On it there was a brilliant diamond engagement ring which was worth as much as I could earn in a year.

Rita put a gentle hand on my arm. “I’m sorry, Alfred. I know this will hurt you, so I wanted you to know as soon as possible.”

I said nothing. Vincent was advancing across the room with hand outstretched. “No hard feelings, I hope, old man,” he said. “No reason why all three of us shouldn’t remain friends.”

My hand slid across his and I heard myself murmuring, “No reason at all.”

And then I found myself outside of the house. With a start I realized that I had been unnecessarily brutal to Rita; I had strode right past her without saying good-night, without wishing her luck. All I had been able to think of was to get away from her maddening beauty.

I was about to return to make amends, then changed my mind and in a mental fog walked to my apartment. I didn’t put on a light. In the darkness I sat, feeling my heart dissolved within me.

Presently there was a knock on my door. As I rose stiffly, a preposterous
notion crossed my mind that Rita had come to me; that when I flung open the door, I would find her telling me that it was all a mistake and that it was I she really loved.

But the face I saw was the ugly, sickish face of George Dobson. He lurched past me into the room and flopped as loosely as a cloth doll on the couch. It was obvious that since I had seen him last he had poured ten dollars worth of whiskey into himself.

“What do you want?” I demanded angrily. “To be pestered by a drunk was the last thing I wanted at this time.

“Got something to sell you,” he said thickly. “Need money. God, how I need liquor! Got the key to the manuscript.”

“I must ask you to leave.”

“Want the key?” he persisted. “Want to unlock the gate to hell? All right? Ten dollars.”

“I don’t want anything from you.”

He pulled something out of his pocket and placed it on the cigar-stand near the couch. It was a small square of parchment with characters written on it.

“Ten dollars,” he repeated.

To get rid of him at that moment would be worth more than ten dollars. Contemptuously I tossed the bill at him. He got down on his hands and knees to pick it up, then lurched erect. As he staggered toward the door, I was shocked to hear him weeping.

“I had to do it,” he sobbed. “I had to damn you because I need whiskey so badly.”

I shut the door behind him and paced back and forth. What a mess my life had turned into since nine o’clock tonight! And on top of it all this weeping drunk had to irritate and frighten me.

Yes, frighten me. In spite of myself and contrary to all reason, his words and manner and something uncanny and undefinable filled me with fear.

I must have passed that square of parchment a dozen times before my eyes happened to fall on it. Instantly my attention was captured. Half of the characters I knew. They were the sixteen letters of the ancient Scandinavian Runic Alphabet. Next to them were characters which appeared to be the same as those on the manuscript George Dobson had sold me.

The scholar in me temporarily submerged the heartbroken lover. In a mounting fever of excitement I took the key and the scroll to my desk, pulled out a pencil and paper, and proceeded to translate the message first into the Scandinavian Runic Alphabet and then into modern English. Hours passed before I was finished.

I didn’t pay much attention to the meaning of the completed manuscript. It appeared to be simply an exposition of an ancient wizard’s rites: the means of transferring the soul from one living body to another. What excited me was the possibility that I had come upon something which would prove to be a great contribution to the knowledge of forgotten languages. The contents, as usual, would be of relative unimportance.

Or so I thought that night. How was I to guess that George Dobson’s warning was anything but the aberration of a drink-soaked mind?

CHAPTER TWO

Through the Vortex

Saturday night I saw Rita at a country club dance. Seated stiffly in a wicker club chair, I kept my eyes fixed on her as she danced again and again with Vincent Armen. Eventually everybody noticed my hang-dog expression and I could sense the amused whispers going the rounds. But I couldn’t help myself.

I had to admit that she and Vincent made a handsome couple. They glided in
each other’s arms as if on air, and her head nestled on his shoulder, and every now and then they would look at each other with all the love in the world in their eyes. I hated Vincent Armen and envied him.

Toward midnight Rita came to my chair. “Alfred, you’re not angry with me?”

“No,” I said.

“Then dance with me.”

I am not a good dancer, and the feel of her vibrant beauty in my arms made me clumsier than usual. I stumbled, stepped on her foot. Under my breath I cursed myself as aloud I mumbled apologies. If I were half as handsome and graceful as Vincent Armen, she would be mine, for even with his physical and financial advantages, she had hesitated before making her choice. With my intelligence and personality and his body...

Again I stumbled awkwardly as that thought struck me. I knew what had given rise to it. Wat Zurl’s manuscript which I had bought from George Dobson!

As soon as the number was over, I escorted Rita back to where Vincent was waiting for her and took my hurried leave. Walking home, I felt a strange racing of my blood. Of course the ancient rune was nonsense. I was a product of modern civilization which did not believe in the efficacy of spells or in a soul distinct and separate from the corporeal body. Yet my desperate desire for Rita roused unholy hopes.

In my room I studied the rune. There was one word which I could not translate into any known language, and it was the heart of the whole thing. After hours of labor I deduced from its use that it might mean soul, yet at the same time it appeared to include more than that. With a kind of shock I realized that the sorcerer of a forgotten age—if this manu-

script were genuine—had anticipated modern psychology by referring to the soul not as a mystic notion, but rather as the synthesis of the complete personality and character of the individual—the intrinsic I or ego. Indeed it went further than that, discussing what the psychoanalysts call the Id, or the subconscious mind which is the elementary being.

According to the rune, the soul or ego or personality or Id was only a temporary tenant of the material body, and it could be moved from one dwelling to another. And as I studied the parchment, I learned how my ego—I shall call it that for the sake of convenience—could gain possession of Vincent Armen’s body.

In sudden horror I shoved the scroll out of sight into a drawer. My skin was covered with cold perspiration and I could scarcely breathe. Before me rose a vision of the degraded creature George Dobson had become for having dared to meddle with forbidden things, and I recalled how he had wept for me when he had sold me the key to the rune.

Later I laughed at myself for being a gullible idiot. The transfer of an ego from one body to another was sheer nonsense, of course. Good Lord, it had to be!

Exhausted, I tumbled into bed, but sleep would not come. I lay awake haunted by the picture of Rita in Vincent Armen’s embrace.

The following morning, still agitated by jealousy and despair, I took a long walk along streets placid with Sunday hush. Without conscious effort on my part, my legs took me to Rita’s house. And as I turned the corner, I saw Rita and Vincent getting into his swanky roadster.

She wore a slack suit which molded the graceful contours of her figure, and she was laughing gayly as he swung a picnic basket into the car trunk. I stepped be-
hind a tree so that they would not see me, and from there I watched the roadster drive by me and heard the jolly lilt of their voices.

God, if it were I instead of Vincent Armen going off with her to a shady spot and looking at her beauty and feeling it throbbing against me!

I found myself running as if there were something urgent I had to do. There was! My conscious mind rejected the unholy notion which churned in it, but deep inside of me there was a frantic determination to risk hell itself if it would give me an hour with Rita.

Back in my room once more, I pulled out the scroll and prepared to do what had to be done. I cannot tell you what it was, save to mention that the preliminaries consisted of stripping my mind of rational thought. Only my insane passion for Rita could have given me the strength to go through with it. Then at last I was lying rigid on the bed, ready for the last step which would transfer my ego from my corporeal body to its new dwelling.

The sorcerer who in a dead past had written the rune had, as I mentioned, anticipated some psychologists who contend that under certain circumstances the mind can be dominant over matter. And it was stated in the ancient Runic language that if the desire of the will were sufficiently great, the transfer could be achieved.

Lying on the bed in the shade-drawn room, with supreme effort I cleared my mind of all thought but to gain possession of Vincent Armen’s material form. And the room disappeared, and the world, and a disembodied part of me was spinning in a vast vortex. Faster and faster that glob of pure thought whirled downward toward what appeared to be a vast funnel. As it neared the mouth of the funnel, it grew thin as a wire, unendurably taut, yet still spinning; and through the mouth of the funnel I could see, as if from a great height, the green of trees and fields and the shimmering blueness of water.

Abruptly the spinning stopped and I was awake.

“You’ve been asleep, darling,” a voice laughed lightly.

I was no longer in my room. Above me the most perfect face in the world, to my mind, was bent over me, and I felt the presence of warm lips close to mine. My arms moved to draw Rita closer.

Gently she slid away from me. “Not now, darling,” she said. “Everybody would see you kiss me.”

Hot sand was beneath me. Looking around, I saw a lake and hundreds of people all about us on the shore. I turned again to Rita. In the briefest of swimming suits, she was even more desirable than I had ever seen her.

“Let’s leave,” a voice close to me urged.

And then I realized that was I who had spoken in a tone which I recognized as Vincent Armen’s. I looked down at myself and saw a strong, athletic body clad only in swimming trunks. The kind of splendid male body women would be drawn to. Vincent Armen’s body of which I was now in complete possession!

I CHUCKLED. Everything that had been Vincent’s was mine—his body, his wealth, his sweetheart. I had driven his ego out of its own dwelling and usurped its place. Casually I wondered if his ego had been forced into my body or was homeless in the vortex.

I leaped to my feet. A sudden twinge in my knee brought a cry to my lips. Then I smiled wryly as I remembered that Vincent had had a game knee which had been injured some years ago in a football scrimmage. Also I recalled that his heart wasn’t in good condition as a result of too strenuous exercise. My own body had never known a sick day. There was irony in that, but I was satisfied. I had Rita.
“It’s still too early to leave,” Rita was protesting as I reached down a hand to pull her up to her feet.

“Too many people around,” I told her. “Any place is dull where I can’t get you off alone and kiss you.”

She blushed and squeezed my hand and together we ran off to the bath-house. When we had dressed, I hit the first snag.

I didn’t know, of course, where Vincent had parked his roadster. I got over it by making a joke about my poor memory.

“Why, darling,” Rita said, “just yesterday you were boasting to me how you never forgot anything.”

“Did I? It was probably an attempt to hide the fact that sometimes I can hardly remember my own name.”

She glanced sharply at me, and for a moment I feared that she suspected the deception. But how could that be? She tucked her arm through mine and led me to the roadster.

“Let’s go somewhere to dance,” I suggested as we drove along. I had to try out my new body. First there would be dancing in a way Alfred Coate’s body could never have danced, then the love-making. There was plenty of time. Feeling her thigh pressed against mine as she sat close to me, I began to be sorry for Vincent. Patronizingly I found myself hoping that his ego had found another dwelling. It would be tough on him in any event, but it couldn’t be helped. I had what I wanted.

All at once there wasn’t any road in front of me. Rita was gone, and everything but the funnel through which I was spinning upward. Frantically I tried to return and there was a momentary slackening of the spinning, as if in hesitation. Then it started again, and the thin line of thought was broadening as it gyrated upward around the sides of the funnel and became part of the vortex.

The bed was whirling and so was the room. Although I was not moving from the spot where I lay, I had the sensation of being tossed wildly about. Then slowly I was being eased down. The bed settled; the room straightened out.

I was back in my room, and the body I looked at was the thin form which I had occupied all these years of my life save for one, too-brief hour!

Had it been only a dream? Impossible. Everything that had happened was too vivid.

I slipped off my bed and found that I was so exhausted that I could hardly stand. A dream would not have done that to me. With an effort I dragged myself to my desk and studied the scroll. There was no mention that occupancy of another body could last for only short intervals at a time. Perhaps I had done something not quite right. I would try again.

But not today. The first attempt had sapped me of physical and mental strength.

Vincent Armen was once more in possession of his body, riding, or perhaps by now, dancing, with Rita in his arms; and later the kisses I had anticipated for myself would be given to him. A short while ago I had pitied him. Now I hated him.

CHAPTER THREE

Strange Dwelling

The following morning I again projected my disembodied self through the vortex. I found myself seated behind a huge walnut desk in an ornate office. A man whom I had never seen before stood diffidently at the other side of the desk. His expression indicated that he was waiting for orders.

What orders? Sparring for time, I said: “That will be all.”

“But Mr. Armen, you haven’t yet
given me an okay on the Casey account."

"Haven't I? Well, it's all right. Go ahead with it."

He frowned. "But you haven't told me which of the three lay-outs we should use."

The man's persistence irritated me as much as my own helplessness to give him a rational answer. "Get out!" I snapped. "I don't want to be bothered now."

He jumped as if I had struck him a physical blow. Vincent Armen was doubtless the kind of man who never raised his voice to his employees. I had to watch myself.

The man was almost at the door when I called him back. "I'm sorry I lost my temper," I apologized. "I awoke this morning with a devilish headache. I think I'll knock off for the day."

He nodded slowly, but his eyes were still puzzled. "And what about the Skin-Tint account. Mr. Armen? The deadline is at three this afternoon."

Damn that man! "I'll phone you at noon," I said.

When he was at last gone, I inspected Vincent Armen's body in the mirror and found it pleasing. The only drawback was the twinge in the knee. Admiringly I looked about the office. Vincent, I recalled, was head of an advertising concern. It was mine now. With a grim smile I wondered if my lack of ability and experience in the advertising game would wreck the business. As soon as possible, I would sell it. What would be left of Vincent's money would support me comfortably for the rest of my life.

It struck me that I was wasting valuable time. Perhaps I would be allowed possession of Vincent Armen's body for a period no longer than yesterday, and it was Rita that I especially wanted.

On the way out the game knee bothered me and silently I cursed Vincent for not having had a more perfect body. I walked through a huge office in which at least thirty people were working. My chest expanded with the pride of ownership. Then a man and an attractive blonde converged on me and hammered technical questions at me. Again I pleaded a terrific headache and hurried out.

When I reached Rita's house, her mother told me that Rita had stepped out and would return shortly. Mrs. Baldwin was surprised to see me at that early hour, but she went out of her way to make me comfortable and fluttered about me as if I were something to be closely protected. It was obvious that Mrs. Baldwin approved of me as a son-in-law—or rather approved of Vincent Armen. And with unreasonable loyalty to my discarded body, I despised her for it.

My nervousness mounted as I waited for Rita. Why didn't she hurry? I had no way of knowing whether or not my possession of this body would be permanent. Any minute now I might be driven back through the mouth of the funnel.

An hour passed. I could have killed Mrs. Baldwin as she persisted in what was her notion of entertaining me by making inane conversation. I found myself staring at her throat and wondering how it would feel to contract my fingers on her windpipe. With an effort I banished the thought. Never before had I remotely desired to harm anybody, and as far as I knew, Vincent Armen was a mild sort of fellow. Had my mind or soul or whatever it was, been warped in transit through the vortex?

At last I heard the front door opened and Mrs. Baldwin left to tell Rita that I was here. Rita came in a little breathlessly, brushing a loose strand of hair in place, and the way her face lit up at the sight of me made me feel weak.

"Vin, darling, what are you doing here at this time? You weren't due until eight tonight?"
Quickly I moved forward and put my arms about her. "I couldn’t stay away, Rita. I go crazy thinking about you. I must have you all the time."

She laughed lightly. "Our wedding is only a month away."

"Rita, sweetheart, do we have to wait? Why can’t we just drive to the city hall now and get married?"

"Silly boy, I have so many things to do first and we have a lifetime together. Aren’t you going to kiss me?"

Vincent would have kissed her at once. But the feel of her in my arms, her closeness and her ardor, were too new to me. It wasn’t so easy for me to get over the shyness that had been a plague to me all my life.

I crushed her against me and dropped my mouth to hers. The ecstasy of that kiss sent my head to spinning, sent the whole world spinning—and I found that I was whirling up the funnel, up into the vortex. From the depths of frustration I tried to cry Rita’s name, but I was not a being that had a voice. I was nothing but a thought in nothingness.

And when presently the excurting journey was ended, I was again back on my bed occupying my own body.

Twice I had been pulled violently away from Rita. Could the ego of Vincent Armen in a mighty rage of jealousy have fought its way back to its own dwelling place and driven out the intruder? I did not know. But I did know that I had inhabited his body twice as long as yesterday. Perhaps each time it would be longer—until the final triumph.

Had I had the strength, I would have attempted to return at once, but it took most of that day for me to recover sufficient energy to go about the arduous and abominable preparations necessary. And so it was early evening before I once again was agonizingly gyrating through the funnel.

I was seated at a long, elaborately set table, having dinner with two women. One was a sweet little brunette who had been a student of mine at the university—Grace Armen, Vincent’s sister. The gray-haired woman with the erect carriage and kindly face would be Vincent’s mother. My sister and mother now. It struck me with a kind of shock. I—that is, Alfred Coates—was an only child and both my parents had died when I was quite young. Now at last I had a family.

"Will you, Vincent?" Mrs. Armen was asking.

I looked up from my plate with a start. "What’s that, Mrs. Ar—Mother?"

Grace’s knife clattered on the table. Mrs. Armen frowned. "What in the world is the matter, Vincent? I declare you were about to call me Mrs. Armen."

I essayed a weak grin. "Pardon me. I was thinking of a new account. The woman’s name is Mrs.—ah—Armando. Sorry I wasn’t paying attention."

She repeated the question and I discovered that the discussion had been about Miami where Rita and I were going to spend our honeymoon. Talk of Rita reminded me that I had a date with her for eight o’clock. It was already seven-thirty, but I had to go through the annoyance of finishing the meal.

I evaded direct answers to questions, and avoided conversation by again bringing up my headache. I would have to employ that headache for some time to come until I learned everything I could about Vincent’s background.

As soon as I could, I excused myself. In the garage I found Vincent’s roadster and drove to Rita’s house. She was waiting for me on the porch, and now at last I could hold her in my arms. But she was rigid against me and her lips were cold. Her anxious eyes searched my face.

"Do you feel better now, darling?" she
asked. "Did you have another one of your attacks?"

"Attacks?"

"This morning you were afraid that you were suffering from spells of amnesia. You said you did not remember leaving your office and coming to see me. And yesterday, a few minutes after we had left the lake, you acted as if you had wakened suddenly from sleep."

"I'm afraid I've been working too hard and I suffer from headaches," I told her.

That satisfied her. We got into the car and I drove to a dark road and parked among trees. And then there were all the kisses even I could desire, but little more. Well, the rest could wait. I was not sorry now that our marriage was still a month off. I did not want to share her with Vincent Armen. Even the thought that he too kissed her when he was in control of his body consumed me with jealousy.

At midnight, as we were returning to her house, I was yanked violently back through the vortex. Lying in my bed in an agony of such weakness as few mortals have had to endure, I found myself feeling for the first time no resentment in having had to return to the body I had grown to abhor. Each tenancy of Vincent Armen's body was lasting longer; each time I was entrenching myself more firmly. Soon, I knew, I would be in permanent possession.

I slept until noon of the next day and found myself rested sufficiently to again attempt the journey. The thought of whirling through the vortex and then the funnel filled me with dread, but it had to be done. Perhaps two or three more trips at the most would be necessary.

The body of Vincent Armen was deep in an armchair in a man's bedroom. On a table were a bottle of rye and a half-filled glass, and an ashtray was loaded with cigarette stubs. He had not gone to his office; seeing that he—or should I say I?—was still clad in pajamas.

The door opened and his sister—my sister—entered. She came to my chair and studied my face searchingly before she spoke:

"Vin, if you're feeling so bad, do you think all this drinking and smoking is good for you?"

"I guess you're right," I said. "I think I'll dress and go for a walk."

"Rita is on the phone. She's worried about you."

I smiled. "Tell her I'll be right over. I feel fine now."

Grace shook her head. "You look bad, Vin. Take care of yourself."

"I promise that I will. Now run along and let me get dressed."

When she was gone, I went to the dresser and peered at myself in the mirror. The face looking back at me seemed ten years older than it had been last night. The broad muscular shoulders were stooped. I noticed a touch of gray at the temples which had not been there before.

Rage filled me. Damn Vincent! What had he done to this body which was so soon to be mine?

Then I burst into hysterical laughter. This was funny. It was the funniest thing that had ever happened to anybody. I swept the glass up from the table and drank down the burning, comforting whiskey.

THERE was enough humaneness left in me to permit a pang of pity for Vincent. I could only guess at the horror he was enduring. It had to be something more than a fear that his mind was giving way. Where was his ego during the intervals when it was dispossessed? Was it looking down at me now in helplessness? Or was there simply a blankness in his mind, followed, when his ego regained his body, by a vague, indefinable sense of the abomination committed on him?

Yes, I pitied him, but not enough to discard my hellish power. I shrugged
and took another drink and proceeded to
dress. Vincent had a large wardrobe,
tastefully selected. That was one more
thing I could thank him for.

When Rita admitted me into her house,
she stepped back from me and stared at
me as if I were a ghost. Then with a
hoarse sob, she flung herself into my
arms.

"Darling, something frightful is hap-
pening to you!" she whimpered. "Last
night when we were driving in your car
you changed so suddenly. You looked as
if—as if you’d come out of hell. You
look older now—different. Darling,
you’ve got to tell me what’s wrong.
Something is eating at your soul."

Aply put, that last sentence. "Just
these bad headaches," I said, trying to
dissim it lightly.

"Darling, you’re not telling me the
truth." She clung to me. "Tell me—are
you afraid you’re going—going—" She
couldn’t say it.

"Insane!" I finished for her. "Don’t
be silly, sweetheart. As a matter of fact,
something is worrying me. I don’t want
to trouble you with it, but I can say that
it will be agreeably settled in a day or
two."

As we went into the drawing-room, she
insisted on sharing my anxiety with me,
but I managed to put her off. Then we
were on the couch and my arms were
about her.

Suddenly she slid away from me and
her eyes were pained and puzzled. "It is
odd," she muttered. "At times during
the last few days you’ve not been like
yourself at all. I get an eerie impression
that you’re two people."

My heart turned cold, but I managed
to grin. "Like what two people, for insta-
ance?"

"Like you and— This is of course ab-
surd, darling, but just now I had an idea
that you were very much like Alfred
Coates. The same thing struck me yester-
day, also. Certain subtle mannerism,
certain phrases you use."

"And the way I kiss?" I bantered.

"Darling, don’t say that. I’ve never
kissed poor Alfred."

Poor Alfred, eh? This was proving to
be a grand joke. Say rather, Poor Vin-
cent.

"I was only kidding," I said. "Let’s
try some more of those kisses."

A few minutes later she happened to
mention that her mother was away for
the afternoon and that we were alone in
the house.

That was a mistake. I looked at her in
a way I never had before. I had always
desired her, in a clean, healthy way a
man desires the woman he loves. But this
was different.

I DO not know what particular hell
George Dobson went through when
he employed that rune in the same way
as I, but I know now that in transit
through the vortex my soul had become
twisted. Normally, after that first jour-
ney and having learned the full implica-
tions of my deed, I doubt if I could have
continued to do what I was doing to
Vincent Armen. But on my return I was
no longer normal, with the compassion of
an ordinary human being.

My arms tightened about Rita. With
a contented sigh she snuggled closer in
my embrace. Then her eyes opened wide.

"Vin, what are you thinking of? Please!"

"We’ll be married soon anyway," I
whispered huskily.

"Vin, you mustn’t! Stop it, I say!"

I laughed crazily. There was no room
for anything in my mind but the fact that
she was desirable above all other women.
Her voice went on and on, quivering and
pleading, and her fingers were like talons
as she struggled against me.

Somewhere within me a lingering
spark of decency flared up. Or was it that
my mind had realized that by going through with this, I would drive her away from me forever? It would be a foolish thing for me to do in view of the fact that if I waited a little longer, a brief month until our marriage, she would be willingly and eagerly mine.

My hands dropped from her and I stood up. Her tear-streaked face lifted toward me, and I saw fear in it and loathing.

I said: "How can you ever forgive me, Rita? I love you so much and—and this cursed headache of mine." And I pressed both my fists against my forehead."

It was, I suppose, pretty good acting. Rita rose from the couch and I felt her hand on my shoulder.

"Vin, you've changed. You're sick."

"Don't touch me!" I cried. "I'm no good. I have no right loving you. I'll go away. Nobody will ever see me again."

That did it. Both her hands were on me now and she was saying: "I'll never let you go, darling. We'll fight this together. If you'll only tell me what it is."

She shouldn't have come into my arms again. I struggled with myself not to take up where I had left off. The moment was not worth the lifetime of love. I had to get away from her for a little while to recover my balance. Tomorrow I could play on her love and compassion and anxiety to persuade her into immediate marriage.

And so I broke away from her. Muttering wild excuses, I plunged out of the house. I heard her feet patter after me; I heard her voice calling. When I was in the roadster, I waved to her as she ran down the porch steps and called to her that I would be back tomorrow. Then I drove off.

I was anxious to return to my legitimate body because I was certain, somehow, that one more journey was required before I could maintain permanent pos-

session of my new dwelling. For a long time I drove. At night I parked the car and walked through dark streets, driven by a strange restlessness. Twice I found my legs taking me to Rita's house, but both times I checked myself after an inward struggle.

A voice in a shadowy doorway said: "Busy tonight, big boy?"

The girl stepped out under a street lamp. She was not unattractive if you could ignore the set, artificial smile on over-painted lips and the infinite weariness in eyes too old for her years. I smiled back at her. Normally a woman like that would have simply disgusted me. Now I felt myself drawn to her because she was a female. A poor substitute for Rita, perhaps, but a substitute just the same.

She tucked an arm through mine and together we went back through the doorway and up a flight of rickety steps.

Ten minutes after we entered the shabby little room I was whirling through the vortex. And when I was back in my own bed in my ego's old dwelling place, I burst into wild laughter. At this moment Vincent Armen was finding himself in the arms of a cheap woman of the streets; and as I thought of his anguished surprise, my laughter went on and on. Looking back now, I knew that it was not the laughter of a sane man.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Horror Beyond Horror

I WAITED two days before I attempted what, I was certain, would be the final journey. To begin with, the four previous trips had weakened me so that I could scarcely move from the bed. My brain, too, was tired and fogged, and the procedure required, among other things, a tremendous effort of will. In addition, why not let Vincent Armen
make up with Rita for what I had done, so that when I returned to her I would be wholly forgiven? It would be the final joke on Vincent.

Night was descending when I set about making preparations. Something was wrong. For a long time I lay on my bed with my mind cleared of everything but the exertion of will for the task ahead. Nothing happened.

Had I made a mistake somewhere? I started from the beginning, repeating the mental and physical abominations as specified in the rune, and again I felt my will smashing against a powerful barrier.

I do not know how long I struggled there in my room, striving to drive my ego from my body by the sheer force of my desire for Rita. Slowly the spinning started. At last my room was left behind and I was in the vortex, although the gyrations were sluggish and hesitant. Something was attempting to hurl me back, but in the vortex I was the will power which was gradually overcoming whatever attempted to bar me.

Finally the funnel was achieved, and as I lengthened out into a single thin thought I suffered such agony as could not have been endured by any physical form. How can I describe it? It was not like any pain a human body had ever felt, for it had no body. I was one with pain, pure and unmitigated, yet the power of the rune and the drive of my unencumbered will spun me forward.

It was over at last. I was conscious of being in a body—Vincent Armen's body—seeping in to take control. The body was asleep, which was good, because I needed rest. For what appeared eons I lay supine.

Presently I felt strong enough to rouse myself. The body refused to respond. I had slept long enough; I must wake up. Then again my will was battling, this time to bring motion into the body.

The hand stirred feebly and struck against something. The wall at the side of the bed probably.

Then I heard voices. They were subdued, hushed, and near me a woman was weeping. Was I ill? I felt so infinitely tired.

The woman who wept spoke between sobs. It was Rita.

"Why did he do it?" Rita was saying. "I had told him that I forgave him. He came to me two mornings ago, and he looked frightful. He started talking wildly about how he was no good, rotten to the core. I told him not to blame himself because of yesterday; that he had been sick and not responsible for his actions. He stared at me and said: 'How do you know where I was last night?' He frightened me. I stammered that of course I knew because he had been with me most of the morning. He kept looking at me with something in his eyes that was more horrible than madness. I blurted out that I forgave him because of what he had tried to do to me. He cried: 'God, did I do that? And at night I found myself in the arms of a street-walker!' Then he ran out of my house. I went after him, but I lost him. He was not at home. Finally I tried his office, and when I reached it"—her voice cracked—"it was too late."

Too late? Dully those two words ran through my mind. Too late for what?

A NO THER voice, Grace Armenia's took up. "That note he left on his desk, if we could only understand it. What was the horror he wrote about? He said that he did not know what it was himself, except that something hellish was happening to him and that he could no longer go on living. He said that he had no right to go on living."

My brain leaped frantically. What were they talking about? Enough of this. I was Vincent Armen now. The ego of Alfred Coates and the body of Vincent
A tremor shook her. She cringed away from me.

"You're dead, Vincent!" she moaned.

"You're dead!"

All I could think of saying was her name. Her expression changed to one of wonder and far back in her eyes I saw a flicker of hope.

"It was a mistake," she whispered.

"You're not really dead. We would have buried you."

Then I touched her bare arm. She screamed and threw herself backward against the wall. My touch had been the cold touch of death.

"Your eyes!" she moaned, cringing against the wall. "They're the eyes of a dead man!"

"Rita!" I said, and went to her again.

She could endure no more. She plunged under my outstretched hand and tore the door open.

I MADE no attempt to follow. It struck me that Rita was no longer important. All that mattered was to discard this abomination into which my will had forced me. There was a way. In my room—or rather in the room of Alfred Coates—was Wat Zurl's rune.

Through the closed door I heard a chaos of frenzied voices coming closer. The room was on the ground floor. I climbed through an open window.

Presently I was in my room, gazing down at the naked soul-less husk that had been my body. It was as rigid as death, yet appeared to have the glow of life.

A wave of affection for that body swept over me. It had been an adequate dwelling; had never given me much trouble. It would not die and rot until I was well out of it. I would regain possession of it, and I would yet have Rita for my wife. She had loved me second best. With Vincent Armen out of the way, she would naturally turn to me. In the end it would not turn out so badly for me after all.
Chuckling softly to myself, I picked up Wat Zurl’s manuscript.

* * *

As I sit at my desk where I write this, I can see another twilight drifting down over the earth. I do not know how many twilights and dawns have come and gone since the cadaver entered this room. What does time mean to the dead?

Yet I am not dead. The essential I—the ego—remains as much alive as it ever was in this unspeakably vile dwelling. I have prayed for death, but even that final boon is denied me. Yesterday, I think it was, I thrust a knife in to the heart. Nothing happened, of course.

I cannot kill a body that is already dead and I cannot escape the rotting confines of the corpse. How I tried! How again and again I went through the preparations! How I studied the rune which already I had known by heart! But what I did was no longer effective.

Perhaps horror has weakened my will to an extent where it can no longer achieve a transfer.

Yesterday I started to notice the smell in the room. For a while I searched before I realized that it was the stench of the disintegrating body I occupied. It was rotting of exposure and heat. Even as I write this I see the hand—no, I cannot bring myself to describe it. It is the hand of a man who died many days ago.

I cannot keep my eyes away from the bed on which lies the form I had so foolishly abandoned. It is still alive, I believe. At noon I placed a mirror against the lips and it clouded slightly. What life remains in it is growing weaker and weaker. For lack of food, perhaps. In a little while the shell will be completely dead. So much the better.

No, I cannot kill myself, because I do not live. I do not have to eat or sleep or even breathe. It is only the hellish life of my ego which gives the unimpaired eyes and nose, sight and smell and the uninjured limbs motion.

WHY have I bothered to write this record? It will not be believed. It will be set down as the mad ravings of Alfred Coates before he died mysteriously. The stubborn, rational mind will satisfy itself with an explanation for the disappearance of Vincent Armen’s body from the coffin. It will convince itself that the corpse was stolen, and that the eye-witness accounts of Rita Baldwin and Grace Armen were nightmare illusions caused by grief. That will be for the best. It is well that human beings will not believe.

On my right there is a pile of ashes—all that is left of Wat Zurl’s scroll and the key to translate it. It is small amend to make for what I have done.

Black as are the sins I have committed against Vincent Armen and Rita Baldwin—yes, and against myself—I am paying as no man ever paid before. Vincent got off easily. He is dead, at rest.

Always in the past man has been able to escape whatever plagued him through the death of his body. One of my bodies is dead and the other is dying, yet the horror has only begun. My ego still lives, and I cannot kill it because it has no physical anchorage.

Will I have to drag this rotting form about until it becomes a hideous slime? The stench of it is already overwhelming. Is there no escape? Perhaps if I destroy it utterly, with fire or acid.

I shall try that. In a few minutes I shall leave this house to seek my release. Will I find it? Even if I manage utterly to destroy this dead body, will my soul, which I have torn violently from its home, ever find a haven?

I know now why George Dobson wept when he sold me the key to Wat Zurl’s rune.

THE END
I hated snakes. But now I found myself weirdly fascinated by this one.... For in it I saw the spirit of my dead husband, doomed to roam the earth in the body of a reptile—and to drive me to insanity!

I could see the festering clods of putrid flesh that hung to its mouldering form.

I AM GOING to try to tell, as calmly as I can, my version of this weird, ghastly affair exactly as I lived it. Combined with what my poor husband has written, reading them both you may perhaps understand the thing that struck numbing, freezing terror at us in such different ways—I wonder now, how my
mind was able to withstand it's blows!
I don't know what possessed me to catch that harmless little green garter snake and bring it home, hiding it from Tom. I think that up to that instant I was a normal woman, with a normal hate, even fear of snakes. I had more than a normal fear of them because my first husband—Dr. Paul Levant, whom I married when I was only seventeen—was bitten by a snake and died a few months after our honeymoon. Then I married Tom Allen. He had been our best friend, so gentle and sympathetic during those months of my bereavement that I yielded at last to the love I knew Tom had always had for me.

And three months after our marriage, when I was walking alone one summer afternoon in the woods near our home, I chanced to see the little garter snake. If you are one of those who can think of nothing save in terms of cold logic, I fear you will have little understanding of the vagaries of a woman's emotions, her instincts, things she does not understand herself, which prompt her to act illogically. And you will not believe that there are things of mystery which no scientist can ever explain. Things diabolical—

I stooped, caught the little green snake and held it to my bosom, cuddling it, even while I shuddered with terror and the cold sweat broke out on me.

"Paul," I whispered, "is it you? Could it be—really you?"

I know that when you finish reading this, and when you have read what Tom has written, you will say that I didn't whisper that to the garter snake. You will say the ghastly idea that something of my first husband was imprisoned in this writhing reptile came to me later, prompted by the horrible occurrences which so swiftly engulfed me. But I swear it didn't. I swear that now it leaped into my mind.

"Paul—oh, Paul, dear—"

The flat little green head was close to my face. The harmless green tongue flicked out; the little eyes stared at me. Then suddenly as I gazed, fascinated, into those tiny eyes, the revulsion of my horror was so great that I cast the writhing thing away.

The little snake didn't seem to want to escape. It writhed there on the ground almost at my feet. Looking at me? Watching me? I snatched it up again, cuddling it, murmuring to it horrified, and with God knows what other gruesome emotions as I ran home with it.

The LITTLE bungalow in which Tom and I lived was set in a lonely grove of trees near the edge of town. The house was empty when I got there this late afternoon. I found a box, put the quivering little snake in it, and hid it from Tom when he should return.

That was the beginning. Horror was upon me that night. Guilty horror? I suppose so. It must have been stamped on my pallid face, in my shifting eyes as I served Tom supper out on the front veranda. Beyond the rail the leafy woods were darkening with the purple night-shadows and the stirring of insect life was sounding... This was Paul's home...

Vagaries, abnormalities of a woman's mind? Yes, I suppose it was that. I sat brooding, staring, thinking only of the little box back in my bedroom with the writhing green thing in it... .

"Gloria, what the devil's the matter with you tonight?" Tom was regarding me with a puzzled frown. His dark hair was disheveled where he had run his hand through it impatiently; his dark eyes searched me.

"Why—why nothing, dear."

He let it go at that.

I didn't want it to be moonlight, that night. For me there is more horror in moonlight than in sudden blackness for some reason. I knew Paul's eyes would
stare at me strangely if the moonlight shone in my eyes.

After I thought Tom was asleep, I crept out of bed. I sat by the window with the green snake in my arms. It was horrible. God knows why I clung to the sleek twisting little thing. It wound itself around my arm, caressingly. And the moonlight shone in its eyes as it raised its head to stare at me.

Ravings of a woman demented? Is that what you're thinking as you read this? That's not so. Not quite. Heaven knows, I barely escaped madness before the ghastly thing was over. But there at the beginning, I was wholly sane. My terrified thought that something of the dead Paul Levant was imprisoned here in this little reptile had a very real basis.

“Paul dear, I—I'm trying so hard not to be afraid of you—” I must have murmured it, shuddering, as the snake wound itself around my neck.

Suddenly I was aware that Tom had leaped from the bed. In a shaft of moonlight, his pajama-clad figure trembling, he stood staring at me with silent horror.

“Gloria—what the devil—”

“Oh Tom—Tom—”

I could only murmur it numbly as for a second he stared at the writhing green thing where it coiled around my throat.

“Gloria!” Then he leaped, snatched the snake from me, flung it on the floor. Gripping one of his shoes which lay under the bed, he pounded the snake's head. mashed it.

“Tom! Don't—”

I sat frozen with the ghastly horror of it. Those thuds, mashing the little head. Then as Tom picked the quivering dead thing up and flung it out the window I burst into hysterical sobs.

W E TALKED it out that night. I tried to play square. I tried to tell Tom of the grisly thoughts which had been within me.

“Why,” Tom murmured at last, “that's crazy, Gloria. A dead man can't come back. You're trying to tell me that Paul's spirit took possession of the body of that little snake so he could get here, near you?”

Tom was sitting on the bed, staring at me queerly, as though never before had he quite known me. Was this the beginning of a ghastly struggle of two men to possess me? Tom, my living husband, whom I loved, and Paul Levant, moldering now in his grave—but something of him struggling out, trying to reach me in the world of the living; trying to separate me from Tom.

I must have been babbling something like that. And though Tom held me, trying to soothe my hysteria, I was conscious that there must be within him a question of my sanity. And a feeling of jealousy. Surely I realize that I must have shown a grisly, morbid love for Paul, that first terrible night.

“You—you know Paul always said that he could come back,” I babbled. “You remember—study of snakes? Oriental occultism—Oh Tom, he told me that if he died before I did, his spirit would possess the body of a snake—a way to get back.”

“Rot,” Tom said. But oh why—why did he stare at me so queerly? Why was his handsome face so pallid now in the moonlight?

“He was a nut on snakes,” Tom added. “I remember that, of course. But it's no reason why you should be.”

But now he didn't hold me in his arms as I sat beside him on the bed. I even thought he seemed to draw away, as though something about me frightened him, revolted him.

“Oh Tom,” I pleaded, “you've got to understand me. Why, we were talking about Paul and his snakes just the other day. He always frightened me—I hated snakes—I do now—”
Dr. Paul Levant would have been a brilliant physician, if he had lived. Independently wealthy, he devoted his time to research. I am no scientist, but as Dr. Levant's wife, I knew that at the time of our marriage, he had been interested in snake poisons for their medicinal value. To a layman that may sound incongruous, but it wasn't. Paul was one of the first to develop cobra poison for injection into the spine to alleviate pain. That, and other things of similar character. In his laboratory in our home he kept many varieties of poisonous reptiles. I remember once my terror when I went in there at night and found him gripping one of the huge deadly snakes by its neck, holding its big ugly head over a measuring glass as he pressed its jowls to milk out the poison.

And on top of this, his hobby was occultism. That too, terrified me—his theory that a roving human spirit could take possession of some living thing which had a lower order of intelligence and will.

"It will be a snake I'll tackle," he once told me, with his light boyish laugh. "I've mastered them. Any snake will do what I say. If I die first, you watch out for a snake. That'll be me."

Bantering words. But why—Oh my God, why did I seize upon that little green garter snake this afternoon and call it Paul?

And Paul's death, too, was woven into this hideous skein of horror. I had found him, one morning, in his laboratory, dead on the floor in his pajamas and dressing gown. Evidently he had gone in there to experiment on one of the deadly reptiles. It had bitten him on the neck, the two little ghastly marks were there where the blood had welled out a trifle.

And the snake had escaped through the window.

A snake, causing his death. More than ever, I knew that he would make good his boast and come back. And yet I knew that it was impossible of course. The dead lie festering in their graves—they can't haunt the living. Paul couldn't come between me and Tom...

TOM HAD leaped from the bed and was swiftly dressing. "What—what are you going to do?" I murmured.

He flung me a queer look. "I'm going out and bury that snake. Dead things should be buried. That's right, isn't it, Gloria?"

I could only stare. At the door he paused, white-faced. "I suppose you're thinking that won't get me anything," he said unsteadily. "Well maybe you're right. Let him try—any damn thing he likes."

Poor Tom. "You love him, not me," he said. "Don't lie to me, Gloria—"

Oh I tried so hard not to lie to him. "Tom dear—"

"It's him you love—with your heart, your mind, your soul. And now he wants your body—is that it? Well, let him try, that's all I say, let him try."

How could I blame Tom for that morose outburst? The weird circumstances of my life with Paul, Paul's death, and now my sudden caressing of that damnable little snake.

Tom went out that night, and it was dawn before he returned. How shall I describe my gruesome terror as I huddled there in the dimness of our little bedroom? And those following ghastly weeks. Two men struggling to possess me? How could I blame Tom that he was morose, with sudden flares of anger, so that now the name of Paul could not be mentioned. An obsession. I could see that Tom, too, was obsessed with it. Haunted.

Trapped by a dead man. Tom often left me alone in the little house. I would sit there always with the feeling that something of Paul was hovering, struggling to get at me. Long since I had
been afraid to walk in the woods. Any little movement among the leaves—any little rustle—it could be a snake. Paul, out there writhing, wanting to come to me. Could a snake, if Paul's spirit possessed it, have the knowledge to find my house here?

Wild thoughts—One might go mad, thinking thoughts like that. One might kill himself in sheer terror, trying to escape. Was I going mad? Is that what Paul was doing to me? If I killed myself, I would join him in the grave. And that's what he wanted. My body, festering as his now was festering, with maggots in it. To take me away from Tom—

And then there were nights when I wanted to go out into the woods, to find him. To hold him again in my arms. Tom once had accused me of that.

"No! No," I gasped. "It's only you love, not him."

Tom's face was tragic as my own. Both of us were gaunt now, pallid, wild-eyed. "You lie," he said. "Oh, don't lie to me, Gloria. Just—don't do that."

To hear things slithering at night in your bedroom—a rattlesnake coiling, rearing, rattle its tail; to sit of an evening, gazing at the window, waiting for a slithering thing to come. I knew all that ghastly torture. But Tom thought that I wanted Paul to come. He thought that despite my terror, I wanted the snake to come— the snake that I knew would be Paul—coming to wind itself around my arm, to slide its head up my cheek. Cleopatra had loved the little asp. She had caressed it, there at the last. And then it had killed her.

I recall that evening when all the weird mental torture I had been through abruptly crystallized into that terrifying thought. I was seated alone in the living room. Tom, as usual now, was out. Perhaps in his jealous, brooding rage, his disillusionment, he was running with other women. Almost, now, I did not care.

There was only this weird fascination of horror that seemed to have irrevocably linked me with the dead Paul.

CLEOPATRA had caressed the little asp as it killed her. I would be like that. The thing was so logical. So horribly, damnably logical. Paul had power over snakes. His spirit, roaming, had seized upon the little harmless garter snake. He had felt my caresses that night. And I had felt his. Then Tom had killed the snake. But he would come again. And next time, in the body of a snake not so harmless! Why not? A snake that would bite me; kill me, as that venomous reptile in his laboratory had killed him. To kill me... Take me to the grave. His bride again.

No! No, Paul don't do it! I don't want to die. I wanted to scream it, but my dry tongue seemed frozen in my mouth, as I sat alone in the dim living room, staring at the windows which were dark, somber rectangles with the blur of the purple green woods beyond them... Don't do it, Paul. I did love you, but I don't now. It's Tom I love.

One may go mad with thoughts like that. There was a mirror across the room and I caught my reflection in it—gaunt white face, tousled wild hair and my eyes staring, with the whites of them showing. Dear God, was I already mad? Had I been mad right from the first? Were all these thoughts just the phantoms of a mind unhinged? Or was I trapped by this lover from the grave?

No, Paul, don't come. I hate you—Stay away from me. Forked horror. Two sharp, hollow fangs. That would be Paul's last caress, before he killed me and I joined him in the grave. His vengeance on me for marrying Tom. Forked horror.

Tom had said something like that to me, just tonight when he had rushed from the house in one of his moody rages.
“Forked horror—damn him, that’s his weapon. All right, Gloria, if you like it, that’s up to you. I know what forked horror is, all right.” He had laughed wildly. “I know what it is—I know how it can kill. Well, if he thinks he can get my wife, let him try. She still loves him, even though she’s married to me.”

“Oh, Tom—” I gasped.

But he was gone. Don’t come, Paul—not tonight. I don’t want to die.

Forked horror. What in Heaven’s name did Tom mean? Poor Tom. He too was helpless.

The little clock on the living room mantel chimed eleven—a hurried, frightened little heartbreak, like my own. I fought away my wild thoughts. One may go mad from thinking thoughts of horror.

Then suddenly I stiffened in my chair. Dear God, what was this? No imagination now! This was more than my thoughts. A ghastly reality—

Despite the sultry heat of the night, I had kept the living room windows closed. I was aware now of a movement behind me, toward the dim open doorway beyond which was the dark hall. There was a vague light-sheen—or a little puff of light, instantly gone. In my chair, twisted around, staring, I sat momentarily numbed. The ghastly thing which was Paul had already gotten into the house—by one of the other windows? The thought the realization that I was trapped, here in the living room, leaped at me.

And now I heard the hissing, sibilant, ghastly hissing of a giant snake. I couldn’t move. For that second the room reeled around me as I stared at a dark brown blob, there in the dim hall doorway. It was a thing the size of my head, down there on the floor. It hissed, and suddenly it was expanding.

THERE was poignancies of horror which the human mind is scarcely capable of withstanding. The outlines of the living room swayed before me. My sight blurred; the roots of my hair tingled and a wave of cold sweat burst out on my limbs.

Imagination? Stricken, horrified fancy? I knew it wasn’t—knew in that second that here was reality. On the floor a snake was appearing. Not coming from the hall, just materializing out of nothingness. It seemed to bubble at its source, as though it were in some weird occult state, struggling now into reality.

I realized that I was on my feet, swaying, backing away. Paul—No—no—I don’t want you here. I tried to scream it, but the words wouldn’t come. A ghastly, unutterably hideous brown snake. It slithered toward me—a snake as round as my upper arm. Already it was three feet long—then four feet. Monstrous, leprous thing. A reptile deceased. Like a festered body issuing from its grave it crawled slowly across the living room floor toward me.

A great brown python that was dead. Parts of it reared up in loops. I could see the festering clods of putrid flesh that hung to its mouldering body.

Paul, oh dear God, why do you come like this? There seemed almost no head—a mashed, mangled skull, with pustulence where the face should have been. Eyesockets which were bubbling holes of brown semi-liquid. A stench most horrible came waiting to my nostrils before it.

“Paul—you’re dead! That damned thing you’ve possessed is dead! You can’t do this to me—”

Oh I was able to scream it then—an eerie, wild scream that burst from my constricted throat as I backed into a corner of the living room.

“Paul—Paul, stop—”

But it had reached me. Its horrible ten foot length reared and quivered as the leprous head darted at me. And then I felt myself gripping it. I screamed as I fought.
It was a chaos of horror. I was conscious that I had fallen to the floor with the grisly reptile slithering upon me—horrible mouldering flesh, that it broke in my grip, oozing, scattering itself in great flakes within my convulsive fingers.

"Paul—let me alone—I—I hate you—"

Mercifully my senses were fading. I was aware only that the noisome rotted reptile was quivering in my grip as I lay entangled with it on the floor. And then there was a shout. Tom's voice!

"Oh Tom—save me—save me—"

I seemed only moaning it as the blackness of unconscious engulfed me.

* * *

I, THOMAS ALLEN, take my pen in hand. I'm an intelligent man. That much I hope you'll believe. And I've got sense enough to get what I go after. I wanted Gloria Levant. She was Paul Levant's bride when I first met her. I wanted her—her beauty and her money. No use in mincing words. She was easy to love; anybody could love her at first sight. And when that snake bit her husband and left her a widow, I had an easy time winning her and getting my grip on his money to boot.

Forked horror. I thought it a laugh—my young wife's destiny seeming to be all mixed up with snakes and things of horror that involved the supernatural. How could I possibly think that the dead Paul Levant would try to come back from the grave and take my wife from me? You wouldn't fall for stuff like that, would you? I didn't—fatuous fool that I was.

I know better now. But even so, I'm too smart to let Paul Levant, damn him, do what he's trying to do to me. The little writhing things in my brain are like snakes. I've always felt them, ever since I was a boy—crawling little things in my head that burn and blur my thoughts. But I've never said so to any doctor.

Doctors are apt to figure you're queer, when you tell them things like that. I'm too intelligent to make that error.

Paul Levant, damn his soul, knows about the little crawling things that live in my brain. Naturally he does; the dead know everything. He's making them writhe even worse than usual—they torture me, but I force myself to withstand them.

I first found out how much Gloria still loved Levant, when one day in a fit of God knows what, she brought home a little garter snake. She thought it was Paul who had come back to her. What a joke! The joke, I mean, was that she never knew that I had implanted all that in her mind. It was easy; I had talked about the dead Paul and his weird supernatural ideas about snakes a lot. Poor Tom! That was what she said. And she's still saying it. She never really knew me; she only thought she did. I've always been able to fool people that way.

Jealous of the dead Paul Levant? Sure I was. I didn't want him to get Gloria away from me. I wanted to go right on juggling her money just the way I'd been doing. I didn't want any showdown over what I'd spent on Vivian and the others...

A woman's mentality is not like a man's. Not so firmly seated. A woman can easily go insane from too much horror. She might kill herself in a frenzy, or she might just wind up in an asylum. The husband who happens to have her money is never suspected. Why would he be?

YOU SEE how logical I am? I realized at once that I had a most fortunate set of supposedly gruesome conditions, all ready for me to use.

It was so easy to pretend to Gloria that I was morose—maybe I've always been. So logical was I, that I would stare at her as though she was already crazy. And damn her, maybe she was. You can't

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tell about a woman. She acted gruesome enough over that little garter snake.

It wasn’t long after that I first realized I was playing with fire—toying with the forces of the unknown. I had been leaving Gloria alone quite a lot, so she’d have time to get herself frightened.

“Well, if he thinks he can get my wife—let him try.” What could be more frightening to her than telling her that? I slung it at her often. And one night I got wild. “Forked horror—that’s his weapon,” I shouted at her. “Well, I know what forked horror is all right. I know how it can kill.”

That jumped out of me; I didn’t expect to say it. But she didn’t understand me. She didn’t know that I had the little forked horror right in my pocket all the time. Nobody knows that. But I’ve still got it. It’s lying right here on my paper now as I write this.

I didn’t realize that I was fooling with some demon force that I might not be able to control. There is much in heaven and earth that is never dreamed of in our philosophy. Shakespeare or somebody said that, and it’s true. Maybe I gave the dead Paul Levant a chance to come back from the grave.

Anyway. I was walking in the woods one moonlight evening. When I was away from Gloria I wasn’t always in the city gambling, or with girls. Sometimes I’d walk around in the woods near our home. It was amusing to see if I’d come upon any snake that might be Paul. It had amused me a lot just to let myself think that maybe after all he had been in the green garter snake. And I had killed it; mashed its head and buried it. That must have been an awful disappointment to him! Casting his roaming spirit loose again, just after he’d found a home for it. So I figured if he found another home, I’d kill that snake too.

“Damn you, Levant. You can’t hurt me.” I used to mumble that at him a lot as I walked through the moonlit woods. It was an amusing idea. A roaming, disembodied spirit can’t harm a living person, except through fright and I knew I was too intelligent to be frightened.

And then, one night in the pallid woods, I saw the little snake. Not much bigger than a garter snake, but how different! Its red and yellow and black bands glistened in the moonlight. Not a harmless scarlet snake. These red and yellow bands were touching—narrow yellow separating the broad red and black.

A coral snake, distant cousin of the deadly cobra and almost as poisonous! My heart leaped into my throat, with a wave of horror. Because I was afraid that the thing would jump and bite me now? Don’t be silly. My horror was far more than that. Snakes don’t ordinarily roam at night. But this one was on its way. And then it saw me; it stopped and coiled by the edge of the road ten feet away; then it reared up and eyed me.

A coral snake—and I knew that in this part of the U. S., there should be none. And everyone, at the time, had understood that it had been a coral snake which killed Paul Levant. It had escaped out his window, and it had never been seen since. Only a few miles from here; Gloria had known that, of course, but had forgotten it.

A roaming, deadly coral snake. Here it was, eyeing me. A disembodied spirit can’t harm a living person. My mind leaped back to how, so often I had told myself that—and I amused myself by mumbling it to Paul Levant. But damn him, he knew it too; he had indeed found a way to harm me. A coral snake can harm you very easily!

For that second I stood transfixed, numbly staring at the damnable little thing as it eyed me.

“So that’s your game, Paul Levant,”
I muttered. You can’t blame me if I was suddenly terrified, can you? A little snake though, even with its deadly forked venom, is no match for an alert man. I backed away, looking for a loose rock.

The accursed thing was motionless; just the tip of the tail quivering. And those little eyes watching me. Eyes with the intelligence of a dead man behind them? You can’t blame me if I felt that it was gruesome. I found the rock.

"Now then, hold still, you little fool." Slowly I advanced as near as I dared. A little snake like that can’t jump very far. It can’t travel as fast as a man can run. I was in no danger.

Then I heaved the rock. That snake ducked. I swear it did. It jerked its head and a foot of its length sidewise. The rock missed it. I admit that a panic of terror swept me so that I turned and fled.

That was the night that I realized I must hurry to accomplish my purpose with Gloria. I had always planned what I would do to finish her. The little brown ball, nearly as big as your head, with a pointed top, I had gotten that from the distant company I had ordered to make it. They thought I was crazy, but they were satisfied with the money I paid them.

Everything was ready. Gloria was ripe for the final terror. Thin and pale and wide-eyed, with a haunted look. But why not? I had certainly terrified her constantly, and her own thoughts did the rest. Now I was ready for the finish. Pretty clever too. You’ll see how clever I was.

I did it two or three nights after the one on which I discovered that the deadly coral snake was after me. Those were horrible days and nights for me. Every instant I thought that ghastly little red and yellow banded reptile would appear at my ankles.

And, too, the little writhing maggots in my brain which had been there all my life were horribly active now. They confused me a little; made it hard for me to think clearly.

I put the brown ball of weird chemicals in the doorway of the living room. Gloria, seated there in her chair, didn’t hear me; and I kept well out of sight, in the shadows of the hall.

It was fun. You can imagine how I chuckled inwardly as I touched a match to the fuse of the brown, cone-like ball. It bubbled and hissed. And then the huge brown snake began coming out of it. The miracle of chemistry. Damned gruesome, horrible-looking thing. You’ve probably shuddered a bit when you played with one of the little ones on the Fourth of July. They’re ghastly-looking, aren’t they? Well, you can imagine mine, so huge, slithering out there into the dim living room where the petrified Gloria backed into a corner.

And then she was screaming—the wild eerie screams of a maniac. Fine! Just what I wanted. The thing made me laugh with triumph, but she didn’t hear it. Not until I got into the room with her, helping her. The snake was fragile. Gloria and I got all tangled up in the ghastly wreck of it as we rolled, fighting it. Those damned little maggots in my brain were squirming. All this excitement. They were like fire, burning my brain, blurring my thoughts.

"Tom—Tom—save me—" That was Gloria, screaming at me. Save her? Why, the damned little maniac, my ideas were just the opposite. But the fire in my brain wouldn’t let me do anything except roll with torture.

And then things were turning black. I was only dimly conscious that Gloria’s screams at last had brought one of the neighbors.

NOW YOU’LL see the sardonic humor of all this ghastly business. They’ve got me here in this nasty little
white room, with a locked door and bars at my window. Gloria ought to be here. She’s the maniac; I’m not. It’s a trap. But maybe I’m just as well off. Levant can’t get at me here. I have to keep my window open; I have to have fresh air or I couldn’t stand the fire in my brain. But my window is six feet above the ground. A snake can’t climb up a wall. Or can it?

Poor Tom—Gloria still thinks of me like that. She was here yesterday, looking at me so sorrowfully. But I’m not insane. She’s the one that’s demented, only she’s got everybody fooled. Surely, you’ll agree with me on that. And now Paul Levant, damn his wandering soul, he thinks he’s got me trapped in here. Maybe because he can’t get at me, he thinks I’ll get so frightened that I’ll kill myself. Well I won’t.

But if I did—and here’s the joke—I could do it right now, in a way that would be damably ironic. I’ve still got that little forked horror. It’s lying right here on my paper as I write. Just a little forked instrument that I rigged up a long time ago.

But I won’t kill myself. Paul Levant—even if he is a snake now—he can’t—

THE LITTLE manuscript, with its end trailing suddenly off, lay on Thomas Allen’s table in his room in the asylum.

His body was found on the floor with two little marks on his neck where the tiny drops of blood had welled out. In his clenched hand was his horrible, forked instrument of death—two poisoned prongs—poisoned with snake venom, with which he had killed Paul Levant, that night when he went into Levant’s laboratory, releasing the deadly little coral snake which would get the blame. But no one but himself and Levant knew that.

The asylum attendant laid down the sheets of scrawled manuscript which he had been reading. “Damned dirty villain. And no argument but what he was insane, eh, Doc? And then killed himself with these poisoned needles? Foxy devil, keeping them hidden for just that purpose.”

But the physician looked puzzled. “There ought to be blood here on the prongs, wouldn’t you think? There doesn’t seem to be.” His voice trailed off.

Then a muttered oath came from another attendant who was at the window, glancing out.

“What is it?” the physician demanded.

“Thought I seen a snake out there, in the moonlight, lookin’ up at me,” the attendant stammered.

But if there had been, the little snake had now retreated into the woods. They slammed down the window sash, shuddering.

Seymo had a hunch that the pardon offered him might cost more than even a framed life convict would want to pay. And when he found himself marooned on the flame-swept planet of another star he realized his hunch was correct! Cepheid Planet, R. R. Winterbotham’s feature novelette of the November issue, will hold you engrossed for every thrill-packed page! Don’t fail to read and enjoy this story!

In the same issue are brand-new tales by L. Sprague de Camp, Hal K. Wells, Frank Belknap Long, and half a dozen other top-flight science fiction writers. Make sure you get your copy of the November

SUPER SCIENCE STORIES
Corpse Shadow
by RAYMOND WHETSTONE

What had the accident done to her? Why did those children scream and flee when she spoke to them—why did her husband shiver as though a cold wind had blown over him when she pleaded with him for forgiveness? In God's name. what was she?

He just sat there motionless; his face a thin, cold mask.

MARJORIE BENTON was scarcely a mile outside the town of Wilmerdon when it happened. She was driving the tan roadster at fur-
ous speed, crazed with the desire to flee from Philip and find sanctuary in John Westley's arms. The black ribbon of highway was a flashing blur beneath the spinning wheels of the car, the wind a ceaseless roar in her ears as the speedometer soared to ninety. But fast as she was going, the urge to travel faster was like a whip, lashing her ever onward. This headlong, reckless flight epitomized everything she longed for—excitement, the intoxication of utter freedom, escape from the intolerable boredom of being Philip Benton's wife.

Not that Philip wasn't a good husband—as measured by most standards. He was. Even she had to admit that. He had done everything in his power to make her happy, had lavished upon her all the comforts and luxuries anyone could think of. But that wasn't enough. What good was his money, the security of his name, when she had long since ceased to care for him, when the very sight of his thin, homely face sickened her? Life with Philip Benton had become unbearable, filled with bitter unrest and discontent. Life with John Westley promised to be a glorious adventure, a breathless interlude of love. Why waste her youth and beauty on a man she almost detested?

It was that frenzied urge to escape while she still had time from an existence grown intolerable to her that had impelled Marjorie Benton to leave her husband that night. As the car leaped like a wild thing into the darkness, she remembered vividly what had happened when she went to Philip and told him what she intended to do. Indelibly etched in her mind was the photograph of his face, mirroring the swift emotions of amazement, anger and despair. Even now, visualizing again the hopeless suffering that had distorted his features, she felt a quick, malicious throb of satisfaction at the thought of how much she had been able to hurt him.

"Marjorie, you can't!" he'd whispered hoarsely. "You can't do this thing to me. You—you're my wife. I won't let you go!"

"I hardly think you have much choice in the matter, Philip." Her voice, in that moment, had been cruel and hard. "I happen to prefer John Westley to you. That's all there is to it—"

"Westley!" His entire body had vibrated with hate. "What in God's name do you see in him, Marjorie? He has a handsome face and charming manners. He knows how to flatter women, but he's incapable of real love and sincerity. Can't you see that? Don't you realize he'll make you wretched and unhappy in a week?"

She'd shrugged her shoulders. "I'll take the risk," she had said coldly. "You're just saying that because you're jealous of him, because you couldn't prevent him from winning me away from you. I don't love you, Philip. I don't believe I ever loved you. I'm going to John. And you can't stop me!"

"Can't I?" Sick terror had clutched at her momentarily as she saw his fingers curl around a sharp paper-knife on his desk. "Maybe I've lost you, Marjorie," he'd muttered thickly. "Maybe everything's over between us. But I still can keep you from doing this insane thing. I still can prevent Westley from getting his filthy paws on you!"

He'd meant to kill her, take her life! And for an instant, utter, abysmal fear had closed its iron vise around her heart. But that attack of gibbering panic had soon been over. The imminence of her danger had sharpened her wits, had given her the only possible weapon she could use against him—the force of cool, calm logic. And so, when she spoke again, she had managed to keep all traces of her deadly terror out of her voice.

"Don't be a melodramatic fool, Philip," she'd said contemptuously. "You'd only make matters worse by killing me. This
is the Twentieth Century, not the Middle Ages. A man can’t commit murder, even the murder of his faithless wife, without paying for it. You’d go to the electric chair, Philip.”

She had won. The madness had faded from his eyes. The paper-knife dropped from his shaking hand, clattered on the desk. “You’re right,” he’d whispered. “I’d hurt myself more than I’d hurt you. Do as you please. But remember this. If—” he’d swallowed convulsively— “if you go to Westley, you can never come back. I’ll never recognize you as my wife again. Everything will be ended between us—forever!”

The danger past, her self-control had broken utterly. “Come back?” she’d screamed hysterically. “What makes you think I’d ever want to do that, you fool? I’ll never come back! I’d sooner die than set foot in this house again, Philip Benton!”

She had run from the room then, racing out into the darkness as fast as her legs could carry her. Two automobiles were always kept in the Benton garage—a big, luxurious sedan, and the tan roadster. She had climbed into the lighter, smaller car, had backed it out into the gravel driveway, when Philip came running across the lawn toward her. He had shouted something—something that might have been a plea for her to return. But the roar of the motor had drowned his words; and before he could reach her, she had vanished into the night.

MARJORIE BENTON’S thoughts flickered back to the present. All that was finished now—a closed chapter in her life. Better forget it, think only of the future, as bright and golden as warm sunlight after coming out of a dark tunnel. In the city, twenty miles away, was John Westley. She hadn’t told him she was coming. It would be nicer to surprise him, walk into his apartment unexpectedly. Al-

ready she could see the startled, joyful smile on his handsome face. Already she could feel his strong arms crushing her to him...

And then, in a moment of soul-shaking panic, she became aware of the horror rushing toward her. Suddenly the road twisted, curled back on itself like a double, black tongue in the mouth of the night. Suddenly around that vicious bend in the highway, another car swept to meet her, headlights boring tunnels through the darkness, blinding her with their dazzling glare. Her thin scream of terror was lost beneath the squealing of brakes, the screeching of tires as she twisted the steering wheel frantically, striving to avoid the collision that seemed inevitable.

By some miracle she did it. The other car careened past, the faces of its occupants white smears behind the windshield. But the roadster had been forced too far off the side of the highway, had become unmanageable. It wobbled, swayed, floundered like a wounded bird from the concrete. Before her, a tall, gaunt specter of Death, loomed the chalky whiteness of a telephone pole. There was no way of avoiding it. Onward she hurtled, paralyzed with horror, teeth locked in the flesh of her lips, tensed against the hideous shock that would rip her life from her quivering body.

“God, don’t let me die like this! Let me live! I can’t die yet! I can’t! Oh God, give me just one more chance!”

She couldn’t have screamed those words. She didn’t have time. They were nothing but disjointed, unuttered fragments of a prayer floating through her terror-crazed brain. And then, with a force that seemed to tear the world apart, the roadster struck.

It hit the pole head on, splintering it like a match stick. Water hissed from the smashed radiator, jetted scalding rain. The hood crumpled, folded, and the lights blinked out in the spinning darkness. Her
hands were ripped from the wheel; her head smashed against some immovable object. Excruciating pain shot along her nerve ends, clawed her with red-hot talons. As though from an incredible distance, she heard the tortured shrieking of riven metal, the tinkling of breaking glass. The sounds lessened, ceased, as unconsciousness claimed her, as she slipped gradually into hideous oblivion.

IT SEEMED eternities later when she opened her eyes again in the dim gloom of the car. A night breeze whispered through one of its shattered windows, swept coolly across her face. The pain was gone, though she was weak and sick with horror and shock. But God had been good to her! She could see and hear and feel! She had escaped death when death seemed inevitable! She was still alive!

Alive! Her relief was in itself a sort of unbearable pain, overwhelming her, turning every muscle in her body water-weak. Gasping, shuddering, she slumped back against the cushioned seat. She must rest there for a little while—rest and regain strength after what she had been through.

Footsteps suddenly shuffled along the concrete. Someone was pawing at the door, trying to open it. She caught a glimpse of broad shoulders, the pale blur of a man’s face through the broken glass. It was too dark for her to see what he looked like; but she knew he must be the driver of the car that had forced her off the highway.

“Good God!” the man whispered hoarsely. “It’s Philip Benton’s roadster! He lives in Wilmerdon, where I was going to stop for gas. I wonder . . . .”

It was John Westley! She recognized his voice immediately! Miraculously he had figured in the accident, would take her away with him now. But before she could utter the joyful cry that rose to her lips, another voice—a feminine voice—cut viciously through the darkness.

“Well, stop wondering about it, you sap, and get me out of here! We can’t get mixed up in this. If Dave ever finds out I was with you tonight, he’ll shoot us both!”

It was rage and utter fury this time that made Marjorie Benton speechless, incapable of saying a word. How right Philip had been! Even while she had been speeding toward John Westley, eager to throw herself into his arms, he had been with another woman—undeniably another man’s wife! Even now Westley and his paramour were planning to sneak away from the wreck for which they were to blame, leave her stranded and helpless along the road! Oh, why hadn’t she listened to Philip when he told her what an unspeakable cur John Westley was? Why hadn’t she conquered her mad infatuation before it was too late?

“But we should do something, Fay,” Westley was saying hoarsely to his companion. He had opened the car door, was leaning inside. “In—in a way we’re partly responsible for what happened. We may have crowded the driver too far to the side of the road, caused the smash-up. I—I’m not sure, but it looks to me like a girl in the front seat. Maybe she’s badly injured. We should at least report the accident to the police, get her to a hospital—”

“We can’t, you fool!” the woman interrupted savagely. “Dave is sure to find out about us then. It wasn’t our fault anyway. She brought it on herself! She was driving like a fiend when she came around the turn. I tell you, we’ve got to get away from here, John! We mustn’t let anyone know we were out together!”

Marjorie Benton found her voice then. “You filthy beast!” she raged at Westley. “You—you monster! And to think I believed I was in love with you! To think I left a decent man for your sake! Thank God I know you for what you are now! Thank God my eyes are open at last!”
The utter silence that followed her furious outburst made her feel uneasy, strangely frightened. She had expected Westley to show some signs of shame and guilt, stammer some response to her words. But he didn’t!

"You—you’re right, Fay," he whispered. Oddly, his voice seemed thick, choked with terror. "We’ve got to get away from here! We—we’ll let someone else report the accident! Fay—" sheer horror was in his tone—"the most awful feeling came over me just now..."

THE rest of his words trailed off as he and the woman hurried away. Abyssmal panic claimed Marjorie Benton then. She was out of the roadster, stumbling after them.

"You can’t do this!" she shrieked wildly. "You can’t leave me! It’s—it’s inhuman! Take me along!

They paid no attention to her whatever. She saw their black, shadowy figures race over the concrete, melt into the blacker shadow of their car. She heard the door slam, the motor come roaring to life. Then they were gone, speeding madly through the darkness, leaving her behind! The tail-light of their car gleamed back at her, momentarily taunted her with her helplessness before it faded.

Trembling from head to foot, Marjorie Benton stopped her futile pursuit. Curiously enough, her rage and impotent fury had passed. She no longer hated John Westley for his treachery and deceit. She wasn’t jealous of the woman now for stealing him away from her. She couldn’t even despise the two of them for running from the scene of the accident without bothering to find out whether she was alive or dead. All these emotions had been submerged, swallowed up by another emotion which left room for nothing else in the whirling chaos of her mind—the emotion of unutterable horror!

(Continued on page 106)
CHAPTER ONE

The Small Black Bag

"YOU NEVER know when a story is standing right in front of you waiting to be written," the Judge said. He leaned back in his chair and looked owlishly about him. "One of the biggest stories I ever covered was under my nose for weeks. It practically followed me around begging to be written." That was odd because the
A Novelette of Weird
Mystery and Terror

by WYATT BLASSINGAME

Judge was a damn good newspaperman, and had been before the three young newsmen listening to him were born. He drank a lot—he was called the Judge because he was never known to have been as sober as one—but he got the news, and he knew how to handle a story when he got it.

He took a drink now, a small nip straight out of the bottle. "Did you ever hear of Philip Madison, the explorer?"

There in the moonlight ahead of him, like the dream of a man gone mad, rose the temple of Oxatopal. . . .

Well, I'll tell you a story about him." He took another nip from his bottle and sat there holding it on his knees and looking like a minister studying the Bible to find his text.

I was covering the hotels in those days (the Judge said) and I noticed where
a fellow named P. H. Madison was registered at the Exchange. I asked Sims, the clerk, if this P. H. Madison could possibly be Philip Madison, the explorer. I doubted it, because Philip Madison was supposed to be in the Yucatan jungles.

Sims said that P. H. wasn’t Philip. Sims had seen Philip—everybody in Montgomery had seen him; he had married a Montgomery girl—just before he left for Yucatan a year before. “This P. H. Madison is a white-haired old duffer not as tall or as big as Philip and thirty years older,” Sims said.

“He might be some relation,” I said. “He comes from the same place.”

“Yeah,” Sims said. “New York. I imagine there must be a half-dozen Madisons in New York.” But he rang the old man’s room for me. P. H. Madison said no, he didn’t have anything to tell the press, and hung up.

About a week later I was in the Exchange at a little after midnight. Some of the boys were having a crap game up on the fifth floor and I thought I would go cast a few. I had stopped at the desk to speak to Sims and he said, “Look! There goes the P. H. Madison fellow you were asking about.”

I turned just in time to see an old, white-haired man crossing the lobby toward the side door. He was small, shriveled—he actually looked dried-up, but he walked like he was in a hurry. He carried a small, black leather bag and he kept looking at it in a furtive way, like he was either very worried about what might happen to it or pretending to be, the way a shy person will do sometimes just so he won’t have to look up and meet anybody’s gaze.

I asked Sims where the old fellow was going at that hour of the night.

“I don’t know,” Sims said. “He goes out every night, later and later. And the later he goes, the later he comes back. He came in at sun-up yesterday.”

I went out and looked up and down the sidewalk but I couldn’t see the old man anywhere. So I went up to the crap game and won thirty bucks.

Old P. H. Madison kept leaving the hotel every night later than the night before, and never getting back until daylight—or so Sims told me. He always carried the little black bag and he always walked down from his room and hurried out the side door as though he didn’t want anybody to see him. I was getting really curious about this when, abruptly, he stopped it. He stopped going out altogether. He had never left his room in the day time since he came here, and now he never left it at all.

I asked Sims and the day clerk what Madison did up there. They said he must sit and twiddle his thumbs. They sent up his food, that was all they knew.

I asked the bell boys and the chambermaids. They said he just sat up there with the little black bag on the bed beside him and looked at it. One of the bell boys said, “I think he talks to that thing. I heard him talkin’ once before I knocked on the door, but I couldn’t tell what he was sayin’. When I went in he was settin’ there like usual, lookin’ at the bag, and there wasn’t nobody else to be talkin’ to.”

ONE of the chambermaids admitted like everybody else in the hotel, she was curious about the old fellow, and one morning she unlocked his door and went in “without knocking very loud” and he was still in bed. It had taken her a few seconds to unlock the door and when she got in he was snatching up the covers around him, holding them as if he was afraid of what she would see. He told her to get the hell out and she had only a few seconds to look around, but she didn’t see the black bag anywhere. So she decided the bag must have been under the covers with old Madison.
About this time he started leaving the hotel again, about twilight now and returning two or three hours later. But each night he left a little later than the night before and came back later. One night it was rainy and he didn’t go out at all; but the next night was clear and off he went as usual.

That gave me my first idea: he was leaving the hotel about an hour before the moon came up and returning about the time the moon set, or a little afterwards. During the dark of the moon he hadn’t gone out at all. On a night when it rained and there was no moon he hadn’t gone out. That might have been merely coincidence, but I doubted it. I decided his trips had something to do with the moon.

The next night I took a couple of nips to brace myself, and took a bottle in case I needed rebracing; and I made it my business to follow him.

He left the hotel at a quarter of eleven and went out South Perry street. He walked faster than you would have expected a fellow of his age to walk. The moon hadn’t come up yet and after you got away from the business district there weren’t many lights in those days. I got occasional glimpses of him ahead of me, little and thin, with the black bag in his hand.

I almost lost him in the five hundred block. Then I heard a whistle, a kind of soft, low whistle, and after a moment I saw him. He was standing in the yard of the old Allen house, looking up at the big, columned home in which there were no lights at all. The Allens were out of town and the place was closed for the summer. He whistled again and stood there as if he expected somebody to come out.

And all at once I got that creepy feeling down the spine that you get when you know you’ve hit on something big. Because this was the house that Marcia Allen had lived in—and Marcia Allen was the Montgomery girl who had married Philip Madison the explorer. Now I was sure that my first hunch about this man was correct: in some way he was connected with Philip Madison, and Philip Madison was front page news.

Nobody came out of the Allen house, but P. H. Madison seemed satisfied. He went back down the sidewalk, passing not more than ten feet from me. On his little, shriveled face was a look of almost fanatical tenderness; but at the same time he seemed hurried and excited.

As he passed I heard him whispering to himself. I heard him saying, “We’ve got to hurry. It will be up soon. We’ve got to hurry, darling.”

From that time on I knew I was dealing with a madman.

We went back two blocks the way he had come and then turned off toward West End. It was nearly midnight, the streets were deserted in this part of town, and when I stopped I could hear his steps ahead, sharp and hurried.

Once I looked back and saw that the sky to the east was a dull yellow. The moon was pushing at the horizon. Ahead of me the old man began to run.

**THERE weren’t any houses in that part of West End in those days, just trees and underbrush. I could hear the old man pounding along, yet I didn’t dare follow too closely. Then I lost him; but I knew he couldn’t be far off because the river was close ahead. A half hour later I found him again.**

He was sitting in a little clearing on a high bluff above the river. The river bends east at this place and the moon reflected in it. It was a yellow, crooked old moon just above the trees.

The nearest I could get without being seen was about thirty yards away, but I could see P. H. fairly clearly because of the moonlight. He was sitting cross-legged, on the very edge of the river
bluff. His handkerchief was spread on the ground beside him and the black bag rested on this. As well as I could see the bag was open and he held something in his lap, but what it was I couldn't tell. It was smokelike; it changed shape; sometimes it seemed to swell and sometimes to shrink; sometimes a part of it ran down out of his lap and puddled on the ground beside him, and when he picked it up, it coiled and twisted about his arm.

Now what I'm going to say may sound foolish (because I can't explain it now any more than I could then—not really explain it with solid, believable facts) but all at once I thought I was going to be sick. My stomach turned over and knotted. It took me a minute to understand the reason: I was afraid. I was so afraid I was cold all the way into the pit of my stomach, so afraid that although I wanted to run I couldn't possibly have moved. I was hypnotized by terror.

And I didn't know why. I still don't know why—that is, I can't explain so that you would understand and believe me. Because the old man just sat there, with this shapeless thing in his lap. Now and then I could hear him talking to himself. He just sat there until the moon started to pale; then he put the thing he held in the black bag, got up and went back to the hotel.

He did the same thing the next night, and I knew then this was what he had been doing every moonlit night since he came here.

Well, I wanted to know why. I wanted to know who he was and what was in the black bag. But I was afraid. I don't mind admitting it now. I saw a blind leper once and while I was talking to him he put out his hand—the fingers were all rotted off—and I thought he was going to touch my face. Whenever I thought about P. H. Madison and his black bag I had the same kind of feeling.

CHAPTER TWO

"It Will Be Murder"

THE Judge wet his throat with a small drink from the bottle and leaned back in his chair. One of the reporters said, "Well, Judge, did you ever find out?"

"Of course. We went after stories in those days."

"All right. Tell us. What was in the bag?"

"It was a long time before I learned that," the Judge said. "I talked to Madison before then. I went up to his room and handed him a line about having learned that he was a relative of Philip Madison the explorer, and could he tell me anything about Philip, had there been any messages from him recently, and when did he expect to return from Yucatan."

"He fell for it?"

"Yes. It was easy to guess at the part about him being a relative of Philip Madison because when you looked at him closely he resembled the explorer—smaller and older, a sort of shrunken edition of Philip. And anyhow—" the Judge said this slowly—"the man was mad. You could tell it when you looked into his eyes. So when he started telling the story I just let him go ahead, without asking questions. He told it in the third person, but you got the impression he had been there, even on the trip to Yucatan, a sort of disembodied witness, or maybe an actual member of the party. And you knew from the first time he mentioned her name, from the look in his eyes and from the way he spoke, that he had loved the girl."

"What girl?" a reporter asked.

The Judge said, "I'll tell you the story the way he told it to me, sitting there in his hotel room, with the little black bag, locked, resting upon his knees. It was a fairly long story, but I remember it, word for word almost."
The Judge said, “He just started off without any preamble, without any warning. And while he talked he kept looking at me with those blue, mad eyes. He kept his hands on the locked bag. He started:

LONG before they got there, before either of them had seen the tilted moon drip blood or seen the temple of Oxatopal rise dreamlike and terrible out of the jungle, before he watched the first particles of life wither from her body and her body shrink in upon itself, he knew what he was doing to her. Before they left this country and the crowded docks and the cheers and the newspapermen, he knew. Perhaps he knew from that moment when he saw her for the first time.

It was at a reception in his honor and persons were crowded about, passing back and forth; then they saw each other and every other person was forgotten and there were just the two of them looking at one another. He knew instantly she was the right girl, and she—she worshipped him. It was that worship of him which contributed to the things which followed; it was the open door at which horror entered.

He had never thought of anyone except himself, nor of anything except his own glory. He was an explorer not because he loved the work but because he loved the receptions, the publicity, the glory on returning to civilization. Other scientists did better work, but no one else made the front pages like Philip Madison. He was a tall man with a bold, handsome, arrogant face. Every newspaper reader in America knew that face, against a background of desert or jungle or snow.

He was preparing the Maya expedition when Tom Brinkley said to him. “Why don’t you marry, Philip?”

“Marry?” Philip Madison was surprised. He liked women and women groveled before him, but the idea of marriage was new. “Why should I get married?” he asked.

“Marry a good looking girl and take her with you,” Tom Brinkley said. “The male public is getting tired of looking at you. The women like it, but the men don’t—and men edit and read most of the newspapers. The publicity on this last polar trip was off about fifty percent, and you know the apathy of the newspapers toward this Yucatan expedition. But if there was a girl going with you, a good looking girl, and if she posed with you in the pictures so that the men would have something to look at—”

Philip Madison laughed, but he knew the truth of what Brinkley had said and he began to consider the matter. He didn’t like the thought of sharing his glory with anyone. But his publicity had been falling off, and the receptions had been less adulatory—and these things were the essence of life to Philip Madison.

He decided then that if he found the right person he would marry her and take her with him. She must be beautiful, for the benefit of the pictures; and she must be willing to retire into obscurity for the benefit of Philip Madison.

He found Marcia Allen.

God knows she was beautiful. Her hair was a dark bronze red, long and thick. In the sunlight it burned like flame; it seemed to have a life of its own; and in the moonlight it was like a living shadow about her pale, ethereal, child-like face.

There followed two weeks which were very delightful for Philip Madison, and for Marcia they were incredibly happy. It was a city in which the proper respect was paid to celebrities, and during the days Philip basked delightfully in public admiration. At night he would walk with Marcia and there was a spot of the river bank where he would sit with her and
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TERROR TALES

watch the moonlight in her long hair. And Marcia—there was something of religion in the way she worshipped him, sitting quiet and pale, listening to him. Even later, with the life shriveling out of her because of his doing, she never knew there was anything but goodness and greatness within this man.

MARCIA’S father said to Philip Madison, “This talk in the papers about Marcia going with you to Yucatan.
She’s never been a strong girl, Philip. We’ve always had to take her north in the summers. And from what I hear about Yucatan I don’t think it would be wise for her to go.”

Philip Madison brushed the idea aside. “Of course she can go. Yucatan isn’t as bad as you think. Marcia won’t have any trouble.”

“But it is in the tropics,” Mr. Allen said. “And they claim the heat in the jungles is terrific.”

“I’ve been there,” Philip Madison said shortly. “I know what it’s like. And I know that Marcia will be all right.”

But there were doubts in his mind, small, nagging things that jabbed into his consciousness at odd times; he shook them off. He had never been deep in the Maya jungles where he hoped to penetrate, and there were stories he had heard. . . . Of course he didn’t believe them. Perhaps the temple of Oxatopial existed; the pigmy tribe might exist. But that talk of the moon dripping blood, and of the things that happened to women from the outside world, even to the Indian women of other tribes, to the men also, some said. But Philip Madison was no coward. He was not afraid to go anywhere in this universe a human being can go. Then why, he asked himself, should he be afraid to take someone else?

Now that he had found Marcia, now
that he'd got these reams of publicity about her accompanying him, he certainly wasn't going to make a fool of himself by going without her.

It was two days before the wedding that her doctor came to see him. "You can't take her," the doctor said.

"Why not?"

The doctor looked straight into Philip Madison's eyes. "It would be murder," he said.

The nagging fears in Philip Madison's mind only added to his anger. He was (perhaps organically) unable to consider the welfare, even of this girl he loved, above his own selfishness. "What the hell do you know about it?" he cried. "I've been there. I know the country. And I know Marcia. She's willing to go."

"She's in love with you, though God knows why. She would go, if you asked her, even if she knew it meant her death. And I think she does know it."

"You're a damn fool!" Philip Madison said. "You want to keep her here because you're in love with her! You—"

The doctor hit him; but Philip was the bigger of the two and stronger. He knocked the other man down. He beat him unmercifully—and no one ever told Marcia of this.

So Philip Madison knew deep in his mind (though he refused to admit to himself that he knew, refused even in the face of the bloody and horrible climax of his actions) what he was doing to this girl. And months later, in the mad, black-green jungle where the moon rode tilted and red, when he could feel his mind crumbling within his skull, he fought for sanity by sitting and laughing harshly that he had fooled the doctor after all, that it was not the climate nor the jungle which had got Marcia.

For it was something far more horrible than either, though it was bred of them both.

The gulf was bluer than the throat of an indigo bunting and there was that sense of near-coolness which the water always has, even in the tropics. But Progreso was hot and Merida was hotter, although it looked cool and white in the sun with all the windmills turning. At Bolonchentical the heat closed upon them, fetid and breathless and terrible, and soon afterwards the jungle closed upon them also. And Marcia's face was a little paler than ever now, and her dark eyes seemed liquid against her white skin.

Philip Madison told himself it was nothing but the first touch of the tropics. He told himself he could protect this woman anywhere in the world. And he was making adjustments for her comfort. In Merida he had hired a personal maid for her—realizing also that if one woman would look good in the pictures he would take back, two would look even better, especially if one of them was an Indian and as beautiful as Theresa.

**THERESE** was, perhaps, the only woman in Merida he could have persuaded to accompany them. She was educated, beautiful, and ambitious; she had long wanted to enter the United States to be a dancer, and she knew the benefit of going there with the fanfare of a Philip Madison expedition; so she scoffed at the stories. For the stories were known, even in Merida, although the educated people pretended to laugh at the peons' whispers: the temple of Oxotopal, and the blood-moon, and the small creatures which moved through the moonlight and vanished and were not human. And the other whispers, the vague ones that could not be traced down.

*Keep away, the whispers said, and faded.*

*Keep away, because.*

Miguel's old grandmother knew of a girl once. She never came back but there were two men who saw her and they would cover their eyes and ears.
when you asked them; they would crouch in the corner and cross themselves and say nothing.

There have been others since then. Old Maria herself once knew....

She is dead now. No, Senor, I cannot tell you. I do not know.

But keep away, the whispers added. Keep away...

And Philip Madison laughed and said, “I hope there is something to all this. I'd like to take back a pigmy ghost and a photograph of a moon dripping blood.”

And Theresa, the Indian girl, said, “This is the opportunity I have always wanted. Any agent on Broadway will have to give me a chance when I get there with Philip Madison's backing. I'm not going to duck this chance because of a few ancient folk stories.”

And Marcia said only, “Philip knows. Wherever he is, I am not afraid.”

They made slow progress through the jungle, but they made progress. And slowly the fierce, deadly heat increased. It was tangible, omnipresent, inescapable as the jungle itself. There was no relief, neither in the darkness of night, nor in the dim, stagnant, dead green-dark with which the jungle enclosed them during the day. The light of the sun did not strike through the trees any more than the cool winds which had blown across the Gulf could come through; the light blazed on the tree tops, but only opaque green shadows, oven-hot, came down through the leaves to the earth—a twilight and ghastly world of insects, damp heat and stillness.

Marcia was paler than ever now. She rested whenever it was possible, but she never complained.

Philip said to her, “You're feeling all right, aren't you, Marcia?”

“Of course I am. A little tired, that's all.”

And he believed her because he wanted to believe.

It was on the forty-third morning after leaving Bolonchecutical that they awoke to find two of the porters had disappeared. Philip went straight to Pedro Martinez who was a graduate of the University of Mexico and sent by the Mexican government to accompany Philip's expedition. Philip had put Martinez in charge of the porters.

“Why did they run away?” Philip asked.

Pedro Martinez was a small lean man with eyes like black flames and a mouth unusually red against his dark skin. “They are afraid,” he said.

“Afraid of what?”

The dark eyes looked straight into Philip's. “They say we are somewhere near the temple of Oxotopal.”

“I hope there is such a place,” Philip Madison said. “And I hope we are near it. But how would the peons know?”

“They say they have been warned.”

“Warned? How warned?”

“I cannot make them explain fully. They say they awake in the night and they know. They say that while sitting still, thinking of nothing, a voice speaks in their minds and tells them to go no farther.”

“Superstitious fears. Dreams,” Philip Madison said shortly. “But we can't have the porters running away after we have come this far. We'll have to watch them.”

“I shall watch them,” Martinez said. He put his hand on the butt of the gun which he was wearing.

Philip laughed. “I don't think you'll have to go that far. But watch them.”

CHAPTER THREE

Jungle Night

THEY went ahead, slowly, hacking their way at times, moving with fair rapidity across occasional patches of

(Continued on page 94)
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TERROR TALES

(Continued from page 92)

ground where the underbrush was not so heavy, where the trees formed a less-thick roof overhead, and where, looking upward, one could sometimes see a tiny patch of molten, tropic sky. And it was this day that Philip first noticed the curious excitement that began to besiege him. It came gradually, invisibly; it came out of the fetid stillness, out of the dim green jungle-light, and out of the heat itself, permeating through cloth and flesh and bone, to take possession of him. He felt a desperate need to hurry, a reasonless and almost panicky urge to rush ahead.

There is something there, wrapped in the green blanket of jungle.

I must hurry! If I don't hurry.

The sentences never completed themselves in his mind, but they were always there. Hurry! Hurry! Later he wondered if he had not sensed the same weird terrors which had gripped the peons; he realized, when it was too late, that what he had felt was fear—but he had never known fear and he did not recognize it.

Even that night he did not realize.

He awoke suddenly, violently, sitting bolt upright within his hammock. He was icy cold and the little hairs at the nape of his neck felt as though they were frozen and sticking rigidly out from the skin. His heart ached. It pounded viciously for seconds, and stopped, and beat again. His mouth felt cotton-dry and for a few seconds he wondered if he were gagging because of thirst.

"Philip!" Marcia's whisper came to him through the dark, a choked, horrible sound. "Philip, please!"

"What is it?" He groped and found the lantern and lit it. The yellow light moved silently; it filled the tent; it showed Marcia sitting straight up in her hammock with her bronze-red hair hanging loose about her throat and shoulders and down her back. Her face was ghastly, the
eyes seeming to overflow their sockets.

"Philip!" she whispered. "What—what happened out there?"

And he said only, "What did you hear?"

"I—" She stopped. Fear that was keen as physical pain showed in her eyes. "I didn't hear anything! I just—woke up."

"You've been dreaming," he said, and out of his dry throat the words sounded harshly. "But I'll look around." He went out, the lantern in one hand, his revolver in the other. He did not stop after leaving the tent, did not pause to look around; and he did not even consider this as curious at the time. He turned and walked as though drawn to the far glow of the fire around which the porters slept.

Someone put fresh wood on the fire as he went toward it. It blazed up and the light flowed out to meet him. He saw Pedro Martinez, the fire like blood on his dark face; he saw the gleam of the fire on the gun which Pedro Martinez held.

Martinez came to meet him where the fire glow and the light of the lantern first mingled. He was not as tall as Philip but his gaze slanted squarely up against the other's. "Another one of the men has gone," he said. And he added slowly, "I do not understand how."

"H O W?" Philip Madison said. "He ran away, didn't he, like the first pair?"

"They would have all run away, if they could. I knew that. Look." Martinez gestured back toward the men huddling about the fire. Some of them were looking toward Philip, their eyes gleaming. Others stared out into the darkness. And Philip saw for the first time that that they were all chained together and one end of the chain ran about the hole of a mahogany tree.

"Was the man who escaped chained to the others?"

"Yes."

"Let's see." He went forward into the light. All the peons looked at him now, and were silent. He picked up the loose end of the chain. It was a light steel chain, but strong. The end of it was broken. Not chiseled into, but broken.

"How did he break it?" Philip asked the men. They only stared at him, huddling together, saying nothing.

"He couldn't have broken it himself," Philip said. "All of you pulling together couldn't have broken it. How was it done?"

The dark eyes in the dark, fire-washed faces looked back at him in silence.

Pedro Martinez said, "Come with me." He led Philip out of earshot of the group. He said, "The men say Pepe did not escape. They say he was taken away as a warning to the others to go no farther."

"Taken away? Taken away by whom?"

"They do not say."

"But you know what they are thinking."

"Yes. They think he was taken away by the little ghost people from the temple of Oxatopal."

Philip Madison was silent then, and thoughtful. There was a small, cold, hollow in his stomach, though if he were afraid he still did not realize it. But he was cautious. He had seen enough of the world to know that in another man's country the stranger must be cautious.

He said, "There may be an actual race of pigfries somewhere hereabouts—though no pigfries could have broken that chain. There may be. . . ." He paused. "That talk of a group of un-human people is absurd." He paused again, then asked, "What do you think, Martinez?"

"I do not know," Pedro Martinez said slowly. "In school they taught me one thing. When I was a child at my grandfather's hacienda I heard the old people say other things." He gestured, turning the palm of his left hand upward. "The Government sent me with you. If you go
ahead, I must go with you. We shall find whatever we shall find."

Philip said, "But you are afraid?"

And Pedro Martinez answered him calmly, "Yes. I am afraid."

They faced one another, the lantern's yellow light holding back the encircling darkness. Around them the jungle was unnaturally silent; the heat lay still and motionless as death upon them. Not even an insect moved through the darkness, nor a leaf stirred against the quiet.

Philip Madison turned away and stopped and looked back at Martinez. "What do the peons say this temple of Oxatopal is?"

"They say it is the Valhalla, the Happy Hunting Ground, of the Maya Indians. The spirits of the conquerors and the builders of old live there, ashamed of their people who came after them. They live alone in their shame and they allow no one, living or dead, to come and disturb them."

"It's a pretty legend," Philip Madison said. "But we shall see." The strange excitement that he did not understand obsessed him and he was trembling.

As he walked back toward his tent, he noticed for the first time there was a break in the trees at one place and the sky was visible. A quarter moon hung there. He stopped and stared. It was tip tilted and red and wet-appearing as though painted with fresh blood.

"Curious," Philip Madison thought. "A haze in the sky that filters the light. I've heard of that illusion, but I've never seen it before." He wondered why his hands were trembling so and his throat was tight. He did not understand the furious, lashing desire to scream aloud, to bang against the boles of trees, to fire his gun, anything to shatter this deadly, inhuman silence in which the night hung suspended.

He tried whistling. Against the vast silence the sound was thin and lonely as the cry of a child left alone in a world where every other thing had died.

He went into his tent and the thin canvas walls seemed to shut out the hungry silence, to protect him against it. Relief flooded through him, replacing the tension, the unrecognized fear which he had endured outside.

Marcia said, "What was it, Philip?"

Light gleamed and quivered in her bronze hair as he swung the lantern. Her face was bloodless as the face of death. Beside her Theresa, the Indian girl, was standing now.

"Nothing important. One of the men saw a panther close to the fire and screamed."

Marcia said nothing. Theresa said, "The peons are so afraid already it doesn't take much to have them seeing things."

Philip grinned at her. There was nothing mysterious about Theresa. She was pretty, lush, earthy. She brought a man's thoughts back to actuality. "You aren't afraid?" Philip asked her, still smiling.

"Not a bit. That surprises me, too, because I've heard those old stories since I was a child. When I first agreed to come with you I was afraid, sometimes. But since we left Bolonchenticul I haven't worried a moment. Instead of frightening me, the jungle swallowed my fear."

He wondered, later, if she had been marked for death and the things which happened before death since that moment of leaving Bolonchenticul and if she had been spared fear because her fate was already predestined—he was to wonder a great many things in the days to come, and find no human answer for them.

They went on the next day without accident. The night passed quietly, and the second day. Philip and Pedro Martinez kept the porters always in sight, herding them forward like cattle, keeping them chained at night. Both men knew the peons would vanish into the jungle at
the first opportunity—and they knew what it would mean to be left stranded here without porters.

And on the third day the jungle tilted upward, green-black, climbing abruptly toward the sky. Only Philip realized what had happened. He stood there, trembling a little, shaking with an excitement such as he had never known.

“We have found it!” he whispered. “A lost Maya city!”

Marcia had scarcely spoken for the last two days. A rose-red color had begun to flush her cheeks unnaturally and there were dark circles beneath her eyes. “You mean—?” she asked. “This—?”

“Now! We are climbing the ruins now! Dirt has spread over them, trees are growing... Look! Up there ahead!”

He began to scrape at the dirt, to rip away the roots of plants. A lean, cruel face carved in rock stared back at them.

Marcia turned away from it, a hand at her throat. “Then this is as far as we go, Philip?”

“Probably. We aren’t equipped for extensive excavation, but we’ll uncover enough to get some idea of what we’ve found, to take pictures that will prove I discovered it. And we’ll find how far the ruins extend. My guess is that this is the lost city of T-Ho Itzal.”

Pedro Martinez said then, looking at them with his dark, flame-like eyes, “According to legend, the temple of Oxatopal is one kilometer away from the city of T-Ho Itzal. T-Ho Itzal is an empty city where even the dead do not come because they do not want to remember its former glory.”

“Then we should be safe here!” Philip laughed. His laughter was high pitched and he was quivering with excitement. “Break out the equipment and get the men to work. There’s still three hours of light! Get them to work!”

During the days that followed he worked with a feverish and maniacal excitement. For a half hour he would lead the work on the excavation, working harder than any two of the peons; then abruptly he would fling away, leave them under Pedro Martinez’ charge, and plunge into the jungle, searching for the temple of Oxatopal.

Philip was to remember later the sudden silence that came on him, leaving the ruins of T-Ho Itzal, a silence as quick as though a door had closed between him and the peons at work upon the ruins. But he pushed on through the jungle—and even the sounds of his own progress seemed to vanish too suddenly, to cease before he heard them as though the hungry silence had snatched them away from his ears.

He went on, he never knew how far, though it was probably no more than a few hundred yards; but he never knew, never had an idea except what he could guess later. Time stopped, died, turned black within his brain. His mind was blotted out. And then his mind was alive again, on fire within his skull and he was standing there, his mouth wide open, screaming, trying to shatter the furious silence. And for an insane instant he thought that his hands striking together made no noise and his empty mouth held no voice. Then he knew that he had only been asleep or dazed because he could hear the noises normally enough.

CHAPTER FOUR

Red Moon Shining

He started back to the camp. He walked faster and faster. A dozen times he looked behind him, but there was nothing except trees and the green twilight beneath them.

That sense of being followed left him when he reached the ruins of T-Ho Itzal and made his way across them to the
camp at the north end. But he did not stop to examine the excavation work. He went straight to his wife's tent and pushed aside the netting.

Marcia lay in her hammock. Her eyes were closed and for one horrible instant he thought she was dead—and it was then that he realized, consciously, for the first time in his life, that he was afraid. He could not move. He stood there, cold, with terror like hands at his throat and his heart.

Marcia's eyes opened. She saw him and tried to smile. "Hello, Philip."

He went to her and knelt beside her, holding her hands with both of his. It took three efforts to say, "How are you feeling, Marcia?"

"I'm all right. A little weak, that's all."

"Are you—worse than you have been?"

"I don't think so."

His mouth was dry. The fear was still in him and he was thinking, 'I'm afraid. I'm afraid that.' He said, "Do you want me to take you north again, before we finish the work here? Before—?"

"How much longer will the work take, Philip?"

"Not long. A week or two. By that time I should have a pretty good idea of what I've found. And I should know if there is—" he hesitated a fraction of an instant—"any such thing as a temple of Oxotopal hereabouts."

She knew how he wanted these things, how he wanted to take back proof of some important discovery, and how it would hurt his pride to go back before his proof was complete. And so her love was the open door by which horror entered. "I'll be all right," she said. "Finish your work."

He slept quietly that night on the ruins of the dead city of T-Ho Itzal; and quietly, calmly, he set about the next day's work. He knew soon that he had found the most amazing and beautiful of the ancient Maya cities, that what he was un-covering here surpassed even the ruins of Chichen Itza. And yet, strangely, as the work wore on, he could not concentrate his attention upon it. He found himself staring off into the surrounding forest. . . . The temple of Oxotopal only a kilometer away, perhaps . . .

He said, "Keep on with the work, Martinez."

He went down from the ruins and into the thick silence of the forest, the furious unnatural silence that enclosed this place like a net. And once more the quiet slipped into his mind, blackened it, drowned out all sense of time and distance. He did not know where he went or if he were moving at all. There was no thought, no feeling, in mind or body. Until, like a man shocked awake from a trance, he found himself standing there, conscious once more of the jungle about him and the thunderous silence which filled it.

The voice did not come from outside him; it sounded only within his own brain, saying:

"Why did you bring Marcia here when you knew that it meant death for her? Why are you murdering the only person you have ever loved?"

THEN the voice was gone and about him the jungle lay wrapped in its awful silence. He turned; he was breathing like a man dying of pneumonia, fighting for one last breath. He began to walk, with no more sense of direction than had served him in coming here. He walked faster, faster still, beating at the tangled arms of vines and brush. He thought he heard the noise of someone (was it something?) following him, but when he stopped and listened there was nothing. He went forward again, walking faster, then running, tearing his way through the brush.

Without warning or foreknowledge he was climbing the ruins of T-Ho Itzal,
How do you KNOW you can’t WRITE?

EARN LIVING—
Before Finishing Course

"I had no job, no chance of getting one. I had always had the desire to write, I saw your ad, borrowed the money to pay for the course. Before finishing your course I had become self-supporting as a full-time writer, and the experience I gained while working in the newspaper business was invaluable."

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Tallahassee, Fla.

H ave you ever tried? Have you ever attempted even the least bit of training, under competent guidance?

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If the latter course is the one of your choosing, you probably never will write. Lawyers must be law clerks. Engineers must be draftsmen. We all know that, in our times, the egg does come before the chicken.

It is seldom that any one becomes a writer until he (or she) has been writing for some time. That is why so many authors and writers spring up out of the newspaper business. The day-to-day necessity of writing—of gathering material about which to write—develops their talent, their insight, their background and their confidence as nothing else could.

That is why the Newspaper Institute of America bases its writing instruction on journalism—continuous writing—the training that has produced so many successful authors.

and the thing behind had ceased to follow him. But he kept running, falling and struggling erect again, and still going, past the working peons who stared at him, his face scratched by thorns, his clothes tattered, and into Marcia's tent.

He had not noticed before how thin she was, how the chin and cheek bones showed against her skin, how her dark eyes had sunk into their sockets. There was fear in those eyes now as she looked at him. "Philip, what's happened?"

He clutched her shoulders. "Are you all right?" he cried. "Are you? You're not going to die, are you?"

She pulled him down close to her. "Of course I'm all right, Philip. What's happened to you?"

"I heard—someone. It was all confused within his mind. He would sound crazy if he said that the silence had spoken to him. "I got to worrying about you, that's all."

She stroked his hair gently. "Don't worry, Philip. Go ahead with your work. Do it well. You are going to be very, very famous when the world learns what you've discovered, even more famous than you are."

"You will be all right until the work is finished?" Already his fears were leaving him and he was imagining the excitement this discovery would create. He scarcely noticed the way Marcia's hand paused on his head for a moment, how rigid her fingers were.

"I'm going to be all right," she said. "Do your work well."

He felt reassured. He kissed her and went out and joined the work on the excavation, shifting the peons to a new part of the ruins. He took a hand in the work himself until darkness closed in and the men went to their fires and their supper under the watchful eyes of Pedro Martinez.

Philip stood there for awhile, near the center of the clearing, looking about him.
Getting Up Nights Makes Many Feel Old

Do you feel older than you are or suffer from Getting Up Nights, Backache, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Dizziness, Swollen Ankles, Rheumatic Pains, Burning, scanty or frequent passages? If so, remember that your kidneys are vital to your health and that these symptoms may be due to non-organic and non-systemic Kidney and Bladder troubles—in such cases CYSTEX (a physician’s prescription) usually gives prompt and joyous relief by helping the Kidneys flush out poisonous excess acids and wastes. You have everything to gain and nothing to lose in trying Cystex. An iron-clad guarantee wrapped around each package assures a refund of your money on return of empty package unless fully satisfied. Don’t take chances on any kidney medicine that is not guaranteed. Don’t delay. Get Cystex (Sistex) from your druggist today. Only 35c. Guarantee protects you.

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TERROR TALES

He was pleased with the work. Marcia was right when she said he would be very very famous when he went back to civilization. Some of those old fools at the Academy who had sneered at his work would have to swallow their words now. Another week’s work, perhaps two, so that he would have a fairly complete idea of what was here.

He looked out at the surrounding jungle and a little chill went up his spine. That had been a strange thing which had happened to him this afternoon. Like a dream. Like something out of an opium pipe, he thought. Could it be that something was happening to his mind? He shrugged the thought aside. But the jungle did strange things to a man sometimes, he knew. He said aloud, “I’ll stay here on the ruins with the men for a few days. I won’t go off alone.”

And so in the days that followed he spent all his time directting and taking part in the excavations—preliminary excavations meant only to give him an idea of what lay hidden here, to uncover enough so that he might take back objects and photographs to furnish indisputable proof of his discovery—and with each day the importance of that discovery grew more and more evident. With each day it seemed more necessary to extend the work.

Marcia was, undoubtedly, sick. Even Philip admitted it now. But it was nothing serious. She had assured him of that. And a few more days. . . . A few more days.

THEN came the night when he saw above the clearing the curved scimitar of a new moon. And the moon hung red as though dipped in blood. It gleamed, fresh and bright and wetly crimson.

He stood and looked up at that curved, blood-colored moon and his heart ached under his ribs with each slow pulse. The last time he had seen a red moon shining a chain had been broken that no normal
human being could break, a peon had disappeared—carried away, the men said, as a warning to go no farther. And now... The moon seemed to drip blood upon the trees beneath it, to spread a thin red film over their leaves.

He went back through the camp, past his own tent and Theresa’s tent and the tent of Pedro Martinez, and on to where the peons crouched like dogs around their supper fires. He counted them slowly.

They were all there.

He did not see Pedro Martinez until the man was there beside him. “What is wrong, Senor Madison?”

“Wrong?” Philip said. His voice scraped in his throat. “Nothing’s wrong that I know of. Why?”

Martinez shrugged. “Your face looked odd. Perhaps the moving firelight on it.”

“Perhaps.”

Martinez regarded him a moment. “Did you notice the moon tonight, Senor?”

“No,” Philip said, and wondered instantly why he had lied. Was he trying to hide from his own fear, to make believe the thoughts crowding his brain were not there?

Martinez said, “Look at it. There, through the gap we have cut in the trees. It is red. Blood red.”

“So it is.” Philip tried to keep the tremor out of his voice. “A rather common phenomenon, as you know; but this is the only country where I have ever seen it.”

“It was red the night Pepe disappeared.”

“Yes,” Philip said. “I noticed it that night.”

He went back to his own tent. Marcia was asleep in her own hammock. Her face was ethereal and beautiful as the face of a saint. Her dark lashes made shadows on the porcelain-white skin. Beneath her head and shoulders her long hair coiled softly. Her breathing was so faint and she lay so still she might have been dead.

Philip walked on to the next tent and stopped outside it. “Theresa?” he called. There was no answer.

He called again, a little louder now, a tightness in his voice. “Theresa? Theresa?”

But there was no answer and he pushed aside the flap of the tent and went in. The darkness was thick here. He struck a match, holding the tiny flame cheek high. “Theresa?” he called huskily, but he had already seen that she was not here.

He went outside. He did not speak to Pedro Martinez or to any of the men, but within five minutes he had made sure that Theresa was nowhere about the camp or the ruins. And Philip Madison knew now that the final, the inevitable doom was closing in, that there was no escaping it now.

But even then he did not know what the end would be.

HE STOOD there among the ruins, bathed in that faint red reflection of the moon, and he knew, finally, the full gnawing and terrible power of fear. His courage was torn from him now. He looked out at the jungle into which he knew Theresa had disappeared and he was sick with his fear. He thought of going to search for her, plunging into that utter blackness and silence, and his knees trembled so that he could scarcely stand. His hands shook and sweat came cold and gummy over his body. He thought of the afternoons when he had left the ruins and plunged into the jungle, the silence, the thing which he had felt following him although it made no sound.

He looked up at the red moon which smeared a haze like dripping blood upon the trees beneath.

He went back to his tent, to the safety of the canvas walls and the yellow lantern light. Marcia was awake now. When she asked him where Theresa was he said, “Outside somewhere. With Pedro Mar-
tinez, I think. I'll take care of you tonight." He touched her and she was cold, colder than his own icy hands.

The next morning he got by without mentioning Theresa's disappearance. "She's not feeling well," he said to Marcia. "Nothing serious. I told her to stay in her tent today." He knew that eventually the truth must come out, but he was like a child postponing the inevitable.

He told Pedro Martinez, "Let's start winding up the work today. We've evidence enough, I think." He would have struck camp that day, started a wild, panicky dash back toward civilization, but he knew that to do so would hasten the discovery of Theresa's vanishing; and he knew that they—Marcia, Martinez, the men—all would expect him to go into the jungle to search for her. And he was afraid. All his life he had laughed at terror, and now he was sick with it.

All during the day while the men were working, he would go through the trees and brush, not so heavy here upon the buried city, and down to where the thick wall of the jungle started. He would stand there, listening to the quietness. He would circle the edges of the dead city of T-Ho Itzal, fairly well determined now by the weeks of work. Sometimes, when he was far enough away so the men could not hear him, he would call Theresa's name, softly, and his voice would enter into the silence of the jungle, and die.

The day wore on, furious with heat. The afternoon slid past. The sun blazed out finally and the short-lived tropic twilight took possession. Philip was on the fringe of the jungle at the south, the far end of the ruins. He was standing motionless, staring at the wall of jungle.

The voice began to gibber at him. It leaped from spot to spot, now on the ground, now within the trees, shrieking thin, silly words that he should be able to understand and couldn't. It was a monkey-voice, running crazily about just within the wall of the jungle, just out of sight. It yelled at him, called to him, cursed him, and he knew these things though he could not understand the words. A small, insane, chattering voice.

"Theresa?" Philip Madison whispered. The muscles of his throat felt as though they were splitting. His heart contracted into a knot of fire. "Theresa?"

The voice shrilled gibberish back at him. It clattered on fiendishly. And the thing, the animal, she who spoke, leaped violently into view and sat there like an organ-grinder's monkey perched on the limb of a tree scarcely above his head, twisting, distorting its little, hideous, unbelievable face that somehow still held the ghost of the other face, Theresa's, the face it once had been. And all the while it jabbered at him with words that had shrunk like the face and the body had shrunk, insane, mad, monkey-cackle.

He started backing away, frozen-legged, deeper into the ruins of the city. And the thing leaped out of the tree and started after him along the ground. He turned to right and to left and it followed him; it was going to follow him, back into the camp, into the view of Marcia and Pedro Martinez and the men!

HE PULLED the revolver from the holster at his hip. It sat and screamed at him, naked and Indian-brown in the twilight. His hand shook and the gun wavered. He held the gun with both hands. He steadied it.

The sound of the shot rang dull and hollow. It seemed to echo about him for hours, for all the endless furious hours while he ran back over the ruins toward the spot where the men were working.

He stopped before he reached the spot. The men must not know what had happened, or even the fear of Pedro Martinez' gun would no longer control them—and if they ran away, left him here with his specimens and with Marcia sick... He
would say he had shot a monkey. The thought made him laugh, a little crazily.

The place where the men had been working was deserted when he reached it. He realized for the first time that it was almost night. Undoubtedly the men had gone back to their camp. He started to follow, and stumbled, and looked down at the body of Pedro Martinez. The Mexican lay on his back, and the iron pick was still buried in his skull.

Philip Madison knew then that he would never see the peons again. They had vanished into the black silence of the jungle. They had never wanted to come here, and now they were fleeing, praying to their own grotesque gods. He and Marcia alone—Looking up he saw the moon.

It was a curved, blood-red blade!

He never remembered going back to the tent. That walk was blotted from his mind forever. He knew nothing until he was standing there, holding the back flap of the tent, peering in. Perhaps he had seen already that no light glazed through the canvas. He did not remember. He found himself pushing aside the flap, walking into the empty tent, knowing already that it would be empty.

He went out of the tent. He went through the red light of the moon, across the ruins of T-Ho Itzal where partially uncovered buildings showed suddenly among the trees and brush, where rock carvings of ancient demons looked down at him. He went into the jungle, and the silence enveloped him and the blackness went into his mind—and faded again, and there in the moonlight ahead of him, like the dream of a man gone mad on beauty, rose the temple of Oxotopal.

The jungle curled back and away from the temple, and the temple rose thin and terrible into the sky. The red moonlight lay upon it and the million jewels gleamed within its walls, purple and blue and coral and emerald green. The alabaster flag-
stones made hollow sounds beneath his feet and the air was heavy with a thousand odors and somewhere, fragile and savage, music moved upon the air.

They did not harm him, nor do very little that he could ever remember. They let the Marcia he had married speak to him. "I wanted to find the temple for you," she said. "I knew what it would mean to you. I knew that I was dying, but I wanted to do something for you before then, do something to help you so that you would remember. I knew that I could never get home again, live through the trip back—"

And he began to scream, shouting with all his lungs, "No! No! You could have lived until we got back! It was not the trip that killed you! Not I! Not I!" He kept shouting as though by the very force and repetition of his words he could make them into truth, could make it true that he had not killed her by bringing her here.

That was before the red moon with her body bound upon it rose dripping from the sacred well three times; before the shrinking started, and the screams.

They sprinkled the water of the well only lightly upon him. They let him go back as a warning to the other world. And there were long days afterwards when he would fight for his sanity by sitting and laughing that he had fooled the doctor after all, that it was not he, nor the trip on which he had brought Marcia that killed her. He had proof of that at least. He had proof!

CHAPTER FIVE

The Man in the Hotel Room

"Well," the Judge said, "that was the story this P. H. Madison told me. He sat there and held the little black bag on his lap. He looked at me with those crazy blue eyes of his, and told me that story."
"But what was it he had in the bag?" one of the reporters asked.

Another one said, "And how was he supposed to know all that stuff about Philip?"

"It was some time before I found out," the Judge said. "When he finished talking he just sat there and I couldn't get another thing out of him.

"Naturally I couldn't use the stuff he had told me. But I kept wondering about it, and about him. I learned that he paid his hotel bills with checks on a New York bank and I wrote a letter to the bank. I got an answer all right.

"P. H. Madison, and Philip Madison, the explorer, were one and the same man!"

All the reporters yelled at him together.

"Wait a minute, Judge! You said you knew Philip Madison, or had seen him. And the hotel clerk had seen him too!"

"You said this man was thirty years older than Philip, and not as big."

"I couldn't understand it either. It looked like I'd got my teeth into more than I could chew. So I took my facts to old Ironsides Hardwick, who was city editor in those days. I gave him the story and I told him that the man who'd told it to me was Philip Madison, the explorer.

"Together we took the story to a doctor and he listened to it and to the way I had it figured. I said my opinion was that Philip Madison had watched his wife die there in the Yucatan jungle, and that he had realized, when it was too late to do anything about it, how much he loved her—and that he had actually killed her by bringing her there when he knew she couldn't stand the climate. I figured that the knowledge of what he had done drove him insane, and that in fighting insanity his subconscious mind had made up this story. He had convinced himself that it was true, because this was the only way he could avoid admitting to himself he was his wife's murderer. And the doctor said that might very well be the case."

"You mean this was something he made up to keep from going insane—but he didn't make it up until he was already nuts?"

"That's the way we figured it at first," the Judge said. He took a drink from his bottle. "We figured he had come back, like an animal will do sometimes, to the place he had been happy—or where she had been happy, rather. We figured that even then he was trying to atone to the girl for what he had done to her. That these walks in the moonlight were because they had made them together when she was happy.

"Well, it looked like we had a story such as had never broke in Montgomery before. Philip Madison was news, sane or insane. But we had to be careful in handling it. Old Ironsides Hardwick and I, the doctor with us, went down to the hotel to see Madison. We didn't expect him to be in, because there was a new moon that night, but it was an almost new moon and would set in another hour and we thought we would wait.

"Sims said Madison hadn't gone out. It was the first moonlit night he had stayed in his room since coming here. 'I think the old boy's sick,' Sim said. 'He looked like he could hardly walk when he went out last night. And he had some medicine sent up yesterday.'

"Old Ironsides said, 'We've got a doctor with us. We'll take a run up and see him.'

"So Sims rang the room, but nobody answered. 'I'm sure he's up there,' Sims said. And he rang again, and still nobody answered.

"Ironsides said, 'We'd all better go up and have a look.'

"We went up, the doctor, and Ironsides, and Sims with the hotel key, and me. We knocked on the door and when nobody answered Sims unlocked the door. It was strange then; we stood there in the hall,
grouped together, and nobody wanted to go first. We stood there and looked at one another and at what we could see of the room through the open door, until finally old Ironsides said, ‘To hell with it!’ and went in.

“I went after him.

“Philip Madison was in bed. He lay on his back with the covers close up around his chin and his eyes closed. I think we all knew right away, maybe before we opened the door even, that he was dead.

“The black bag was on the floor beside the bed. It was open and I leaned over and saw that it was empty.

“Nobody spoke. Ironsides and I stood there beside the foot of the bed and Sims stood just back of us. The doctor leaned over and pulled back the covers.

“The doctor reeled back as if he had been struck. I think he yelled. I tried to yell and my mouth was open, but no sound came out of it. The four of us stood there and stared down at the bed and didn’t move because we couldn’t.

“Although Philip Madison’s face had looked dried up and shriveled it was nothing compared to his body. His bones, ribs, shoulders, legs, stood out against the wrinkled brown skin, and the bones themselves, even the big bone in the lower leg, was no bigger than your little finger. But that wasn’t what we stared at. That wasn’t what held us there. We knew finally what he had carried around in the black bag.

“It was there on the bed beside him. He had died with his arm around it, with it on the bed between his chest and his arm. It was a human head about the size of a baseball. The hair on the head was thick and long. It was bronze-red hair, and even there on the bed, piled about the tiny, wrinkled face and scrappy body of the dead man it glowed in the overhead light as if it had life of its own.”

THE END

CORPSE SHADOW

(Continued from page 83)

Horror? Horror of what? She didn’t know. But it was upon her! It had rolled over her in a black, hideous flood the very moment John Westley had cried out in gibbering panic and fled into the night! Part of that horror seemed physical—a sensation of extreme cold, creeping into every nerve and muscle, chilling her to the bone. But the worst part was mental—a feeling of awful loneliness, an intolerable, psychic hunger to talk to and be with someone, more terrible than anything she had ever experienced before.

She was cold and lonely. Dear God, how cold and lonely she was! She would go back to Philip! Philip would understand! He would take her in his arms, soothe her, warm her icy, trembling body. He would satisfy that dreadful, aching longing for love and companionship, forgive her for what she had done to him.

She was running once more, whimpering, sobbing, racing along the black ribbon of highway, going home! It was scarcely more than a mile to Wilmerdon from the scene of the accident. But it seemed to take ages for her to cover that distance. It seemed countless years before well-remembered houses and lawns appeared.

She had met no one on that frantic journey back. It was late; practically everyone had gone to bed. But suddenly, fleeing past the dark and silent houses, she came to one which was still lighted, saw the figure of a small boy perched on the front steps.
CORPSE SHADOW

She knew him, though not very well. He was Bobby Andrews, the son of a neighbor. It had always been her custom to remain aloof from her neighbors, especially their children. As a rule, she disliked children. But now, out of her terrible loneliness, came the irresistible desire to talk to this boy.

She stopped short, smiled at him. "Hello, Bobby," she said timidly. "Remember me? Of course you do. I'm Marjorie Benton. I live in the big stone house on the next corner. I've often seen you playing when I went down the street. I thought you'd be in bed by this time. But I suppose your father—"

Her voice snapped like a rotten cord. The small, freckled face before her was suddenly contorted into an expression of stark terror! Stupefied with amazement, she watched his eyes bulge in their sockets, his thin little body go rigid. For only an instant did that complete paralysis of fear last. Then he was on his feet, shrieking, stumbling blindly across the porch in an insane effort to get away from her. The front door banged shut on his mad screams. But they continued even after he was inside the house, floating back to her, shrilling from his throat as though they would never stop.

STUNNEED, wild with alarm, she fled on again. What in God's name did it mean? What had she said to terrify him so? First John Westley, now this small boy, had run from her in utter panic when she merely spoke to them! Why should just her voice cause people to shrink from her in horror? What awful thing had happened to her?

Philip would know! Philip would explain! She had reached the house, was racing across the lawn. The door stood ajar, just as it had when she darted through it such a short time before. It was as though Philip expected her to re-
turn. It was as though he knew she really didn't intend to leave him!

Breathless, quivering, she reached the library. He was still sitting hunched in his chair, his face so drawn and haggard that she felt a sudden throb of pity and remorse. She staggered forward, tears streaking her cheeks, arms outstretched toward him.

"Philip!" she sobbed. "I've come back! I know now what a fool I was! Philip, if you can only forgive.

Her words faded away into nothingness. Her hands fell to her sides. He had started slightly and looked up when she spoke. But there was no love, no gladness in his eyes as they swept around the room, lingering only momentarily on her face. There was nothing but cold indifference on his thin, pale features as he dropped his head again.

Terror and despair shook her. She had expected him to be angry with her. She had thought he might revile her for what she had done, might even drive her out of the house. But she had not anticipated anything like this! She could not believe he could be so heartless as to ignore her completely, disregard her presence utterly, when she was weak and sick from the effects of the accident, starving for human sympathy and understanding!

"If you go to Westley I'll never recognize you as my wife again," he had said! This was what he meant by that! This was his ghastly way of revenging himself, the awful punishment he had devised to torture her for her faithlessness! Oh, how could he be so cruel and merciless? How could he do this thing to her when one word, one gesture from him would have lifted the weight of nameless horror that was driving her insane?

"Philip," she choked. "You—you don't understand! I was in a wreck. I might have been killed! And John Westley was responsible for it! He—he forced me off
the road, caused me to smash into a telephone pole! And he ran away afterward, without offering to help me! I know now what a filthy, rotten cur he is! I know now I never loved him! I love only you, Philip! That's why I came back... ."

Still no answer, no response to her frenzied cries! He just sat there, rigid, motionless, his face a stiff, unyielding mask. He might have been a marble statue for all the notice he took of her!

Marjorie Benton lost all control of herself then. She flung herself across the room, twining frantic arms around her husband's neck. "Philip, speak to me!" she screamed. "For the love of God, speak to me!"

She felt him shudder from head to foot, felt him spring up and tear loose from her embrace. "It's chilly in here," he muttered hoarsely. Even now he seemed to be talking to himself and not to her. "It's so cold and—and horrible! For a moment I thought—"

The telephone rang shrilly. Dumbly she watched him whirl around, snatch up the instrument. "Yes, this is Philip Benton," he said curtly. "Yes, I—" A thin squeaking through the receiver interrupted him, a furious babble of words she couldn't interpret. But she saw his face suddenly go livid.

"No!" he panted. "It can't be! I won't believe it! There must be some terrible mistake! I can't—who is this talking? How did you happen to find out about it?"

Again the squeaking, slower, jerkier this time. Her husband's face was awful—the face of a man driven out of his mind with horror.

"You say you're a friend?" he cried thickly. "But that tells me nothing! Why should you want to keep your name a secret? By God, if this is just a practical joke, if you're lying about the wreck—"

"That's John Westley on the phone, Philip!" she shrieked at him. "And he's not lying! My God, can't you understand what I've been trying to tell you? There was a wreck! He caused it! He made me crack up and fled, hoping no one would ever connect him with the accident! He had a woman with him—another man's wife! He thought I was unconscious and didn't recognize him when he opened the car door and looked in at me! He won't tell you his name now because he's afraid you'll find out about his part in the wreck! Philip—"

But he was listening to the squeaking sounds that came from the black, rubber mouth of the receiver, not to her. "Yes, of course," he muttered. "I know where it is. I'll go out there right away."

He forked the instrument with a crash, sprang toward the door.

"Wait!" she cried, stumbling after him. "I'm going along! I've got to make you understand—"

Still he didn't answer, though he shivered again as she pawed at his arm. Hatless, coatless, he burst from the house, headed for the garage. She was right at his heels, barely managed to squeeze in beside him as he climbed behind the wheel of the sedan, tramped on the starter. She didn't try to talk to him again during that mad, short journey. She couldn't. Her anger, her bewilderment at his strange actions, had been swallowed up by the whirlwind of horror which grew in intensity as they swept along the dark ribbon of highway, as they rounded the ugly, menacing curve, and the shattered, twisted bulk of the roadster loomed before them.

Men were all about it now—men in white, sick faces. Most of them stood in little groups, whispering, talking in low tones. But two were carrying a stretcher on which lay a still limp form—a form covered by a blanket.

She was directly behind Philip when he leaped from the sedan and ran toward the stretcher. A stifled moan forced its way past her lips as he reached out—a
shaking hand toward that shrouded form.  
"Better not look, mister," one of the men cautioned him huskily.  
"I've got to see." His voice sounded strangled, unrecognizable.

ULTIMATE horror claimed Marjorie Benton then as the blanket fell away. She understood at last the ghastly thing that had happened to her—the thing she should have understood before. She knew now why she felt so cold, so unbearably lonely. She knew now why John Westley and the little boy had fled from her in gibbering terror, why Philip had not answered her or looked at her when she spoke to him, No one could answer her—see her! The fate she dreaded most had come to pass! The bloody, twisted shape on the stretcher was her own!

"I brought it on myself!" she screamed.  
He didn't hear her! Nobody would ever hear her again! She was condemned forever to wander in a cold, hideous world of shadows, denied even the blessedness of complete oblivion—a lonely, dead thing whose presence among the living could only inspire abysmal fear and dread!

"I was to blame," Philip Benton choked. Hoarse, tearing sobsrocked him as he knelt beside the stretcher and cradled the broken, shattered body in his arms.  
"I shouldn't have let her go. She was crazy with rage and anger when she left me. She didn't know what she was doing. Oh Marjorie, why did it have to happen? Why couldn't I have died in your place?"

Out of the depths of her horror came a sudden rush of tenderness and infinite pity to the soul of Marjorie Benton—pity not for herself now, but for the man she had wronged and betrayed.  
"Philip," she whispered, "I never dreamed how much you cared for me. Philip, if only I could atone for what I have done!"

"There is a way." The voice was but a breath, a sigh. And yet it seemed to fill the silence of the night as water fills a cup. It seemed to come from all around her, from out of the boundless reaches of eternity.  "There is a way back to life—through him. Only a great and noble love can conquer death. His love has done that. Return to him, Marjorie Benton. Live once more—for his sake. Try to be worthy of a love like that. And perhaps, when death comes again to you, it may be more merciful...

The voice faded away, was gone. She felt herself slipping, falling. She felt excruciating pain flooding over her, stabbing every nerve and muscle.

THE pain was still with her when she recovered consciousness. It was like molten lead, rolling through her veins, wracking her entire body with anguish. And yet she welcomed it. It meant she was alive!

"badly injured," a man was saying.  
"She escaped being killed only by a miracle. It may sound terrible to you, Mr. Benton, but it would be almost a blessing if she did die."

"You've got to save her!" Philip was sobbing, "You've got to pull her through!"

"I'll do everything I can, of course. But after all, I'm a doctor, not a magician, Mr. Benton. So much depends on her. She may not want to recover. A person as badly hurt as she...

"I want to live," she whispered feebly.  
"I know what death is like—now!"
She heard Philip's cry of relief, felt his warm, comforting arms going around her.

"Philip," she murmured, "I really was dead—for a little while. You brought me back from the grave. Your love...

He looked startled. "You weren't dead," he said gently. "You just thought you were. Strange fancies sometimes pass through a person's mind when something terrible occurs. Even I—" he hesitated—

"even I thought you came into the library
and tried to talk to me just before I heard about the accident."

"But I did come to you," she protested. "I tried to tell you I was wrong when I thought I loved John Westley. That I loved only you. I asked your forgiveness and begged you to take me back. You couldn't hear me then! But you can now! Phillip, will you forgive—?"

"There is nothing to forgive, Marjorie," he whispered. "Stop worrying about it. Just get well—for my sake."

"For your sake!" A smile touched her lips. "That's what the voice said while I was standing beside my dead body, before life was given back to me!"

"She's delirious, Mr. Benton," the doctor interrupted anxiously. "Can't you see that? Better leave her alone now, let her get some rest. She'll forget all about those delusions when the shock wears off."

She sighed and closed her eyes again as they tiptoed from the room. They didn't believe her. They didn't understand. The world would never accept the miraculous thing that had happened to her as being true. But it didn't really matter. Nothing mattered now except that she and Philip were together again—forever!
BLACK CHAPEL

SLOWLY the man rose to his feet. He looked at the limp girl dumbly, bewilderment clouding his eyes. "She's dead," he said to himself. "I killed her." The words were meaningless. He repeated them again. "I killed her." Then he screamed, a harsh scream of pain. "Elsie!" he sobbed. "Elsie! Oh, God! Why did I do it? Why did I do it?"

His answer was the roar of a gun and the smashing of a bullet into his brain. For a moment he tottered, then sagged downward.

A minute later, a man slunk out from behind a rhododendron bush. He grabbed the corpse of the man and dragged him away. Several minutes later he returned for the body of the girl. All that was left to show that hideous murder had been committed here was a dark stain that was sinking rapidly into the ground.

And this was merely a prelude to the full blast of horror that struck at the students of Walton University early the next day. For Satan had sent his messengers out on the campus and no boy or girl knew but that the next moment he or she might turn into a beast of murder—a mindless thing filled with only one desire; to kill! Was it a new, unheard-of disease—or was there some fabulous criminal genius trying to wreck the little college that was already so hard-pressed? That master of the weird and eerie, Costa Carusso, knows all the answers, and he tells them in a spine-tingling novel appearing in the next issue of TERROR TALES.
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