
September
Weird Tales
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HAUNTS
HORRORS
FANTASTIC
MYSTERY
Unique Fiction

Another Kuttner

IN THIS issue of WEIRD TALES there is a story bearing the name of Kuttner. The author isn't Henry Kuttner, nor even any relative of Henry Kuttner, he says, but nevertheless is a young man who when people asked him if he was the writer of magazine fiction used to say no. Then he began to think that maybe he might become such, after all, so he sent us a story "The Imitation Demon," is it, so now Mr. Robert Kuttner can say yes, he *is* the writer of magazine fiction.

A Bloodsucking Ghost

THAT, we discovered, is the definition of vampire in Webster's dictionary. It is a good definition—as far as it goes—but the further activities of Vampires must interest a good many people, for it is in response to their letters that we are reprinting in this issue a story they have asked for again and again—De Brignac's Lady by Kirk Washburn. It is, we feel, a veritable classic in its field and we are glad to bring it to the attention of a new generation of readers, as well as satisfy those older ones who have remembered it so vividly.

The Vampire legend is supposedly Slavic in origin, but in this story it survives—and is more than legend!—in the neighborhood of New Orleans. And not so long ago, at that.

The Editor, WEIRD TALES
9 Rockefeller Plaza,
New York 20, New York

I have been reading your magazine for three years, and I must say that it has brought me many pleasurable moments.

(*Continued on page* 128)

Weird Tales

September 1954

Published bi-monthly by SHORT STORIES, INC., 200 West 57th Street, New York 19, N. Y. W. J. Delaney, President & Treasurer, R. M. Cogan, Secretary. Reentered as second-class matter January 26, 1940, at the Post Office, New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. *Subscription rates:* One year in the United States and possessions $2.00; two years $3.50. Canadian: one year $2.25; two years, $4.00 Foreign: one year $2.30; two years, $4.10. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts.

D. McILWRAITH, *Editor*

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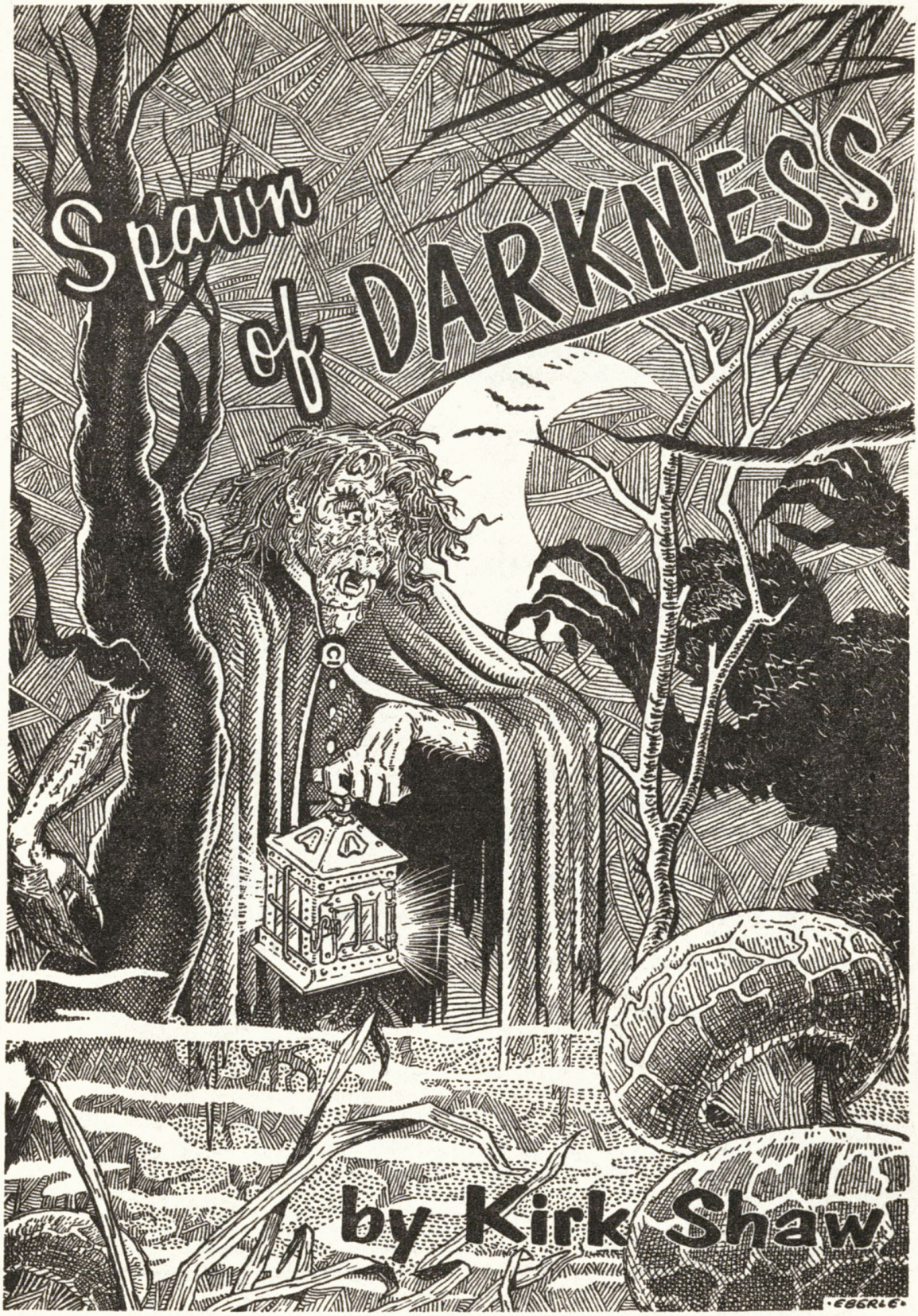
Printed in U. S. A.

VOL. 46, No. 4



Heading by Joseph Eberle

. . . the Old World sometimes seems to live very much in the shadow of the past.

THE sun of the earlier part of the day had completely gone as the car climbed higher among the Cumberland hills, and by late afternoon the sky was dark and forbidding. The first tentative drops of rain appeared on the windscreen and distant thunder, like the angry blundering of some blind beast, rolled round the hills and muttered itself to silence over the dark waters of the lake far down on my left. Like the vanguard of a phantom army long wraiths of cautious mist slithered from every gully and shivered in fitful anticipation as the star shells of lightning ripped the evening asunder and showed up stark and bare the futile resistance of dripping trees and lowering mountains.

A feeling of insane exhilaration like the frenzy I have known in a storm at sea swept over me. I felt I wanted to shout and sing, and as the rain began to fall heavily I let myself go and sang 'Polly—Wolly—Doodle' at the top of my voice.

'A grasshopper sittin on a
railroad track,'
'Singing Polly—Wolly—
Doodle o' a day.'

Crack, went the thunder! Down lashed the rain! Water slewed itself across the windscreen, grabbed at the glass to

peer in at the singing fool and was swept aside by the impartial arm of the wiper.

'A pickin of his teeth wid a carpet tack'
'Singing Polly—Wolly—Doodle o' a day.'

The car breasted another rise and vaguely through the rain and mist I saw the gray ribbon of the road winding down the hillside to a dark forbidding tunnel of weaving trees. The sight sobered me. I ceased my idiotic singing, stopped the car, and while the full fury of the storm broke and surged around me, I lit a cigarette and watched with awe the majestic pyrotechnic display of the enraged elements.

When the wild loneliness of the countryside began to have its effect on me, I had my first real doubts on the advisability of driving on blindly. Perhaps it would have been wiser to have stayed at the inn where I had dinner? But what the hell! I wanted this holiday to be different, didn't I? It couldn't be so much further to a village or another inn, and if the worst did come to the worst I could always sleep in the car. Another month and I'd be heading back to the States, my own private sentimental journey far behind me. Back to the old grind and an editor who thought me a chuckle-headed fool for blowing my savings in trying to recapture something that had gone for ever.

But I was ever a sucker for sentiment and the years I had spent in Britain as a war correspondent were just about the happiest of my life. There had been a girl, come to that, there had been two or three girls; nothing very serious but a lasting memory that made me want to have this one last fling while I still had the chance.

I stubbed out the cigarette. I'd be weeping soon if I didn't watch out. I let off the brakes, and started to coast towards the trees. With the engine silent I wound down the window a little and reveled in the sound of the rushing wind squeezing in over the glass as we gathered pace. Down through the streamers of mist that swirled across the highway until the overlapping trees bowed their storm tossed heads and sucked me in.

The car had gained quite a bit of speed by now and in the woods it was pitch dark, so I switched the headlights on full before starting the engine. As the twin lances swept out ahead I stepped hard on the brake, bringing the car up shudderingly.

OUTLINED for an instant against the gray background of the mist was a man. With a

peculiar stooping gait he had been crossing the road unaware of my silent approach until I had switched on the lights. When they hit him he threw up a protecting hand to his face, hesitated for a second, then vanished among the trees with one tremendous bound. I saw, or thought I saw his face for only a fraction of a minute, but brother, that fraction was much too long.

I had the impression of a startling whiteness. Not a clean pure white, but the unhealthy paleness of uprooted toadstools. The eyes slanted at a narrow angle and they reflected the headlights with a yellowish gleam. The cheeks were cadaverous and drawn, but the lips that curled back from yellowed teeth were red and sickeningly moist.

Only for a second did he remain pinned in the beams before disappearing among the sodden vegetation, but the encounter unnerved me strangely. My common sense told me that what I had seen was some old hobo frightened out of his wits by the juggernaut rush of the silent car, but I felt shaky and slightly hysterical.

Come flood, storm, or high water, I wouldn't have stepped out of that car just then for all the tea in China.

Instead I started up again, anxious to put as much distance between me and that spot in the shortest possible time. Too anxious as it proved, for as the road swung abruptly to the right the wood ended—and so did my headlong rush.

RIGHT across the road and completely blocking it lay a tall elm uprooted by the storm. I had no time to stop and I did the only possible thing, swinging the wheel desperately in a hopeless attempt to avoid a head on crash. The tires screamed protestingly and branches snapped off loudly as I grazed past them, then a stone gatepost loomed right ahead and jumped at me.

I flung up both arms as the hood collapsed and the windshield starred, before the night exploded in a million brilliant flashes.

A COOL gentle touch on my brow brought me sleepily back to this world, and for a minute or two I relaxed and enjoyed the pleasant sensation while I gathered my scattered senses. Carefully I opened my eyes. Oh, let me always awake from my sleep like that! A vision of loveliness was bending over me and gently soothing my brow with a cool sponge. Through veiled lids I watched her. Raven black hair framing a perfectly oval face with a rich ivory skin. Two great brown eyes filled with

tender concern that made me curl in knots inside, and a cupid bow that would be a crime not to kiss. Only the wings were missing, and who the heck worries about wings?

"I always did believe in angels," I murmured dreamily, and as the girl jerked back with a startled exclamation I added, "More! More!"

A deep chuckle of masculine laughter made me open my eyes fully. I was lying on a long tapestry covered sofa in front of a roaring log fire, and from somewhere behind me a dimmed light cast soft warm shadows over a room that was built for comfort. By my side the ministering angel was sitting back on her heels brushing a stray lock of hair from a face that was prettily flushed from my badinage.

Then the owner of the chuckle came into view, a tall well built man in serviceable brown tweeds. In one hand he held a glass towards me while a pleasant grin lit his tanned face.

"I'm sure our friend feels more in need of this now, Vi," he said to the girl in a deep rich voice, and then to me, "I trust sir, that you are feeling none the worse of your accident? We could find no bones broken, but I'm afraid we can't say the same for your car. It's in a bit of a mess."

I accepted the glass gratefully and let the neat whiskey glow its way down my throat.

"This must be Valhalla." I gasped when I had got my breath back. "First I wake to find an angel looking after me, then I'm given a glass of nectar."

The man chuckled again. It had an infectious quality that made me smile along with him.

"Then let me disillusion you. I can give you my solemn word that you are still in Cumberland, and that Vi's no angel when her temper's roused. Are you, my dear?"

"Beast!" retorted the girl, rising and placing the basin and sponge she had been using on an occasional table. Her voice was just as I had imagined it would be.

"But let me introduce myself." The man was speaking again, "My name is Stafford, and this is my niece, Miss Vivian Hartland."

I acknowledged the introductions, noting the 'Miss' with pleasure.

"And this—" he turned and held out his hand to someone behind me "—is my wife, Sylvia."

"Oh please don't get up." said Mrs. Stafford, appearing from behind the sofa. "You've had a nasty knock, and although I'm glad it hasn't been more serious you really must rest and take things quietly for a little."

I liked Mrs. Stafford right away. She was tall for a woman, gracefully built, and she spoke with a cultured accent, but there was no denying her evident solicitude for my well-being.

"Well I guess I'm still a bit hazy as to how I got here," I apologized, "but for what it's worth my name is Tracy, and I'm certainly grateful for all you've done for me."

"The real person to thank is Archer, our lodge keeper." replied Stafford. "It was his house you almost wrecked when your car hit the gatepost. When he realized what had happened he phoned here, and Silas, that's my brother, went down to help carry you up." The door of the room opened and shut just then, and Stafford looked up. "Oh, and here's Silas now. Mr. Tracy, my brother, Silas Stafford."

The man who appeared and crushed my hand in a vise-like grip, came as a bit of a shock. Massive is the only word that would describe him. He was close on six foot four with great broad shoulders and long arms that terminated in strong muscular hands. I could quite imagine how he must have carried me up like a baby. When he spoke his voice boomed and seemed to vibrate through the room, but what really stunned me was that he was dressed as a sky pilot. He was the Reverend Silas Stafford.

"Glad you're feeling better, Mr. Tracy." he roared at me, "Sir Hugh thought at first that you were badly hurt."—So he was a 'Sir'? I was moving in high society. But Silas had turned his leonine head now and was addressing his brother. "Brought up his suitcase. Gave it to Meekins to put in his room."

Lady Stafford rescued me from this well meaning but rather overpowering human bear. "I hope you don't mind Mr. Tracy? Silas brought your case up from the car. As it will be quite impossible for you to continue your journey I took the liberty of having a room prepared for you. Were you in a particular hurry to keep an appointment?"

I assured her that time was all my own, but protested that they mustn't inconvenience themselves over me.

"Nonsense, old boy!" Sir Hugh cut in. "I feel a certain amount of responsibility for your accident. After all it was one of my trees and my gatepost that brought you to grief. If you have no definite plans for the immediate future, then you must let me salve my conscience a little by staying at Fardene with us. At least until your car can be repaired."

I protested feebly, but the temptation to see more of Miss

Vivian Hartland, even if she was staying very much in the background at present, was too strong for me to put up much resistance.

So it was settled that I should remain at Fardene Hall for a few days, and in the meantime, Sir Hugh would arrange to have my car towed to the nearest village and repaired.

AFTER that things became more informal and we were soon chatting like old friends. Before I realized it, it had gone eleven and the ladies broke up the party by going to bed. Then as I had a nightcap, I watched Sir Hugh, help Meekins, the butler, fit heavy wooden shutters across the windows and secure them with an iron bar.

"Afraid of burglars?" I asked jocularly. "I shouldn't have thought they troubled you so far in the country."

"Much worse," replied Sir Hugh gravely, fitting a bar into its socket. "Three weeks ago, a travelling circus had an accident about fifteen miles from here when one of their wagons ran off the road and burst open. Unfortunately it contained three leopards and they all escaped. Two were rounded up later, but the third is still at large and it has been causing a lot of havoc among the hill flocks."

"But surely you've tried to hunt it down?" I protested in amazement. "A leopard's a mighty touchy animal and just as likely to attack a human as a sheep."

Sir Hugh struck a match and applied it to an old briar pipe before answering.

"That's not so easy as it sounds. This part of the countryside is still quite wild with houses few and far between. We've tried using dogs to trace the brute and even now there are armed groups scouring the hills and woods. But so far it's been too cunning for us." His voice grew tired and a deep frown lined his forehead. "As you say, the danger is there and I'd feel a lot happier in my mind if I knew that the animal were dead."

Shortly afterwards we went to bed, and what with the long drive and the accident, my head no sooner touched the pillow than I was off in a deep, deep, sleep where strange white faces with glowing yellow eyes mixed in a nightmare fantasy with the lovely features of Vivian Hartland.

THE noise of old fashioned curtain rings gliding on a wooden rail awoke me next morning to see Meekins, his arms outstretched, pulling back the heavy brocade curtains on another dismal wet day. I felt none the worse of my adventures the

previous evening, and as I stretched myself luxuriously on the soft bed I let my thoughts wander. Maybe today I'd get a chance to speak to Vivian alone. Last night there had been little opportunity, and I felt sure she had deliberately kept herself in the background of the conversation.

"A cup of tea, sir." Meekins' carefully modulated voice recalled me from daydreams that were growing a trifle lurid, and I struggled up in bed to accept the proffered cup.

"Thank you, Meekins. Looks like the weather hasn't improved any?"

"No, sir. I'm afraid it's going to be another wet day."

He busied himself around the room, arranging neatly the clothes I had dropped in an untidy heap. Somehow I got the impression that he wanted to say something more. I decided to encourage him. Maybe I could get him to talk about Vivian.

"I feel flattered Meekins," I said, "but isn't it rather unusual for you to call guests in the morning? I thought it would be a maid or someone like that who did that job?"

Meekins straightened, and laid my tie carefully over the back of a chair. He looked tense and—yes, frightened.

"Under normal circumstances, Millie would have called you, Sir. She is the daughter of the lodge-keeper and was employed as maid in the house. But—" he faultered "—Millie was killed last night."

I sat bolt upright, spilling some of the tea on the quilt.

"Killed? What was—I mean, was it an accident?"

"No, Sir." he gulped and his face whitened while his voice dropped to a whisper. "She was killed by the beast that's roaming the countryside—the leopard. Her father found her this morning with her throat torn out."

"WHAT!" I yelled the word at him.

But Meekins had regained his composure and obviously felt he had overstepped the mark between servant and guest.

"You will find the bathroom second door on the left, Sir. Breakfast will be served in half an hour."

And with that he left me to my thoughts.

MILLIE? The name didn't mean much to me, but I had a vague recollection of a pleasant faced, plumpish girl in a black dress and housemaids' cap, coming in to speak to Lady Stafford the previous evening. Probably about the preparation of this very room. And found by her father? What horror piled on horror. To find your own daughter with her throat torn

out. Poor devil. First the shock of my crashing into his house, and now this—

And the animal? Good God, it was probably still around. Driven from the hills by the rigors of the Cumberland winter it must be seeking shelter in the woods.

I bathed and dressed hurriedly, then made my way downstairs. An open door indicated where breakfast would be served, but I had lost all appetite for food. By the long French windows, Sir Hugh turned from a gloomy contemplation of the weather. I was staggered at the way the night had aged him. All buoyancy had gone from his rugged features leaving them drawn and stern, and from his breeches and leather gaiters I could see he had just been or was about to go out.

"Good morning, Mr. Tracy. I trust you slept well?" A very faint smile flickered at his lips. "I'm afraid you will have a solitary breakfast. The ladies won't be down, and I—I'm not feeling hungry."

"Have they found any trace of it, Sir Hugh?" I asked bluntly.

His eyebrows rose. "Then you know?" and at my nod, "So far —no. But the earlier search was only perfunctory. I was just going out again, would you—?"

"Of course I want to come." I cut in. "I suppose you have some guns here, and I've done a bit of hunting in my time."

"Good man," he replied briskly. "Come along to the gun-room where I can offer you quite a decent selection. The police have already taken the girl's body away, and Silas has run her father into the village. So I suggest we take my two dogs—they're both gun trained—and see if they can pick up any scent around the lodge."

FROM the cupboard racks in the gun-room I chose a light but powerful sporting rifle, and after putting on raincoats we went round the back of the house to where the kennels were and collected two beautiful red setters. The dismal day seemed to have not the slightest effect on their spirits for they frisked boisterously at the end of their leads as we walked down the long drive to the lodge, Sir Hugh telling me what little he knew of the night's happenings.

Millie had last been seen alive shortly after supper the previous evening when her father had gone off to bed leaving her to wash up the supper dishes. His bedroom was to the front of the house, but although he was a light sleeper he heard nothing unusual all night. In the morning when he came through to the kitchen he had been surprised to find the electric light still

burning, but on going to the back door that was standing open he had immediately found his daughter. She was lying on her back not ten feet from the house, her eyes staring sightlessly up at the leaden sky, her hair wet and bedraggled from the incessant rain that ran down her pallid cheeks. Her high necked dress was torn at the collar, and in her throat the horrible gaping wound.

"Did the police say when they thought she died?" I asked.

"According to Doctor Pearson she had been dead for at least seven hours," replied Sir Hugh.

"Then she was definitely attacked last night and not some time this morning?"

"Yes. The police theory is that after washing up the supper dishes she went out to bring in some clothes she had left on a line. The kitchen door would be open to give her some light and this must have attracted the leopard that crept out of the woods and stalked her."

I shivered at the thought of the animal slinking through the shadows towards the unsuspecting girl. One lightning rush, a spring, and the scream for help would be silenced as its fangs sunk into her throat.

Sir Hugh sensed my thoughts. "It's a horrible picture and the sole redeeming feature is that her death must have been almost instantaneous. Poor Millie, I doubt if she even had time to realize what had happened."

WE WALKED on in silence, each engrossed in his own thoughts, until we came to the lodge. It was a solid square built little house, and as we rounded the path to the back a hefty young policeman in glistening oilcape, stepped out from the partial shelter of the kitchen doorway. When he recognized Sir Hugh he saluted awkwardly.

"'morning Hawkins," acknowledged the squire, "I've brought down the Baron and Countess to see if they can help us."

I was puzzled at his words until I realized he was referring to the two dogs.

"Aye, Sir, an' they've sent for them there bluidhounds that's out wi' the hill searchers," the policeman informed us. "But I'm thinking the rain'll no give them much chance."

Meanwhile my attention had been taken by the patch of grass immediately opposite the door. It was marked off by four small wooden pegs with twine stretched round them. Millie's body had been lying there. Beyond it a line of sodden washing flapped forlornly in the slight breeze. Common everyday articles—a shirt or two, some handkerchiefs, some underwear—com-

mon everyday articles, but the unwitting cause of Millie's death.

"Her throat was torn you said, Sir Hugh?" I asked with a frown. "I meant it's not just a figure of speech, her throat really was torn?"

"The front of her neck was gone," he replied, "like—like a bite out of an apple. I saw the wound, and God knows when I'll ever forget it."

"But there seems very little blood for such a wound?" I persisted.

The young policeman had been looking slightly green during this exchange, but the ignorance of such an amateur evidently required immediate remedy for he looked pityingly at me and replied laconically.

"Rain!"

Sir Hugh smiled, but he saw what I was getting at.

"I noticed that too, Tracy, and—" he emphasized the word, "—the doctor said she had bled heavily. The body was almost drained of blood."

We walked carefully round the marked area but could see no sign of pad marks on the muddy ground. Then Sir Hugh let the dogs nose around. They wove back and forward for a bit at the end of their leads before starting to pull towards the dripping trees with excited yelps. With a hurried farewell flung back to the policeman who seemed relieved to see the last of such ghouls we gave the dogs their head.

That they were definitely on to something became obvious from the eager way they surged ahead, and we found it difficult to keep up with them. Underfoot the ground became soggy and slippery and though the actual rain wasn't penetrating the thick branches, water dripped continuously on our bent heads. Every sound was magnified by the close confine, and each snapping twig jerked our guns to the ready. Even the panted snuffling of the dogs sounded unbearably loud, and every now and then I could hear my companion curse softly as he tripped over broken branches. Despite the cold and damp I felt clammy with sweat as I pushed after him.

When we came to the clearing I thought we had passed clean through the woods until I saw the shadowy outline of more trees sweeping silently round the solitary building that stood in the center. The dogs were acting nervously now, whining uncertainly as their heads jerked from side to side and Sir Hugh hung back on the leads to bring them up.

"They're acting damned peculiar, Tracy," he said in a puzzled voice. "Think we can be anywhere near our quarry?"

I nodded towards the lonely gray building. "What's that?"

"That? Oh that's the family vault. All my family for generations have been buried there."

"Could the leopard have taken shelter inside?"

Sir Hugh shrugged. "Quite possible. There's a grilled window on either side and it could have squeezed its way in—look, you can see one of the windows from here."

"Then let's tie the dogs to a tree." I suggested, "and we'll have a closer look. If the brute is in there it will probably be asleep and we don't want the dogs to warn it of our presence."

He did as I suggested, and when the two dogs had lain down at his command we advanced cautiously with our rifles at the ready.

CAREFULLY we approached one of the windows and rising on tiptoe peered in. An artificial twilight cast deep shadows over the whole interior but as my eyes became accustomed to the gloom I saw that it wasn't so dark as I had at first thought. From glass windows in the high domed roof weak light filtered in and I could see the blurry outline of the last resting places of the Staffords.

Sir Hugh's fingers bit deep into my arm, and a pointing finger indicated one of the coffins near the opposite window. Light played near its foot and from behind it what looked like a long furry snake lay stretched on the floor.

"A tail," he mouthed in my ear and I nodded silently as carefully we began to retrace our steps. When we reckoned we had gone beyond the distance our voices were likely to carry, we held a hasty confab.

Its outcome was that as the leopard lay hidden, one of us must flush it, the other to be ready by the window to shoot as it appeared. Sir Hugh being more used to the guns, it was decided he should take the stance by the window while I created some kind of diversion by the door. Quickly we took up our positions.

As soon as Sir Hugh signed that he was ready I reached for the heavy iron ring of a handle, and with my heart in my mouth began to turn it. The creak of the door sounded monstrous but I was careful not to open it wide enough for any big cat to spring at me. When nothing happened and there was no shot from Sir Hugh, I slid the barrel of my gun into the opening and squinted along the sights. Then as my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom I saw the leopard.

It was lying on its side with its head arched back at an unnatural angle. I felt certain that it was already dead.

Still taking every precaution I pulled the door wider and moved in. A quick glance up at the window showed me Sir Hugh's startled face, then I kept my eye on the animal—just in case.

But this particular leopard would kill no more, and when Sir Hugh joined me I saw his eyes open in astonishment. Not only was it dead, but from the signs and smell of decay it had been dead for quite some time. An almost overpowering sense of evil flooded over me as we looked at one another. Then Sir Hugh voiced our unspoken thoughts.

"But who—or what killed Millie?"

AFTER a very silent lunch the question still remained unanswered. We had told the ladies that the leopard was dead but had not mentioned for how long, as it would only have scared them unduly. Silas still hadn't returned, so when the meal was finished Sir Hugh decided to drive in and inform the police himself of our discovery, and as Lady Stafford had some arrangements she wanted to attend to regarding Millie's funeral she went with him, leaving me alone with Vivian.

Under any other circumstances I would have welcomed the opportunity of being alone with her, but my mind was so full with the problem of the dead beast that I was absent-minded and distant. When Vivian excused herself therefore on the plea of having a headache, I felt relief that I could be alone to work out an answer.

I went into the gun-room and taking down the gun I had with me in the morning, I began to clean it although it had not been fired. The whole picture was screwy. The dead sheep—Millie with her throat torn out—and the escaped leopard dead for days.

Still engrossed in the problem I carried the rifle over to the long curtained windows, and I was looking out at the thickening mist when the scream shrilled through the air. It came from above and slightly to the left of me and as I hesitated for a second a dark shape thumped lightly to the ground and began scuttling to the safety of the mist.

My reaction was automatic. Up flew the rifle, and the window shattered as I hurled a bullet through it. With a screech the thing stumbled and fell, but it was on its feet again instantly. As its head turned in my direction I felt shaken and sick—it was the man I had almost run down in the woods. Then he fled and disappeared in the mist.

I threw the rifle aside and took the stairs three at a time to the first landing. But quick as I had

been, Meekins had beaten me to it and already he was hammering on one of the doors.

"Miss Hartland! Miss Hartland! Are you all right? Please unlock the door!"

I barged him aside and threw myself at the heavy door, but it would probably have withstood my onslaught had help not arrived from an unexpected quarter. Silas appeared, and without waiting to ask any questions he flung his great weight against the panelling. At his third charge the hinges collapsed and we surged in.

Vivian lay stretched on the floor, and a cold fear gripped at my heart. But Silas again proved himself a man of action, and bending swiftly he picked her up as if she were a child and carried her to the rumpled bed.

"It's all right," he assured us. "She's only fainted."

WHEN Vivian regained consciousness the experience she had gone through flooded back in a terrifying wave, and it took our combined reassurances to quiet her enough to tell us what had happened. Her story sounded macabre in the extreme, and if I hadn't seen that dark form drop to the ground and scuttle off, I would have felt inclined to think she had been suffering from a nightmare.

After going up to her room, in the hope of getting rid of her headache she had taken a couple of aspirin tablets, removed her dress, and lain down on the bed with the quilt over her. With the quietness of the house she had fallen into a light sleep when a persistent low scratching sound brought her awake. A strange feeling of intense fear had crept over her, and realizing that the scratching came from the direction of the window, she turned her head slowly on the pillow.

On the window ledge, silhouetted against the gray background of the mist, crouched a man. Misshapen and bent, she could make little of what he was like or what he was doing until she saw one hand, a bony parchment like hand with long cruel fingers, rasp down the side of a pane. He was slowly and painstakingly picking out the lead that held in the glass. At that instant he grew suddenly aware of the girl's scrutiny, and lifting his head peered in at her. Separated by a few feet and a thin sheet of glass she saw clearly the drawn pallid features, the glittering yellow eyes, the slobbering red lips, and the sharp discolored fangs.

Terrified as the creature writhed back its lips in a snarl, she screamed and flung herself from the bed—the rest we knew.

Sir Hugh and Lady Stafford returned shortly after we had persuaded the frightened girl

that her unholy visitor would not return, and while Lady Stafford ran upstairs to comfort her, we three men sat down to a council of war.

"But it's impossible, Tracy," said Sir Hugh in bewilderment, "The wall outside Vivian's bedroom is sheer and there's neither ivy nor a suitable pipe that anyone could have climbed. She must have imagined it—mixed a bad dream with reality."

"Then I just shot Vivian's dream," I replied scathingly "—or perhaps I imagined that too?"

"And don't forget Millie," cut in his brother, "nor the dead leopard. Hughie, there's no use continuing burying our heads like ostrichs. You know as well as I do that neither of us felt too happy about blaming any circus leopard for what's been happening recently. Oh it was convenient I grant you, but both of us had the Fardene curse at the back of our minds all the time."

"The Fardene curse?" I queried. "What has Millie's death or the scaring of Vivian got to do with a curse?"

Silas looked quizzically at his brother whose downcast head nodded silently. The baronet's shoulders had bowed as he sat hunched in his chair, and I felt pity for this obviously very worried man. But I had little time for conjecture as Silas started speaking again.

"A curse, Mr. Tracy, is probably something you rarely encounter in your enlightened land, and even then it is only in the form of profanity. But over here we still live in the shadow of the past, and a curse in its old sense had a very vital and totally different meaning to our forefathers.

"The curse on Fardene for instance goes back to the days of the Stuart kings, when twin brothers of that name shared the title to these lands. Twins they were physically but by nature they were extreme opposites. Rupert was what the Scots would term 'unca guid,' but his life was dedicated to the ungodly aim of amassing a personal fortune. Hector, his brother, was a renegade as far as the church was concerned. A man with a nasty name regarding women, and the center of dark rumors of an even viler nature.

"Nothing definite was ever known to Hector's discredit until the death of a young girl, one of the tenants, under rather horrible circumstances. Public opinion rose against the brothers, and to protect himself Rupert gave damning evidence that resulted in Hector being tried and found guilty of practicing Black Magic. He was condemned to death at the local assizes, and when sen-

tence was passed on him he cursed and swore at the brother who had betrayed him. He swore that he would be revenged and that whenever the House of Fardene flourished he would bring its name down in dishonor."

Silas paused to light a cigarette and I took the opportunity of asking a question that had me puzzled.

"But surely, although this is still Fardene Hall the curse won't apply to the Staffords?"

Silas smiled. " 'Fraid so, Old Man. The name Fardene died out in the nineteenth century, but the Staffords are legal descendants on the female side of the family. But as I was saying, Hector was hung, and a pretty ghastly business it was by all accounts requiring two men to hang on his legs before the rope did its grisly work.

"After his death, Rupert flourished and made quite a bit of money. Then came the Civil War and the start of the Fardene curse. Cromwell's men captured this house that had remained loyal to the king, and failing to force Rupert to tell where his money was hidden, they squeezed him into a small iron cage and suspended him above his own doorway until he starved to death.

"Twice more since then the curse has brought ruin on the family just when it seemed to be most prosperous. Now old Hugh here has raised the family fortune once more and we have been plagued by these weird happenings."

Silas leaned forward to stub out his cigarette. When he looked up his face was apologetic.

"Must sound childish and superstitious to you, Mr. Tracy, especially coming from a man of my cloth, but as I said before, we live very much in the shadow of the past over here."

"But surely there is something we can do?" I burst out in exasperation. "Curse or no curse, what I shot at was solid enough, and if I can wound it, why can't we exterminate it?"

Sir Hugh sat up with a jerk. "Wounded it!" he exclaimed. "Then there may be a trail we can follow. Anything would be better than sitting here waiting for something else to happen."

"Of course!" I cried excitedly, jumping to my feet." Why the devil didn't I think of that before?"

TEN minutes later saw the three of us scouting around the area where I had seen the creature fall, safe in the knowledge that Meekins was sitting stolidly outside the bedroom of the two women.

Sir Hugh was the first to find any trace, a brownish gray patch

that discolored the fallen leaves. From it at intervals we found other spots that led us over the path the fugitive had followed in his escape through the woods. All around us lay the unnatural silence of the mist, as careful not to make too much noise we followed the uneven drops.

It was with no great surprise that I found we had left the wood and were once more in the little glade of the mausoleum. Straight to its door the blood-stains led us—and entered.

The hairs on the back of my neck grew rigid and once again I knew the overpowering sense of evil I had felt when we found the leopard's body. But we were three against whatever lurked in there, and cautiously we entered.

On the dusty floor the spots of blood were easier to see, and across the vault they led us to an old wooden coffin, green with age. On its side were marks where the dust had been scuffed, and I heard Sir Hugh draw in his breath sharply as with a shaking finger he pointed to the almost illegible plate on the lid:

HECTOR FARDENE

DIED 1626

A MAN OF SIN.

Silas broke the uneasy silence with a strong steady whisper.

"It looks as if we have traced the killer home. It only remains for us to remove the lid and make certain."

My hand trembled as I reached for one of the heavy screws to open the coffin, but I had no need to turn it. Their groving didn't hold the wood. Together we lifted the lid.

Within lay the man I had last seen as he fled from Fardene Hall. His eyes were closed, and the thin cruel hands lay folded on his breast. From one corner of his tightly closed lips drooled a saliva stain of blood, and there were ugly blotches of it staining the wooden sides of the coffin. One leg of the trousers was torn and through the rent showed the taut parchment-like skin. A black bullet hole still oozed tiny drops —my snap shot had been a good one.

Silas had hooked one finger in the man's collar, and now he pulled down the cloth exposing the scrawny neck. There was a band of deep brown skin right round the throat. I remembered my hands when a sail I had been handling jerked through them—it was a rope burn.

WE LEFT the lid leaning against the coffin and made our way out into the open. Despite the clammy atmosphere of the mist it felt clean and wholesome compared to that of the tomb.

"What do we do now?" Sir Hugh's face was white and I knew that I must appear the same, but Silas proved the tower of strength.

"I don't think there is anything you can do," he said quietly. "By virtue of my office the task automatically falls on me. I only pray I have faith and strength enough to see it through."

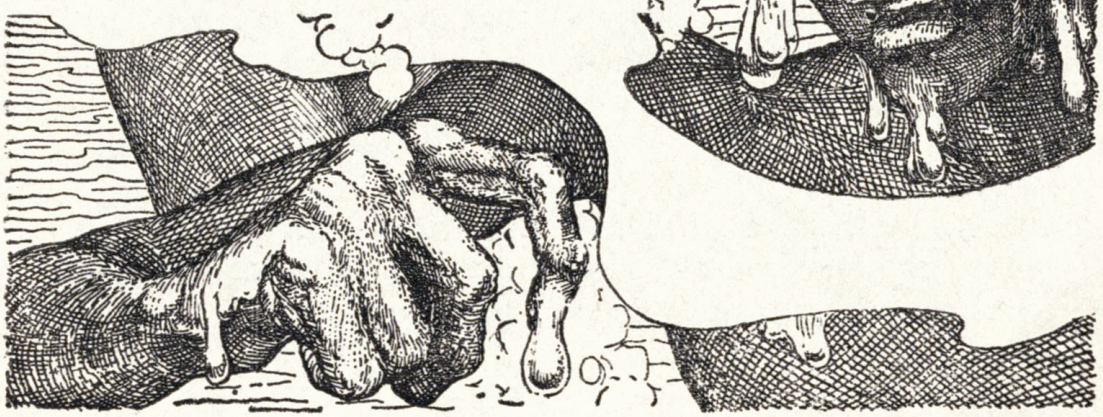
I remembered stories I had heard of stakes being driven through bodies and heads being cut off, and I felt sick in the pit of my stomach. But Silas's only weapon was his hand as he stepped forward to the door of the tomb, and making the sign of the Cross began to intone in Latin.

I am no scholar and I failed completely to understand his words but as his voice strengthened, their power surged and swirled around us like a buffeting wind. I looked with awe at this great burly man who stood firmly at the entrance of this antechamber of Hell, his face uplifted and lit by an inner glow as he repeated the ancient protection against the powers of Evil.

From the tomb rose a smell of carnage, so vile that my knees grew weak and feeble, and I knew that the evil thing within was answering his challenge to battle.

Sir Hugh swayed beside me and I could hear his hoarse voice whispering the Lord's Prayer over and over again, but my eyes were fixed on Silas.

His face was serene and majestic, but great beads of sweat glistening on his forehead told



of the inner conflict. Again his hand rose in the sign of the Cross, and from the tomb came a clatter as the lid of the coffin fell to the floor. Through the open doorway I could just see past Silas's body, and I saw the thing in the coffin sit up.

The great burning eyes fixed themselves in hate and fear on the face of its adversary, the slobbering lips writhed back displaying the yellowed fangs, and the creature squirmed as if in pain. Slowly I saw it rise from its unclean bed, and swaying upright begin a drunken lurch towards us.

TREMBLING with fear I dropped to my knees babbling half forgotten prayers from my childhood. Then the skies ripped asunder. Crash after crash of thunder pealed and roared around us. Vivid streaks of forked lightning tore the skies apart—and ever the voice of Silas grew louder and louder above the awful roar of the storm. In the doorway appeared the vampire, its fingers hooked to tear at the throat of the man who swayed it before the powers he invoked.

"It's no use." I moaned, "it's no use." And the fireball struck! A blinding thunderbolt that smashed on the ornate iron cross surmounting the mausoleum and shattered the high domed roof.

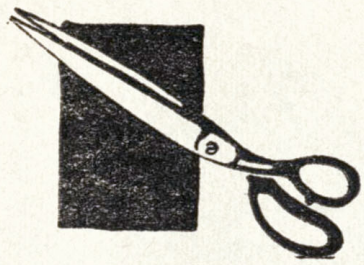
For a second the cross teetered and I saw the vampire look up. Its mouth opened in a snarl that it never uttered as the cross crashed down. High on its chest the iron spike drove in, then the building collapsed in ruins, obscuring everything in a cloud of dust.

As quickly as it had risen, the storm swept over and I rose on wavering legs. Silas was on his knees and I feared the falling masonry had struck him down. But as I drew near I saw that his lips were moving silently and that tears trickled from his closed eyelids—he was praying in gratitude.

Sir Hugh was beside me and he whispered a hoarse, "Look!"

I followed the direction of his finger to where the body of the vampire lay half buried in the broken stone, the iron cross rising triumphant from its chest. It was no longer the terrifying creature that had killed Millie or threatened Vivian. Cheated for so long, the grave had reached out its long delayed hand to claim its own.

All that remained was a skeleton form with some few patches of flesh, clothed in garments over which the mould spread before our eyes.



Dorgen

BY SUZANNE PICKETT

TRION CONNER smiled as he unlocked his door, turned on the light and started across the room. Then he halted and stared in stupefied unbelief.

There, on his sofa was the most gorgeous pair of feminine legs that he had ever seen. Slim and long; they curved deliciously from ankle to knee to thigh. There was only one thing wrong. The legs ended abruptly in the middle of her thighs.

Trion rubbed his hand over his eyes and looked again. The legs were still there. Well, he was drunk. Crazy, stupidly drunk. And yet he had taken only one cocktail. The imaginary girl wore a pair of blue shorts. The cuffs and part of the legs showed, but they too ended in that incredible way.

The room was cold and the night would be colder. Trion smiled stupidly, then went to his closet took out a blanket and draped it over the girl. She sighed and turned over on her side. His eyes widened as he looked. The blanket wasn't invisible. It followed the perfect, rounded curves of a girl's body.

He felt his jaw go slack and hang open. With an effort, he closed it, marched himself into his room and put himself to bed. He'd just have to sleep this one off.

. . . difficult when you run foul of a jealous demon.

He was smiling as he woke the next morning. He yawned, stretched and turned over. Then he sat up in bed abruptly. The scent of bacon and coffee filled the room. He dressed hurriedly, went through the living room to see if the legs still occupied the sofa and stopped. The blanket was there, but pushed to one side and turned back as if someone had slept under it and left it thus.

Trion went into the bathroom to wash his face again and look into the mirror. His eyes were a little frightened, but they definitely didn't look insane.

And yet, the scent of bacon and coffee grew stronger. He tried to smile. Maybe a pair of legs could cook. That was certainly a wonderful aroma coming from the kitchen. He turned and followed his nose.

For a minute, he stared in horror. The table was set daintily, his best cups and saucers were out. Two steaming cups of coffee sat beside bacon, eggs and toast cooked exactly as he liked them.

HE SMILED foolishly and pulled out his chair. He'd see if he could do a day's work on a breakfast that was pure fantasy. The chair on the other side of the table pulled itself out and then drew closer to the table. He stared again. Just below the level of his eyes, across the table from him was the most dazzling pair of brown eyes that he had ever seen. They were more startling than the legs of last night. They could smile, and then look mournfully and doubtfully at him.

Somebody had surely slipped something into his drink. It couldn't have been that strong. Nevertheless; he'd lay off the stuff from now on. No telling what might happen to him.

Well, at least he wouldn't go so far as to talk to himself. As long as he managed to keep quiet, he'd have that much control over his mind.

He ate his breakfast. Good too. Impossible that he could imagine such taste, and certainly not the coffee that burned his lips. The food across the table disappeared a little more slowly and more daintly than his own.

He was always as neat as an old maid's pincushion, and he was almost too fond of his food. Tired of eating the same tasteless, restaurant meals, he'd taken this apartment. Enjoyed cooking his own breakfast, dinner, too, when he wanted. And he kept the place clean. But this morning he left the bed; dishes, and all, and hurried out of the door.

Two or three times during the day, he started to mention the eyes and the legs that had visited him, but wisdom made him hold

his tongue. When Burt Jenkins, his best friend, asked him to stop for cocktails, he refused so emphatically that Burt gave him a queer look.

Perhaps he'd eat out tonight, he thought. Too big a mess at home. The girl who came to clean every week would do the apartment tomorrow. He would not even bother with his breakfast dishes.

Then he frowned. He hadn't cooked, nor set the table. The whole breakfast, the blanket too must have been his imagination. Anyhow, he wanted to hurry home. Maybe the eyes would be there again. He'd always preferred blue eyes, but he'd never seen brown ones like these.

They were large and clear, the whites almost blue. The lids were wide and shadowed, and underneath the eyes looked a little tired. The lashes were long and soft, like black silk tassles. Slanting at the edges, they turned back over the lids to darken the shadows; while the iris seemed to constantly change; from brown to almost purple, then to black, yet alwyas glistening with a soft, sweet light.

HE WAS a little tense as he went up the stairs, unlocked his door and looked at the couch. He smiled in relief. It was neat and bare of legs or blanket. It had only been the drinks. Everything was all right now.

But—he wrinkled his nose. There was the distinct aroma of garlic and onions in the air. Of bubbling meat—what did he have to cook? He hadn't bought groceries the day before as he planned. There was only a can of beef, some onions and potatoes. But as surely as the couch was bare now; just that surely he smelled the most delicious hash of his entire existence.

Fearfully, he went into the kitchen.

The table was set again. Something bubbled on the stove. He walked over to look at a pot of steaming potatoes and meat in a smooth, brown gravy. His mouth watered as he looked then he glanced around the room.

There, across the table behind a fork that rearranged itself; was a perfect, white, rounded chin. A soft, pink mouth that trembled on a smile; and cheeks with dimples that deepened, then disappeared. The tip of a small, dainty nose could be seen; but above and below these nothing was visible.

He smiled tentatively. The lips smiled. He opened his mouth to speak, but for a minute, no words came. Then he swallowed, moistened his lips and said. "Hello." It was a bare whisper, but at least it was a sound.

"Hello," the lips opened and small, white teeth showed. They came closer and he felt a hand on his arm. Then the lips trembled on a sob. "I was afraid you —you'd—I thought you'd run or something when you decided I was real."

"You—*are* real?" he asked carefully; as if he were handling eggs that would break at the vibration of his voice if he used it too much.

"Of course I'm real. Can't you see—" The words trailed off. "What—" she said. "How much have you seen?"

"There were your legs last night, your eyes this morning, and now your mouth and chin." He put his finger on it to be sure that it *was* real. "And the tip of your nose."

The lips smiled again. "Do you—" Her chin was childish and sweet. "Do you think I have pretty eyes?"

"The most beautiful in the world," he said fervently.

"And—and my lips and chin?"

"The only things, I have ever seen that were almost as beautiful as your eyes," he declared.

Her chin dipped. She must be looking at her legs. "And—" modestly, then a delicious pink swept from the tip of her chin, over her dimples and colored the small, white nose.

"Your—" he began. But she was shy. He didn't want to embarrass her. "You must be very beautiful," he amended. "The most beautiful girl on earth."

"I am," she sighed. "That's the trouble."

"You mean it is troubling to be—"

"Yes."

"But—why?"

"You see," she began. Then he heard her steps as she ran to the stove. "Just in time!" she gasped. Her lips and chin faced him again. "Aren't you hungry?" she asked.

"Starving," he said, sniffing the air.

"Let's eat, then I'll tell you."

"By the way," he said, unfolding his napkin and eager to get at the hash. "What is your name?"

"Venus," the lips grinned impudently.

"Really?" he stared in awe.

"Actually," she stopped smiling. "You see, daddy is an artist. When I was born, he said I had beautiful bones, someday I would be—you know, so he named me Venus." Then she smiled again. "My friends call me Vee."

HE ATE awhile in silence. "How did you do it?" he asked and dipped the fourth helping of hash.

"What?" she asked.

"How did you get this flavor with what I had?"

"Why it was simple. Just enough garlic and onions. A touch of celery salt, sage, oh, all of your herbs; then the gravy must be just brown enough and only so thick—"

"Will you marry me?" he leaned across the table. His head was giddy and light. The drink was still active, even after a whole night and day, but he might as well enjoy himself.

Her giggle was real and not the product of his imagination. Then her lips trembled again.

"I don't suppose I'll ever be able to get married," she said.

"Why?" he leaned forward. Might as well humor her.

"Dorgen won't let me."

"Dorgen? Who is he?" Trion wanted suddenly to see this Dorgen, he'd murder him—he'd—

"He—he's the spirit who is in love with me."

"The spirit—" he stared at her lips. "You mean there's a—a real spirit who—"

"Yes," simply. Then she sighed. "If I hadn't been so beautiful and if we hadn't gone on that world tour. That's where he saw me."

"We?"

"Mother and daddy."

"Where are they now?"

"They're at home of course."

"At home? I see. And where is that?"

"In Birmingham."

"But what are you doing here in New York?"

"Dorgen lets me be visible here sometimes, just to—to get my mail. But half of the time not long enough to buy food, and I was hungry—"

"But your people?"

"They think I'm trying to get work on TV. They send me money."

"Surely they're not fools."

"Of course not!" angrily.

"But it seems they would know that any producer would hire you the minute he saw you."

"They think I don't have talent."

"And they don't know about Dorgen?"

"Oh no. I was always visible to them. He didn't even show himself to me until I stayed on in New York."

"And now, he makes you invisible," soberly. "But isn't there any way to get away from him?"

"Not any that I know," sadly.

"How did you find me?"

"I was trying to hide from Dorgen. I was hungry, hadn't been able to buy food for days. I darted into this building—"

"You were invisible all of that time?"

"Yes."

"Completely?"

"Of course not! That's what made it so bad. He always lets part of me show."

"I can see his point."

"What do you mean?"

"If all of you is as beautiful as the parts I have seen—"

"Unfortunately, it is."

"Then he wants to marry you?"

"Oh no, I told you, he's a spirit."

"But what—"

"He's jealous. He doesn't want anyone else to have me. And he's so mean— If I were completely invisible—"

"You could take what you needed."

"Certainly not. That would be stealing."

"So you buy when you can?"

"Yes, but Dorgen— As I told you, I hadn't been out for a week, when I tried to buy anything—well, it was pretty awful. You know," she leaned forward. "You're the first person who has not had a fit when he saw part of me."

"I'd likely have one if I saw all of you," he remarked.

SHE blushed again, but her dimples showed, and her lips wore a complacent smile. Then they trembled again. She took a bite, chewed a minute and said. "I passed your door, smelled the soup you were making, and slipped in. You put entirely too much garlic in it," she said.

"I make very good soup," stubbornly.

"Too much garlic."

"You know," he was afraid he couldn't hold another bite, looked wistfully at the small amount of hash in the bowl, then leaned forward, "I forgot about the soup." He looked at the cabinet, saw the red pot very empty and very clean. "Did you eat all of it?"

"Every bite," she said.

"Then it couldn't have been so bad," triumphantly.

"I was starving," she dimpled.

He managed another bite. "By the way," he asked then. "Where is Dorgen now?"

Her dimples grew deeper. "He saw Jean Milliford down the street and left me to follow her."

"Jean Milliford?" he asked. "Boy, it would be too bad if he fell in love with her!"

Her lips made a thin line. "Why?" she asked. "Is she more important than I?"

"Of course not. But Wallflowers and Belles would likely fold."

"She has an understudy."

"Nobody could take Jean's part."

"I could," smugly.

"You mean—?"

"I saw her and thought maybe Dorgen—anyhow, I began to haunt the place; listened, found a copy of the play and learned her part. I can beat her too."

"How do you know?"

"I've seen it twenty times."

"Whew! How did you get tickets?"

"I don't need tickets," primly. "I just walk in when only my eyes or lips show."

"Doesn't anybody have a fit?"

"In that mob? Nobody has noticed yet."

"Wasn't that wrong?"

"Why—" the lips trembled. "I didn't think."

He patted her chin, then said, "And if Dorgen falls in love with Jean?"

"No chance of that," sadly.

"Why?"

"I'm prettier than Jean."

HE CHOKED, remembered her legs and eyes, looked at her chin and lips and nodded. "You know, I rather think you are," he said. He sipped his coffee thoughtfully. "If I could make Dorgen forget you, could I see all of you then?"

"Yes, he'd leave me alone if he didn't like me any more."

"A dirty trick to play on Jean."

"Maybe he'd forget her in a little while. Find someone else."

"Yes—he might if we tell her."

"Tell her what?"

"If I managed it, would you marry me?"

The lips were open. A bite of hash was almost inside, the hash lowered, the lips closed quickly then opened again and came across the table until they were near his. "Kiss me," she whispered.

Her body was firm and round and soft. Her lips—"Roger!" he gasped. "No wonder Dorgen—" He narrowed his eyes. "He loves you because you are the most beautiful girl in the world?" he asked.

"Yes. He won't look at anyone who has the slightest flaw."

"That's it then!" he snapped his finger. "He can see you when others can't?"

"Oh yes."

"Is he here now?"

"You'd know it if he were," bitterly. "He hasn't found me yet."

"But he will?"

"Of course. He always does. You see, he has helpers."

"Any of them around?"

"No."

"How would you look in a turban?"

"Pretty," she said regretfully. "I'd look pretty in anything."

He kissed her again and for awhile forgot what he had been saying. Then he remembered. "But, would you marry me," he asked.

"Of course." Her voice was sweeter than apple blossom honey.

"What color is your hair?" he asked wistfully.

"Black," she said.

"It would be, with those

eyes." He tried to picture her. "Jet black?" he asked.

"No, it sort of has red lights, makes it shine in the sun."

He rubbed his hand over her head. The hair was below her shoulders and as soft as milkweed down. He touched it lovingly, then said, "No girl, not even you could be pretty if she were baldheaded."

"Why hadn't I thought of that!" she gasped.

"You wouldn't have met me," smugly.

She gave him another kiss. "Where are your scissors?" she asked excitedly.

"Can you cut your own hair?"

"I will," grimly. "Shave it too. What kind of razor do you have?"

"Electric."

"Good."

HE WENT to his desk drawer, found the scissors and handed them to the air. A hand took them from him, he saw them raised high and heard the snip, snip, but saw nothing.

Her lips disappeared, then he heard a gasp in the bathroom. "I look awful," she wailed. "Perfectly terrible. You couldn't love me if you saw me. Nobody could."

"Sure?" he asked gleefully, then he smacked his lips silently, remembering the bacon, eggs and coffee: and the taste of that hash was still with him. Besides; with her eyes, lips and those legs—Well, what man would spend much time looking at her head? He heard his razor buzzing, then it stopped and her chin came into the room.

The door opened suddenly, then slammed angrily and a voice full of rage said, "What have you done to yourself?"

"What does it look like?" saucily.

"You—you—I never saw anything so hideous."

"Good," she said, but her voice trembled on a sob.

"He's welcome to you!" the angry voice said. "Or anyone else who would have you. I can't bear the sight of you now." The door slammed again.

Trion saw her legs first. They were more beautiful than he remembered. Then her body. The blue shorts fitted over an incredibly small waist. A shirt to match filled out in just the right places. Her arms and hands were perfect. Her throat, her whole face. There were those unbelievable eyes and a brow that should have inspired a hundred poets. And there, above all of that beauty, was a hideous, white dome; as bald and bare as a door knob. It was incredible, fantastic, horrible.

For the rest of his life, Trion was proud of the way he acted then. He walked over, took the

bald head in his hands, closed his eyes and kissed her.

"You couldn't want to marry me now," she sobbed.

"Of course I do," he kissed her again, but he kept his eyes shut. "Of course I do sweetheart." He opened his eyes a minute, but directly under them was that—that bare— Quickly, he closed them again.

"In—in spite of my head," tearfully.

"Your hair will grow, darling." He stared at the floor, turned her loose, then stooped. The soft, silky strands lay visible now. Shining ringlets, dark against the hardwood floor.

She took a handful and wept.

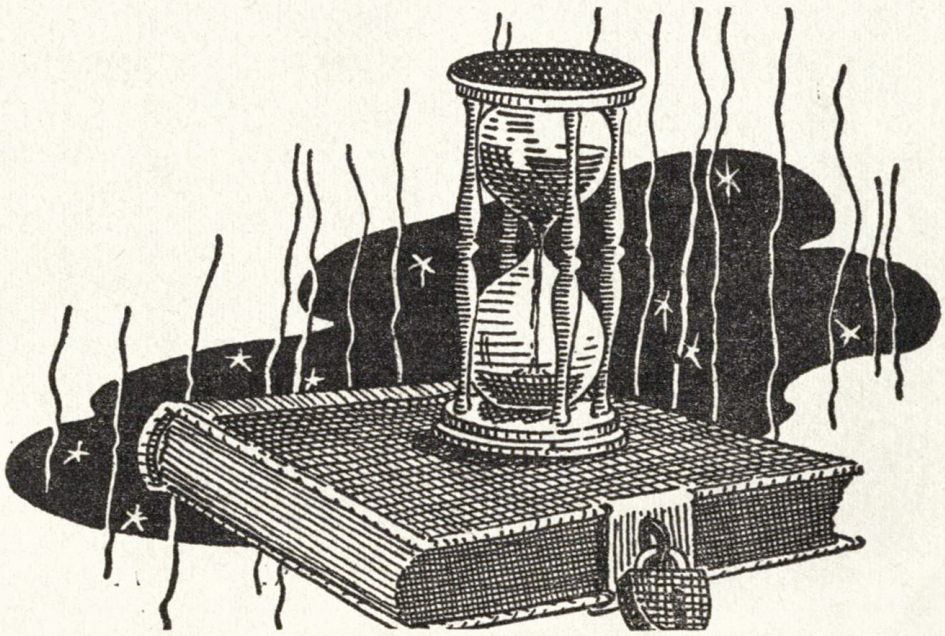
Trion went into his bedroom, searched until he found a blue silk scarf someone had given him for Christmas. "Here," he said gently. "Try this."

She took the silk and went into the bathroom. A few minutes later she came back looking like an Indian Princess.

"I love you, I love you!" he said fervently. She didn't seem to notice that he had not told her that before.

SHE even wore a veil for the wedding. One of those little caps of pearls with white tulle flowing all around. Trion was glad Dorgen couldn't see her then. She had picked her clothes carefully. The model was exactly her size; though not half so pretty, so no one thought it strange that she didn't try them on.

There had never been a better cook in the world. Trion was as happy as a man could be. There was only one small fly in his glass of champagne. Vee



must always wear a scarf or turban. His friends were beginning to wonder. They couldn't guess. But she even slept with it on her head.

Jean Milliford was suddenly ill, the paper said, and her understudy took her part.

Vee felt of her turban mournfully. "All of my study wasted," she said. "If I had my hair, I'd have gotten the part."

"Aren't you happy?" he asked.

"Of course, darling."

"Then forget about the stage."

"I might as well," she said. But her face was wistful.

Carefully, they wrote a letter to Jean. She'd get her mail of course, Dorgen would give her time for that.

Three days later she returned to the stage to play her part in a turban. Set a new style too. Everyone thought Vee very smart to be the first to wear one.

But Trion was a little tired of them. One afternoon he came in from work cross and worried. Things were not going so well at the office. But they always got better after a bad spell, and one of Vee's suppers would fix everything.

"I'm in the kitchen, darling," she called. But she didn't have to tell him, his nose did that. Dumplings bubbled on the stove, the smell of sage and onions; of dressing, roast turkey and gravy came from the oven. This *must* be an occasion. He tried to think. It wasn't her birthday or anything.

She was standing at the table. He lifted his eyes to her and they widened in delight. Why, he hadn't dreamed— Why no one on earth could be that beautiful!

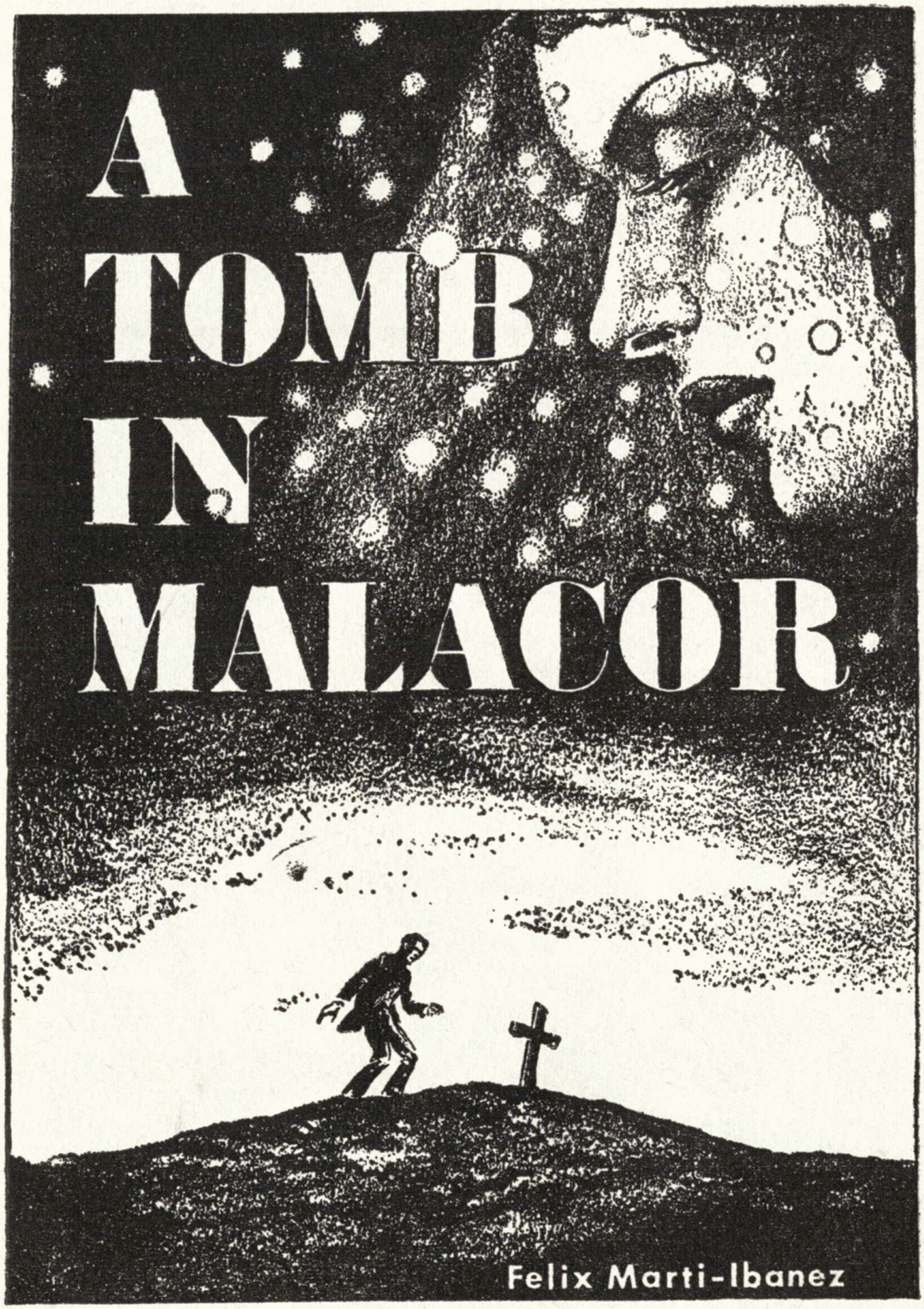
She wore blue, the perfect shade to set off her white skin and dark eyes. A white necklace and earrings made her beauty more startling: and, turban gone, she proudly lifted a head covered with shining, soft black ringlets. Little curls swirled about her cheeks and back to her neck in the most beautiful head of hair that he had ever seen with the most beautiful Italian haircut.

He started across the room with delight. Why this, this unearthly creature that he had married was too beautiful to be real. He stared in unbelieving rapture. Slowly, the hair, dress, lips and chin disappeared. Only her eyes, stricken, yet angry looked at him, then they filled and ran over as she whispered. "Oh no!" in tones of despair.

He continued to stare a minute, went slowly towards her, kissed her, felt her hair with his hands; then crossed into the living room went to his desk, found the scissors and brought them back to her.


MOON MIST
By VIRGIL FINLAY
MIST that creeps on the valley floor
Fingers the windows, tries the door,
Crawls on my threshold, gropes about—
And strong, stone walls won't keep it out!
It quiets all the forest things
And covers them with ghostly wings;
Dancing a shroud-like saraband
It makes a moon-path on the land.
Thick, in chimney and water spout,
It chokes the roaring hearth fire out;
The candles flicker and grow dark—
White fingers snuff the last faint spark.
Mist, on my face, is a skull-like grin
As the fire goes out and the Moon comes in!
Virg Finlay

I had never heard of anyone suddenly finding himself face to face with his own grave!



Heading by W. H. Silvey

THE town of Malacor is small and ugly, a cluster of hovels at the foot of high mountains. A short distance from the town there is an expanse where airplanes plying between Managua and Guatemala City occasionally land due to bad weather or some difficulty with the motor or to land men attached to the nearby silver mines. In my case, a storm brewing on the other side of the mountains forced us to land in Malacor, which immediately loomed in my mind like a curse of God burned into the granite forehead of the country.

It was five in the afternoon when our plane came down. A rickety station-wagon was waiting for us. Two or three men, their faces even more weather-beaten than their clothes, stood alongside the wagon. The landing of the plane, the only break in the monotony of their lives, excited no more interest among the personnel of the improvised airport than that implicit in their inquiries about letters or packages.

We climbed into the station-wagon and sat among bales of merchandise and luggage. The sky was a pale blue, but the clouds over the mountains were dyed crimson, as if the sun had been wounded by the sharp peaks and was bleeding. The hot breeze smelled of parched earth. The only humidity in the air was the acrid sweat exuded by the men around me. The whirr of the motor pestered me like a swarm of invisible bees. There was no conversation. A dense cloud of dust kept us company the entire way. In the distance, under the last rays of the sun, the plane looked like a silver arrow that had fallen to earth suddenly drained of its impetus. Mosquitoes started to annoy us. Frightened by the noise of the car, huge lizards scattered in all directions, reverberating under the sun like living emeralds.

The auto stopped right at the entrance to the town. Viewed from above, Malacor was a blackish triangle at the bottom of immense peaks, but from the ground and only a few feet away from it, it looked like some diabolic game of blocks of wood and stone scattered in the mud simply to show how sordid and wretched a human habitat can be.

THE men dispersed without good-byes or even a wave of the hand, as if the sun had dried up their very souls. Carrying my valise, I entered a house with windows of a color that was only a dim reminder of the original green. The cool dark interior smelled of bean stew.

A woman, whose flaccid obesity had withstood the burning suns and whose eyes shone like

metallic flies behind glasses blurred by perspiration, pointed to a greasy book.

"Alfonso de Castilloblanco, engineer," she read aloud over my shoulder as I registered. "Only until tomorrow, when the weather on the other side of the mountains improves?" she asked.

"That's what the pilot said," I answered. "We should be leaving early tomorrow morning. Have someone call me. And I would like something to eat tonight at about eight."

"Have you ever been to Malacor before?" the woman asked as we went up the stairs to my room.

"Many years ago," I answered. "Many years. Ten, as a matter of fact. Planes were not yet landing here. I only spent one night. I was on my way to the silver mines, where I had to make some reports. But it has not changed much."

We entered the room. Like the hall downstairs, it contained only the furniture strictly necessary for the most meager hospitality: an iron bed with an orange-colored spread, a chair, a hat-rack and a washstand with an empty jug alongside of it. The walls were a dirty gray and naked, except for a single nail, long and rusty, to which every guest must have turned with a look of fear and a sinister thought. There was a window looking out upon the back of the house. Beyond it one could see the end of the only street in town tracing an absurd semicircle, and then the naked plain. Further away there surged hills of a dark green sheltered by the shadows of the mountains, and on them floated a sheaf of sun filtrating through the tortuous peaks like a fiery sword of an avenging archangel. The town was connected to the hills by a serpentine path covered by lime dust.

"No, nothing has changed," the woman repeated, smoothing the bed cover. "I came here eight years ago with my poor husband, who died of dysentery. The town will never grow because the mines haven't grown. Nobody wants to stay any longer than they have to, either the length of their contracts or a few days between planes. As soon as the miners have enough money, they leave by mule or plane to look for work on the other side of the mountains. This town has been cursed by God."

A FLY, fat and lustrous, alighted on one of the dusty window panes and sparkled in the sun like a ruby. The woman crushed it indifferently with her dustcloth and then passed the cloth over the scarlet stain.

"A town cursed by God," she repeated softly.

"What can I do until supper time?" I asked her, horrified by the idea of remaining shut up in this room.

She shrugged her shoulders. "It depends on how tired you feel. If you want to wait a while, the little cafe at the end of the street will open and you can have something to drink there —if you don't mind the noise of the men who play cards. Otherwise, I can rent you a horse and you can take a ride to the hills and then come back in time for supper. There is grass there, and trees."

"I prefer the horse. Doesn't anyone live in the hills?"

"Live? No, nobody. But there's a cemetery there."

Half an hour later, after washing up a bit, I was jogging along on a horse as enormous as a small elephant and as pensive as a German philosopher. The horse knew the way and I didn't use the reins. With my eyes half-shut to protect myself against the sun which still burned though about to set, I gave myself over to my thoughts.

I was starting my longed-for vacation. A month of freedom to take inventory of my life and try to reorganize it. I am forty-five years old, I said to myself. I hold a good job with an oil company and I have a house and two servants. This month is mine to do with whatever I wish. And what I wish, what I have always wished, is to write. This frustrated desire has strangled me night and day. I haven't written a single line in my life aside from my professional reports, but I have always felt I had a great many things to say. If one can call oneself a musician simply because of a melody in one's heart, I can call myself the author of a thousand unwritten novels which, confused and inchoate, bubble inside of me like a brew fermented by witches.

IF I COULD live my life again, I would give up my arid work, the boring routine of professional duties, and live the unlived lives which at night assail me. For every night I am teased by the countless paths which my feet would have trod had they not followed the well marked-out line of my career. I am a writer who wrote his stories only in his dreams. Instead of collecting stars and clouds, flowers and tresses, silks and plumes with which to weave romantic tales, I have spent my life squaring the world with bridges and roads and setting the earth bristling with metallic wells. Instead of building with stories a path of dreams to heaven, I have connected heaven and

earth through oil wells, forcing the earth to spit its dirt into the blue of the sky.

As my horse slowed down at the foot of a hill, my thoughts came to a halt too. The path crawled like a reptile behind me. The limit of the sun's spread marked the beginning of the spot of green. The slope of the hill curved up to a moderate height; covered by low trees, it was an islet of damp greenness in the surrounding aridity.

I tied my horse to a tree and started to climb up a path carpeted by pale grass. It was a blessing to smell the wet earth and the grass, to touch soft stems and smooth tree trunks. When I got to the top, I stopped at the foot of some trees clustered together like assembled guards. Before me lay the cemetery.

It was a modest cemetery surrounded by a crude fence of stones; more than a cemetery it looked like a deserted little orchard divided up into small parcels. I counted six parcels—six graves, to judge by the wooden crosses which struck me as large crows in grotesque positions. The large sprawling stone on each grave looked like bodies fallen on the field of battle. At the far end of these little lots, separated by sort of ploughed furrows, there was one grave meticulously cared for. The earth was clean of weeds and pebbles. The wooden cross was painted white, its simplicity softened by a garland of withered yellow flowers, and it struck me as a dove poised for flight.

I drew nearer, picking my way through the graves on tiptoe. Next to the white cross was a smooth stone half-buried in the earth. The light of the setting sun suffused it all like a miracle. I kneeled before the stone to read the name. There was a birth-date which struck me as familiar, and another semi-effaced date, that of the death, which I could not quite make out. Over both dates was the name of the deceased: Alfonso de Castilloblanco. My name!

I don't think I felt any surprise or fear. I had never heard of anyone's finding himself suddenly face to face with his own grave. I began to rub the dust from the stone to make sure I had not been mistaken. But no! There it was. My name, my birthday, and the date of my death. I peered closer. The day was left blank, the month and year were specified. It was *this* month and *this* year.

I remember that I got up slowly, feeling that I was living through a nightmare. But the buzzing of the mosquitoes, the neighing of my horse at the foot of the hill, the sweat that rolled down my forehead into my eyes,

were my anchors to reality, a reality that had been ripped open by a grave in a forgotten country cemetery. The cemetery of Malacor, the town cursed by God.

I brushed the sweat off my forehead with my sleeve and sat down on a large stone facing the grave where my body lay at rest. Many minutes passed by. My brain seemed to have stopped functioning. It refused to provide any logical explanation for this strange event. But when darkness, advancing with bovine slowness over the blue of the sky, began to spread its ink-colored scarves over me, I rose, my heart contracted by something very much like fear, and then fell on my knees before the grave and began digging. A pointed stone, a penknife, a tree branch, all served as shovels. The earth was dry and hard. Several times it was spotted by little drops of blood from my hands, but I continued digging, deeper and deeper, until I should come face to face with what was buried there.

NIGHT fell over my shoulders like a thickly-tufted blanket. The birds stopped singing as if an invisible hand had shut off the switch of their trills. The air was turning cooler. In the distance, the lights of Malacor started to twinkle. Blindly, I continued digging. The ditch was already about three feet deep. I could not even see my hands, it was so dark, but I could not stop digging. When, I wondered, would the stone I was using hit against something? When would I be forced to light a match and face the nameless terror?

At that moment, a hand was placed on my shoulder.

I had no time for fright. In the light of a silvery prong hanging from the moon which had just appeared in the sky, I could see the outline of a woman with loose long hair.

"Don't look any further," she said softly. "It's not necessary. You're here and that's all that matters. I have been waiting for you a long time. I thought you wouldn't arrive in time. Get up and come with me. You are burning."

I got up and followed her. Paradoxically, all my fear had left me. It was as if the woman had the power to dispel all my horror. We advanced towards a clearing made by the moon. The stillness of the night was even greater than the calm of heaven. I saw the stippling of the fireflies around the trees. Gently she turned to me and taking my hot hands made me sit down at her side on a large flat stone. I could then see her deeply set black eyes. There was a moon-like

brilliance in them as she took out a little handkerchief and wiped the sweat off my forehead.

"Who are you?" I asked her.

"*You* ask me that, Alfonso? Have I changed so much in the last ten years?"

"Who are you?" I insisted.

"You couldn't have forgotten me or you would have found my grave next to yours."

I leapt up.

"Who are you?" I cried. "What does this mean? Why is my grave here? Who is buried in this grave?"

She got up too and taking me gently but firmly by the shoulders made me sit down again.

"Alfonso, look at me like you used to. Speak to me like you used to. I am Armandina."

I jumped up again. A memory flashed in my conscience, surging from some subconscious nook like the herald of an approaching storm.

"Armandina?"

"Don't you remember me?"

"Armandina?"

"You used to repeat my name three times before kissing me. Remember?"

She moved closer and I received the kiss like a sip of cool water. For a few minutes we were in each other's arms, the silence cut only by her sighs.

Armandina! I remembered her now, just as she had been ten years before, the only other time I had passed through Malacor.

QUICKLY I recalled the chief engineer of the silver mines, an elderly man in whose house I stopped for the night—only one night. I remembered a large white wooden house full of porcelain and china, lace curtians and silk cushions, all so incongruous in this desert. I recalled his wife, almost a child, as pale as a ghost, who struck me more as a submissive granddaughter than a loving mate. I remembered the long conversation about the mines with the engineer after dinner. And then he had gone to bed early because he suffered from rheumatic pains, and after a few commonplace words with his wife, who had been silent throughout the entire evening, I bade her good night and retired to my room. In my bedroom I had felt a great sadness, a great nostalgia for things I didn't dare name. Early next morning I left the house without seeing her, and never saw her again until now.

"Armandina," I said, "where is your house and your . . ."

"Where it used to be, higher up, on the other hill." My husband died two years ago. Now I'm alone with the old Indian woman who has always taken care of me like a mother. Every-

thing is the same, everything you liked so much that unforgettable night. The china on the wall, the ivory fans, the satin chairs, even the little music boxes and the piano where you made me sit so I could play a love sonata—you said—by letting the moon strike the keys instead of my fingers."

"Armandina, what have you done all these years?"

She looked at me, her eyes simple and serene.

"I thought of you," she answered, "and waited for you to return."

"How did you know I was here tonight?"

"I didn't know. I come every night to see the little piece of ground that holds so many memories for both of us. 'When I die,' you said, 'I want to be buried here with you.' And we died a little that night. I bring flowers here and I pray, and here I have waited for you all these years."

"But this stone? Who is buried here?"

A soft finger sealed my lips.

"Don't ask so many questions. I cannot answer you. Let it suffice that I was waiting for you. Your memory has given me strength all this time."

"Armandina, I hardly spoke to you that night. I said practically nothing."

"Alfonso, you did speak that night. Let me remind you. In our great lonely house, my husband and I lived like the wardens of an abandoned museum, not as husband and wife, but as grandfather and granddaughter. I loved him out of gratitude, but my life was a constant expectation. When you arrived that afternoon with the setting sun lighting up your red hair, adventure, love and happiness entered the house. I remember your resonant laughter putting to flight the sad shadows lurking in the corners. Dinner, which had always been sad and silent like a meal in a monastery refectory, became a merry banquet. You carved the meat as if you were carving some prize game which you yourself had just hunted down, and you drank the wine —'as red and warm as a hunter's blood,' you said.

"The dinner stirred what you called your pirate's blood. You talked, talked, talked! You traced tales of adventure in never-never lands where you had been. We relived with you flights through pathless forests, carpeted by the ermine of snows, visits to ruined towers where armed men watched coffers overflowing with jewels, canoe-rides through silent rivers where every wrinkle was smoothened by the silver iron of the moon. You spoke of dark houses on deserted beaches where you had played

at a magnificent hide-and-seek; swords were wielded in audacious combat and life itself was at stake. You spoke and it was a voice out of a picture-book discovered by children at the bottom of some forgotten trunk in a dusty garret. In the living room you took it into your head —an idea I have cherished ever since—to lift the tops of all the music boxes strewn about the room, and we were enveloped in a wave of sound that was meant to be heard only by angels, you said.

"THEN we went out for a stroll and when you held me by the waist, you said that it was like the stem of a rose, and that my breath was sweeter than the fragrance of imperial violets, and you kissed me on the lips under the moon which you said was as pink as the pink silver you sometimes found in your mines. As my hand passed over your leg and felt the scar which runs from your knee right down to the foot, you explained that you had a platinum bone in place of the one you had lost in an accident, and you said that even anatomy had its poetry, for the magic metal within your body was your nexus with the mysteries hidden in the entrails of the earth."

"Armandina, I am not the man you are speaking of. I scarcely spoke to you that night. I am only a commonplace engineer who can only speak about machines and knows only the smell of grease and oil and has listened only to the creak of cranes and pulleys and the bore of drills."

"Be still, Alfonso! Could I have lived all these years if it had not been for the memory of that night, and if I had not known you were coming back? On this very spot, where I found you tonight, I gave you my love ten years ago. I knew that not even the earth could hold you, that you would return to me."

"Armandina, I am confused. You must help me to find out what there is in that grave, and who put a date there . . ."

From the hill which loomed behind us like the shadow of a huge castle, a ringing call pierced the air. Armandina rose.

"That is Concha, my Indian nurse. She came here with me many times to bring flowers. I must explain to her before she sees you, so she won't be frightened. You'll wait for me here, won't you?"

"Armandina, I shall return to the hotel, pick up my things and then return to your house. I must clear all this up."

"Do what you like, my love. This path in front of us will lead you to my house. I'll be waiting for you."

I felt her lips on mine; then I saw her walk away and disappear along the path alive with fireflies.

THE slow trot of my horse returning to the lights of Malacor restored some sense of reality. I was as alive as the horse that was carrying me back to town. What had happened had been a nightmare without any possible explanation. A grave with my name and date of the present month and year, a spectral woman who said she remembered me—not the engineer who had been in her house for a few hours to talk business with her husband, but rather a bold adventurer, gay and romantic, who had carried away in his knapsack an unprecedented night of love, and who had left behind him such sentimental seed that ten years later he was still being expected with a carpet of memories rolled out for his coming. I would have liked it to have happened, but it had *not* happened, unfortunately. That woman, the lovely Armandina, was either confused or mad. The discovery of the grave in which some stranger lay no doubt, was certainly madness. I resolved to return and complete the task which she had interrupted, so I could find out who it was that was occupying my grave.

The luminous points in the distance changed into little moons, little frames of yellow light, and finally into windows. My horse, already smelling his feed, instinctively hastened his trot and the dark houses seemed to be coming towards us. With the lights came the noise of voices and gramophone music from the cafe. When I got to the back door of the inn, I left my horse in the hands of an Indian boy and, feeling no desire to go up to my room, and certainly no inclination to face a talkative innkeeper, I walked toward the town bar.

It was already ten o'clock and the main street was in darkness, cut at times by a chink of light from a half-open door. The few people in the street walked slowly as if the heaviness of the air, clinging to their clothes, forbade any speed. From the houses came the aroma of beans and meat stew. The odor of cheap wine warned me that I was approaching the tavern.

It was a sort of cave lighted by candles. Customers were standing at a zinc counter or sitting at wooden tables, surrounded by a fog of smoke only less dense than the music which spread out thickly from a loudspeaker. There was the noise of dominoes, the smell of spiced sausage and alcohol, and grotesque shadows dancing on the walls.

I SAT down at the table nearest the door so I would not choke in that atmosphere, and ordered bread, sausage, and wine from the hirsute, moon-faced mestizo who approached me. The odor of human flesh, bittersweet perspiration, sticky clothes, was sickening. But I was among real human beings and I needed them to dispel the sense of unreality which oppressed me. In this atmosphere the events of a couple of hours earlier made no sense. The sausage bit my tongue, the bitter bread and strong, thick wine afforded me the warmth so necessary to my spirit befogged by thoughts of graves and ghosts.

I tried to think of nothing, to blend into the atmosphere, to become part of the noise, the odors and the sharp flavors. A hoarse but respectful voice broke into my meditations.

"Would the gentleman like to buy us a drink?"

The breath of my interlocutor was as unbearable as hot furious fumes escaping from a barrel of whiskey too long corked. With him were two half-breeds who, from their boots and belts, were obviously muleteers; their clothes were mended but relatively clean, and they wore a profusion of silver ornaments so dear to the half-breed. The fellow who had spoken to me had small brilliant eyes like mustard seeds. The other one was a very young Indian so emaciated that his skeleton seemed to be trying to break through the skin of his face. The third was a half-breed with a silvery shock of hair under which was a great impassive face as if fashioned from basalt. His lips were invisible and his eyes held the bland softness of the hardened drinker.

They were leaning on one another and were so stupendously drunk that it was a miracle they could even stand. Well acquainted with the customs of these places and wishing to avoid a scene, I nodded my head in acquiescence. The tavern-keeper, who seemed to be waiting for a signal, immediately placed on my table a bottle of brandy and three glasses, which they filled to the brim without spilling a drop and gulped down to my health in a couple of swigs. Then they made themselves comfortable at my table. I decided to finish my meal and leave the place.

VAGUELY I listened to them talk of their horses, the travelers they had guided, the brandy they had drunk. The words came out of their mouths like explosive bubbles of sound, and with them a hot effluvium of burning alcohol. But in a few minutes the man who had approached me and who was proposing one

toast after another in my honor —enthusiastically seconded by his friends—changed his tune.

"To the health," he said, "of the best horse-guide in these mountains. To Simon—" turning to the half-breed with the silver hair—"and damn all the automobiles that wait for the planes to land! May Simon's horses again bear travelers to and from the mines like they did twenty years ago."

For the second time that night a distant bell rang familiarly in my mind. An Indian guide who for twenty years had been taking travelers to the mines. I looked at him attentively. Behind the golden down which years and alcohol had put on his face, I recognized him immediately.

"Simon," I cried, "do you remember me? You took me to the silver mines at Los Pozos one early morning ten years ago. Do you remember?"

The half-breed held his glass suspended half way to his mouth, as if he had just been told he was going to be photographed. His eyes tried unsuccessfully to focus on me. He shook his head slowly.

"I don't remember, señor, I don't remember."

But he had to remember! It was of the utmost importance to me. Because one morning ten years ago, a half-breed by the name of Simon had picked me up at the chief engineer's house on the hill and had taken me on horseback to the mines. It was the day after we had had, according to Armandina, our night of love. And my only chance of disentangling this mystery was for someone to remember my first stay in Malacor.

The Indian who had first spoken to me took the other young Indian's hand as gently as if it were a lamb.

"The gentleman wants to talk with Simon. Let's leave them alone a while." And bowing ceremoniously, with one hand he took the half-empty bottle of brandy and with the other led the cadaverous boy to another table.

"Simon," I said, signaling the tavern-keeper to bring more liquor, "you must remember me. You have guided many travelers, I know, but you took me to Los Pozos from the great big white house on the hill. We were together for several hours. You spoke to me all during the trip of this place and of the people you knew."

Simon tried unsuccessfully to light a cigarette but ended by picking splinters of tobacco up from the table wet with liquor and chewing them slowly as if they were crumbs of bread and he a hungry bird.

"I do not recall, señor," he insisted. "But I remember an-

other fellow-countryman of yours, an engineer who passed through here and went with me to the mines."

"I'm not interested in anyone else, only myself. Do you remember me and what we said that day?"

"No, señor. You are very serious and these days Simon is like you, but once upon a time Simon was young and gay and that other gentleman was gay, too and sang all during the trip."

He drank another glass of liquor and looked fixedly at me, as if my face were a telescope through which he could see far back into the past.

"That man was the happiest I have ever known. I met him at the house on the hill, where the widow of the chief engineer still lives. They say she's not all there in the head.

"That lady kissed the gentleman good-bye right there, behind her husband's back, and we started out, and the gentleman was as happy as a spring morning. What things he said and what songs he knew! For the first time I enjoyed my work. He took out of his knapsack a bag of red wine and as he poured it, it shone in the sun like rubies. Anyway, that's what he said, and I still remember it. We trotted along for a while and then we started to gallop and he kept on joking and laughing and waking up the mountains with his songs. He was as dark as rye bread, and told me more stories about these mountains than I ever got from my father. We came across several other travelers on the road, and they all joined us as soon as he spoke to them, and he joked with them and his laughter sounded like the water that falls down from among high rocks. Finally we arrived at the small inn half way to Los Pozos."

"Yes, Simon, I remember that. It was still early in the morning. The woman who owned it came out with her little daughter who must have been about seven or eight, and the little girl set the table."

"I remember that, señor. But the only time I ever stopped at the inn with anyone in the morning was with that other gentleman whom I never saw again."

"Simon, try to remember me. Tell me about the inn."

"THE gentleman began joking with the woman of the inn. At that time La Richola was a handsome merry woman. The gentleman said many things to her, and they laughed a great deal and they became very gay, so much so that I had to take her little girl for a walk in the garden and leave them alone. When I got back, she was preparing a bouquet of roses to put

on the saddle of his horse, and they were both beaming like two polished copper jugs."

"Simon, I was with you, but nothing like that happened. You took the girl out for a walk because her mother, who was pretty but sad, wanted to ask something of me."

"Señor, how can you remember when I am talking about someone else?"

He rose with the supreme caution of a man who is drunk.

"Simon, sit down! Tell me, how does one get to that inn?"

"The same way as always. But it is in ruins and nobody ever stops there now. The woman is ill, but her daughter is very pretty."

"Simon, I want you to take me there tonight. I want you to remember me and tell me why you say I did all those things I did not do."

"I did not say you did them. I am talking about someone else."

"You are talking about me, but you don't remember."

"Señor, with all due respect, I say you do not remember perhaps what you did."

I made up my mind immediately. I had to solve the mystery that surrounded me. I had to discover the identity of the man who had been living the life I had always wanted to live and had lived only in my dreams.

I REMEMBERED my trip with Simon very well. Hours of riding under a leaden sun, toasting in the furnace of the desert like two overbaked loaves of bread, and the arrival at the inn, a solitary place in the midst of countryside as flayed as the flesh of a martyr. The hut had been surrounded by an unhappy little orchard with underbrush instead of vegetables, and squalid hens scurried about like caricatures of themselves. The roof was of straw and mud. The door was like a somber mouth. There were two small windows, one with a shade, the other without, like a pirate's face with a patch over one eye. Inside, there was the clean poverty of the mountain Indian, with mud pots holding dying cactus, an empty cupboard, a religious picture so faded it looked like a gilt frame holding a piece of yellow paper, matweed stools, and woven fiber mats which lent the only spots of color.

A little girl had clutched at the skirts of a young, loquacious woman with sensuous eyes and a red mouth. I talked with the woman for some time. She wanted to know if I could talk her husband, who was working in the mines, into coming back to her as the house was lonely without a man. I remembered having noticed how fresh and luscious the woman was I remem-

bered chatting with her timidly, when all the while I wanted to tell her that in that desert she was like a fragrant apple. I remembered nothing like what the Indian guide was now telling me. It was once more the strange story of things attributed to me by others, things I knew I had never done.

THE following hours were like a nightmare. I had to pull Simon out of the tavern to saddle two horses for us. Guided by a drunken Indian and a handful of memories as vague as the sails of a distant boat on a foggy morning, I undertook the trip to the inn. At first Simon continued telling me about the things that I—or, according to him, someone else—had done and said that morning ten years ago. When I insisted that I was the man but that I had done none of the things he ascribed to me, he looked at me with turbid eyes and sat up straight on his horse.

"The señor thinks, then, that I am drunk."

From that moment on he shut himself up in that tremendous dignity which only the Indian can adopt.

As the horses trotted under a sky peopled by flocks of stars coming to visit a moon of fine silver, we continued our trip without saying another word. The desert seemed to be dead. Any noises around us were lost in the echo of the horse's hoofs. From time to time we spurred the horses on and sped among clouds of dust. Occasionally a fire flared up in the distance. Now and then a flash of lightning accentuated the bleakness of the landscape. It was like the wasteland of ash and sand we read about in prayer books. Suddenly we caught sight of the outline of a house in the distance, its center shining with light like the end of a lighted cigar.

"La Richola's inn," announced Simon, breaking his silence.

We dismounted in front of the place. Our horses neighed and dogs howled. Over us the moon was wrapped in clouds spotted by ink, like a pale widow hidden by black veils.

When we knocked, a woman's voice answered. Simon identified us. More dogs were howling—this time, inside the house. A rifle appeared through the window, and then a pale face and white shining teeth. Finally the bolts were unlatched, the door opened and we stepped in. The little trembling flame of a candle illuminated the face of a girl as fresh as an apricot in May. Her wide, humid eyes were blacker than the night which we had left outside, and her skin had that golden sheen which changes

every half-breed woman into an Inca queen.

I explained that we wanted to get to the silver mines of Los Pozos early in the morning and we had to have some refreshment to help us on our journey.

THE girl smiled, showed us to a table, lighted two more candles, and disappeared into the kitchen at the end of the room. Shortly after she came out with bottles of wine, bread, goat's cheese, and dried fruit, which she placed before us silently. Every time she approached me I could smell her skin, fresh and sweet like that of an infant. When we were already eating and drinking, another door opened and there entered a woman clothed in a brilliantly colored poncho.

I recognized her immediately. Ten years had clothed La Richola's face in fat and surrounded her eyes with purple-colored rings, but there was the same black hair, the luscious mouth, the charming gesture of the half-woman half-child.

She greeted us vaguely and sat down in a chair near the stove, facing us, like one of those mud figures in the Christmas mangers that children make. Close behind her stood her daughter.

Time seemed to have stopped in the hut. One could hear even the noise of a restless mouse on the roof of the house.

"I know you, Richola," I said to her finally. "We met ten years ago right here. I was on my way to the mines. This lovely girl was only a child, and you told me about your husband who was working in the mines."

"He ran away with an Indian girl eight years ago and never came back," she replied somberly.

"I'm so sorry." And after a pause, "But you must remember me."

"Many travelers passed by here. My husband was a traveler, too. That is why I try to remember none of them. You hear? None."

She paused and drew her poncho closer. "My eyes are very bad," she continued. "They have been getting worse all the time, so that even if I wanted to, I could not recognize anyone. And for me voices are only sounds from another world to which I no longer belong. But I do remember one traveler—he was such a fine man and showed me how good it was to be a woman."

"Who was he?"

"Alfonso de Castilloblanco," she answered, and the sound of my name in that house was like a strident ringing of a bell at midnight that awakens echoes of terror in a country house. "A

good-looking man, greatly traveled and very gallant. He was on his way to the silver mines, where he said he had some work to do and a gift to get for the woman of his dreams. But he bestowed his gallantry on this house for a few hours. His presence changed it from a sad place to the inside of a bell. He spoke words to me sweeter than the honey of bees, and his strong hands took mine and placed them on his heart so I could hear how my beauty made the heart of a man beat more strongly. He promised me nothing. He did nothing more than make me feel like a woman, which I had forgotten in my sorrow. He gave me back my confidence in myself.

"Before he left he picked all the flowers we had in the little mud pots and made me a crown and told me that whenever I looked out and saw only the desert land whipped by the wind which winnows the ashes, I should look within myself and I would see only light. Perhaps he foresaw that the light of the outside world would leave me, and he wanted with his words to cut an opening in the dark curtain which overlay my heart."

"Here," said the girl, "mama keeps the gentleman's pipe and what is left of the crown of flowers."

SHE took out of a box an old pipe which I recognized immediately. I had lost it during my trip to Malacor ten years before.

"You must remember me," I said to the girl. "You were here too."

"Señor, I can't remember you, but I know that my mother has always remembered that gentleman. It can't be you, or she would know you."

"Señor," La Richola said, "Alfonso de Castilloblanco spent only a few hours in this house many years ago, but I shall never forget him."

The rest of the trip was uneventful. Simon shut himself up again in silence. As the journey dissipated the effects of the alcohol, he must have begun to suspect that he was in the company of some lunatic. We rode along the dreary plains towards the mines. What I expected to find there I myself didn't know. I was seeking to recover my peace of mind shaken by this journey through time. I was trying to retrace the footsteps of the man I had always wanted to be and never was, except, it appeared, for these people. I had to find someone who had seen me during my first visit to the mines and would recognize me. Clutching the reins of my horse, struggling against the drowsiness which was forcing my eye-

lids together, I endeavored to penetrate the obscurities of the past.

My stay in Malacor ten years before had been for one night only. The next day I had proceeded to the mines. There I had spoken with an engineer about some machinery and then the guide and I had returned on horseback to the village, for I was eager to leave this unattractive country. But I remembered that I had spoken with other people at the mine, and I particularly remembered an old man whom they called the Guardian because he had been at the mines from time immemorial. I remembered his long silver beard and his sun-burned bald head. He was sparing in gesture and word, and as strong as a bull.

I remembered having presented him with a hunting knife for his services during the day and having taken friendly leave of him. Perhaps, because such an oak cannot die, he was still at the mine and would remember me. Maybe then I would solve the mystery of the life I had not lived but that others had lived with me.

AS WE rounded a hill, there spread out before us like a timorous fan the last plain right before the mines. Instead of the row of flaming bonfires which I expected, I only saw the blinking of two or three small ones. We spurred the horses and plunged into the night. As we reached the fires, there rose from the shadows several figures enveloped in ponchos with faces blackened by the night and teeth that shone sinister in the darkness. Men's voices were heard and the barking of dogs. Someone drew near and held the horses by the bridle while we dismounted. The other men returned to the warmth of the fires. The wind carried in waves the noble pungent odor of fresh manure.

The peon holding our horses informed me that work at the mines had been suspended for several days now. There had been a violent disagreement between the owners and the peons, resulting in fights and even bloodshed. Most of the laborers had left the mine to look for work on the other side of the mountains. Only about a dozen remained; they were still hopeful of coming to some agreement with the owners.

I decided to wait for dawn and sat down near one of the fires, while Simon wrapped himself into a poncho and fell asleep immediately. Shortly afterward I must have fallen asleep also, with my coat over half my face and a star blinking through my rumpled hair.

The light of dawn woke me

up. I felt immediately that someone was staring at me and I sat up sharply. A dark red bald pate stood out in the gray light and a long silver beard stirred softly in the early morning breeze. It was Asensio, the old guardian of the mines.

The nearby hills stood out behind him black and angry against the sky of a cold blue. The crow of a cock was nostalgic, but soon yielded to the first yelp of the hungry dogs. I looked at the guardian of the mines, who this morning was the same as he had been ten years earlier and would be ten years from now, his mouth set and cryptic, his eyes full of fire. In the sky, a young blond sun was rising like a page-boy in a fairy-tale.

"Do you remember my visit to these mines ten years ago?" I asked the old man. "I am Alfonso de Castilloblanco. Do you remember me? The engineer with the metal leg-bone."

THE old man had taken out his pipe and was stuffing it with tobacco. When the first cloud of smoke rose to join the youngest cloud in the sky, he looked at me with extraordinarily youthful eyes.

"I am too old to remember anything," he answered. "I have seen many people. Today, yesterday, tomorrow? That is not important. In my life, past, present and future are simply different surfaces of the same reality. The present viewed from yesterday was a tomorrow; today seen from tomorrow will be a yesterday; and yesterday arrived at a time that was a today. Time does not exist; those who live in time don't exist either. We live only when we learn to live not in time or space, but in ourselves."

"All that is very interesting," I interrupted him impatiently. "But I want to find out about myself, about my life. Please try to understand! Do you remember when I came to this camp? About ten years ago I spent half a day here with another engineer. You took care of me and I gave you a knife. You *must* remember!"

Something in my voice broke through his indifference. He looked at me attentively as if trying to decide what to tell me.

"Don Alfonso de Castilloblanco," he said, "you came here with some blueprints in your hands and a sparrow's song in your heart. When you were with the white men who had pistols in their belts and large sheets in their hands, you spoke of things I did not understand, but later you sat down next to me and spoke about things which I have never forgotten. You told me about a pale little girl like a May moon who was waiting for you on top of a hill in a clear-

ing of the woods. You asked me what you should bring her as a souvenir and I told you to bring her a silver pin which I myself had fashioned. A simple pin with two hearts, one for her to wear on her blouse and the other for you to carry in your key-ring. Both hearts together made one complete heart. Separate, they were incomplete.

"You took the pin and you were delighted, but when they called you back to the mine, you dropped one of the hearts—yours. When I found it you had already left. I had to go to Malacor and personally bring her the silver heart which belonged to you so she might return it to you, because I was sure you would turn up to claim it."

"Then you recognize me?"

He shook his head.

"I don't recognize anything but memories. But if you wish to bring her the heart which belongs to her, you should do it before it is too late."

"But I have no heart."

SLOWLY he took my key-chain, on which I had collected little charms for years.

"Here it is," he said.

I seized the small indented heart and it seemed to me that the cold silver was throbbing in my closed fist.

"And yet you keep saying that you don't know me, that I am not the same Alfonso de Castilloblanco who came here ten years ago?"

"I did not say that, señor. My memory is very bad. I only said that you look like too well-balanced a man to feel such a passionate love, and that the man with whom I spoke ten years ago was a man very much in love. But take the heart and return it to the woman to whom it belongs."

He got up slowly, as if ten thousand years of wisdom bore him down, and walked away towards one of the fires.

The other peons began to get up. Dawn was setting a pink rouge on their unshaven faces still creased by sleep. The remains of the fires were like smudges made on the ground by the foot of a naughty impatient child. The line on the horizon was soaked in crimson and the air began to be streaked by the flight of the first birds, black and swift.

Only then did I see, at a short distance from the camp, an improvised airport where a small plane was beginning to sparkle in the sun.

"Whose is that plane?" I asked a peon.

"It belongs to the engineer in charge," he answered. "He's coming back from the other camp soon."

The engineer arrived an hour

later, a young man with a thick beard as black against the pink of his skin as the feathers of a chicken after singeing. I explained that I had come to the mine in search of a friend, and that I had to return to Malacor where I was to continue by plane.

"That's just the excuse I need," he said, "to get away from this camp for a couple of hours. If you wish I can take you to Malacor and once there I can decide whether I want to return to this hole or not."

A few minutes later the engineer, Simon, and I, got into the plane. It was a magnificent morning. The sun was sliding over a jubilant sky like a yellow balloon that had escaped from a child's hands.

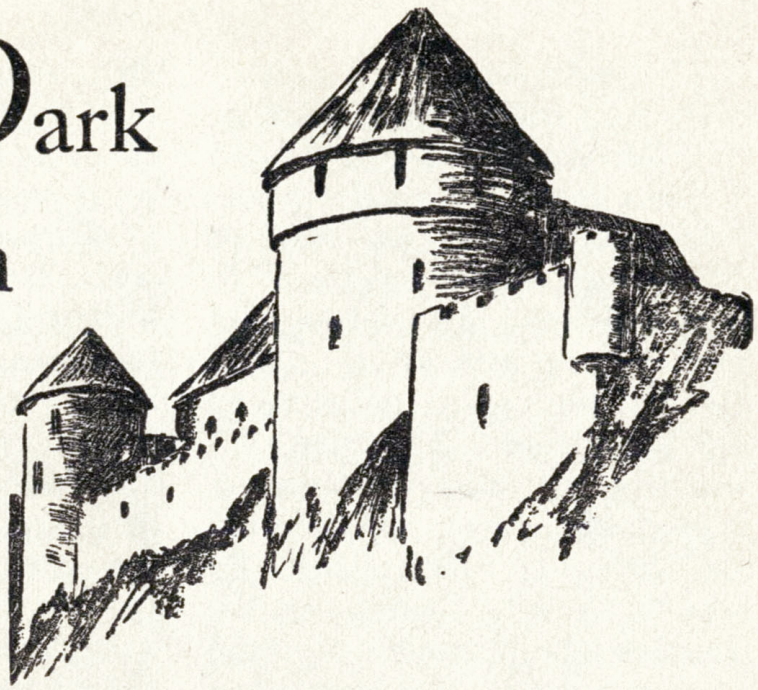
THE plane took off as easily as a butterfly. From my pocket I took the silver heart I was going to return to Armandina. I looked down and caught sight of the guardian of the mine leaning against a rock, looking up. I had not been able to find him before I left. He had probably avoided me.

It was too late now to retrace the steps of my life and solve the mystery. Some understudy must have lived my life for me, doing the things I had dreamed of doing, filling with love, happiness and adventure the places through which I had passed. Had he died and was he now buried in the grave I had discovered? What was the mystery of the grave, of my grave? I seemed to hear Armandina's voice: "The grave is empty, waiting . . ."

I shivered and turned my collar up, as if by protecting myself from the cold I was denying the grave. I knew that Armandina was waiting for me. In the town cursed by God, in Malacor, I had long had an appointment with love and I was finally going to keep it.

The plane begins circling about in preparation for landing. I can see the wretched hovels of Malacor, and there is the hill crowned by the great big white house, and then a smaller hill with its cemetery. But what is happening? The motor is coughing and panting, snorting and roaring like a wounded beast. The pilot's face is livid. Simon's remains impassive. We make a hundred grotesque pirouettes in the air like the acrobatics of a bad circus performer. Then the motor stops and fire flames up behind us and envelopes the plane. The blue whirls around us dizzily as we hurtle down, down towards the hill where Armandina waits beside the grave bearing a stone that announces my death. . . . . .

The Dark Man



BY ROBERT E. HOWARD

"For this is the night of the drawing of swords,
And the painted tower of the heathen hordes
Leans to our hammers, fires and cords,
Leans a little and falls."
—Chesterton.

A BITING wind drifted the snow as it fell. The surf snarled along the rugged shore and farther out the long leaden combers moaned ceaselessly. Through the gray dawn that was stealing over the coast of Connacht a fisherman came trudging, a man rugged as the land that bore him. His feet were wrapped in rough cured leather; a single garment of deerskin scantily outlined his body. He wore no other clothing. As he strode stolidly along the shore, as heedless of the bitter cold as if he were the shaggy beast he appeared at first glance, he halted. Another man loomed up out of the veil of falling snow and drifting sea-mist. Turlogh Dubh stood before him.

Before the black fury of the Celt, the berserk rage of the Viking pales.

This man was nearly a head taller than the stocky fisherman, and he had the bearing of a fighting man. No single glance would suffice, but any man or woman whose eyes fell on Turlogh Dubh would look long. Six feet and one inch he stood, and the first impression of slimness faded on closer inspection. He was big but trimly molded; a magnificent sweep of shoulder and depth of chest. Rangy he was, but compact, combining the strength of a bull with the lithe quickness of a panther. The slightest movement he made showed that steel-trap coordination that makes the super-fighter. Turlogh Dubh—Black Turlogh, once of the Clan na O'Brien.* And black he was as to hair, and dark of complexion. From under heavy black brows gleamed eyes of a heavy volcanic blue. And in his clean-shaven face there was something of the somberness of dark mountains, of the ocean at midnight. Like the fisherman, he was a part of this fierce land.

On his head he wore plain vizorless helmet without crest or symbol. From neck to mid-thigh he was protected by a close-fitting shirt of black chain mail. The kilt he wore below his armor and which reached to his knees was of plain drab material. His legs were wrapped with hard leather that might turn a sword edge, and the shoes on his feet were worn with much traveling.

A broad belt encircled his lean waist, holding a long dirk in a leather sheath. On his left arm he carried a small round shield of hide-covered wood, hard as iron, braced and reinforced with steel, and having a short, heavy spike in the center. An ax hung from his right wrist, and it was to this feature that the fisherman's eyes wandered. The weapon with its three-foot handle and graceful lines looked slim and light when the fisherman mentally compared it to the great axes carried by the Norsemen. Yet scarcely three years had passed, as the fisherman knew, since such axes as these had shattered the northern hosts into red defeat and broken the pagan power, forever.

THERE was individuality about the ax, as about its owner. It was not like any other the fisherman had ever seen. Single-edged it was, with a short three-edged spike on the back and another on the top of the head. Like the wielder, it was heavier than it looked. With its slightly curved shaft and the graceful artistry of the blade, it looked like the weapon of an expert—swift, lethal, deadly, cobra-like. The head was of finest Irish workmanship, which

*To avoid confusion I have used the modern terms for places and clans.—The author.

meant, at that day, the finest in the world. The handle, cut from the head of a century-old oak, specially firehardened and braced with steel, was as unbreakable as an iron bar.

"Who are you?" asked the fisherman, with the bluntness of the west.

"Who are you to ask?" answered the other.

The fisherman's eyes roved to the single ornament the warrior wore—a heavy golden armlet on his left arm.

"Clean-shaven and close-cropped in the Norman fashion," he muttered. "And dark—you'd be Black Turlogh, the outcast of Clan na O'Brien. You range far; I heard of you last in the Wicklow hills preying off the O'Reillys and the Oestmen alike."

"A man must eat, outcast or not," growled the Dalcassian.

The fisherman shrugged his shoulders. A masterless man—it was a hard road. In those days of clans, when a man's own kin cast him out he became a son of Ishmael with a vengeance. All men's hands were against him. The fisherman had heard of Turlogh Dubh—a strange, bitter man, a terrible warrior and a crafty strategist, but one whom sudden bursts of strange madness made a marked man, even in that land and age of madmen.

"It's a bitter day," said the fisherman, apropos of nothing.

Turlogh stared somberly at his tangled beard and wild matted hair. "Have you a boat?"

THE other nodded toward a small sheltered cove where lay snugly anchored a trim craft built with the skill of a hundred generations of men who had torn their livelihood from the stubborn sea.

"It scarce looks sea-worthy," said Turlogh.

"Seaworthy? You who were born and bred on the western coast should know better. I've sailed her alone to Drumcliff Bay and back, and all the devils in the wind ripping at her."

"You can't take fish in such a sea."

"Do ye think it's only you chiefs that take sport in risking your hides? By the saints, I've sailed to Ballinskellings in a storm—and back too—just for the fun of the thing."

"Good enough," said Turlogh. "I'll take your boat."

"Ye'll take the devil! What kind of talk is this? If you want to leave Erin, go to Dublin and take the ship with your Dane friends."

A black scowl made Turlogh's face a mask of menace. "Men have died for less than that."

"Did you not intrigue with the Danes? And is that not why your clan drove you out to starve in the heather?"

"The jealousy of a cousin and the spite of a woman," growled Turlogh. "Lies—all lies. But enough. Have you seen a long serpent beating up from the south in the last few days?"

"Aye—three days ago we sighted a dragon-beaked galley before the scud. But she didn't put in—faith, the pirates get naught from the Western fishers but hard blows."

"That would be Thorfel the Fair," muttered Turlogh, swaying his ax by its wrist-strap. "I knew it."

"There has been a ship-harrying in the south?"

"A band of reavers fell by night on the castle on Kilbaha. There was a sword-quenching—and the pirates took Moira, daughter of Murtaugh, a chief of the Dalcassians."

"I've heard of her," muttered the fisherman. "There'll be a wetting of swords in the south—a red sea-plowing, eh, my black jewel?"

"Her brother Dermod lies helpless from a sword-cut in the foot. The lands of her clan are harried by the MacMurroughs in the east and the O'Conners in the north. Not many men can be spared from the defense of the tribe, even to seek for Moira—the clan is fighting for its life. All Erin is rocking under the Dalcassian throne since great Brian fell. Even so, Cormac O'Brien has taken ship to hunt down her ravishers—but he follows the trail of a wild goose, for it is thought the riders were Danes from Coninbeg. Well, we outcasts have ways of knowledge—it was Thorfel the Fair who holds the Isle of Slyne, that the Norse call Helni, in the Hebrides. There he has taken her—there I follow him. Lend me your boat."

"You are mad!" cried the fisherman sharply. "What are you saying. From Connacht to the Hebrides in an open boat? In this weather? I say you are mad."

"I will essay it," answered Turlogh absently. "Will you lend me your boat?"

"No."

"I might slay you and take it," said Turlogh.

"You might," returned the fisherman stolidly.

"You crawling swine," snarled the outlaw in swift passion, "a princess of Erin languishes in grip of a red-bearded reaver of the north and you haggle like a Saxon."

"Man, I must live!" cried the fisherman as passionately. "Take my boat and I shall starve! When can I get another like it? It is the cream of its kind!"

TURLOGH reached for the armlet on his left arm. "I will pay you. Here is a torc that Brian Boru put on my arm with

his own hand before Clontarf. Take it; it would buy a hundred boats. I have starved with it on my arm, but now the need is desperate."

But the fisherman shook his head, the strange illogic of the Gael burning in his eyes. "No! My hut is no place for a torc that King Brian's hands have touched. Keep it—and take the boat, in the name of the saints, if it means that much to you."

"You shall have it back when I return," promised Turlogh, "and mayhap a golden chain that now decks the bull neck of some northern reaver."

THE day was sad and leaden. The wind moaned and the everlasting monotone of the sea was like the sorrow that is born in the heart of man. The fisherman stood on the rocks and watched the frail craft glide and twist serpent-like among the rocks until the blast of the open sea caught it and tossed it like a feather. The wind caught sail and the slim boat leaped and staggered, then righted herself and raced before the gale, dwindling until it was but a dancing speck in the eyes of the watcher. And then a flurry of snow hid it from sight.

Turlogh realized something of the madness of his pilgrimage. But he was bred to hardships and peril. Cold and ice and driving sleet that would have frozen a weaker man, only spurred him to greater efforts. He was as hard and supple as a wolf. Among a race of men whose hardiness astounded even the toughest Norsemen, Turlogh Dubh stood out alone. At birth he had been tossed into a snowdrift to test his right to survive. His childhood and boyhood had been spent on the mountains, coasts and moors of the west. Until manhood he had never worn woven cloth upon his body; a wolfskin had formed the apparel of this son of a Dalcassian chief. Before his outlawry he could out-tire a horse, running all day long beside it. He had never wearied at swimming. Now, since the intrigues of jealous clansmen had driven him into the wastelands and the life of the wolf, his ruggedness was such as cannot be conceived by a civilized man.

The snow ceased, the weather cleared, the wind held. Turlogh necessarily hugged the coastline, avoiding the reefs against which it seemed again and again he would be dashed. With tiller, sail and oar he worked tirelessly. Not one man out of a thousand of seafarers could have accomplished it, but Turlogh did. He needed no sleep; as he steered he ate from the rude provisions the fisherman had provided him. By the time he sighted Malin

Head the weather had calmed wonderfully. There was still a heavy sea, but the gale had slackened to a sharp breeze that sent the little boat skipping along. Days and nights merged into each other; Turlogh drove eastward. Once he put into shore for fresh water and to snatch a few hours sleep.

As he steered he thought of the fisherman's last words: "Why should you risk your life for a clan that's put a price on your head?"

TURLOGH shrugged his shoulders. Blood was thicker than water. The mere fact that his people had cast him out to die like a hunted wolf on the moors did not alter the fact that they were his people. Little Moira, daughter of Murtagh na Kilbaha, had nothing to do with it. He remembered her—he had played with her when he was a boy and she a babe—he remembered the deep grayness of her eyes and the burnished sheen of her back hair, the fairness of her skin. Even as a child she had been remarkably beautiful—why, she was only a child now for he, Turlogh, was young and he was many years her senior. Now she was speeding north to become the unwilling bride of a Norse reaver, Thorfel the Fair—the Handsome. Turlogh swore by gods that knew not the cross. A red mist waved across his eyes so that the rolling sea swam crimson all around him. An Irish girl a captive of a Norse pirate —with a vicious wrench Turlogh turned his bows straight and headed for the open sea, with a tinge of madness in his eyes.

It is a long slant from Malin Head to Helni straight out across the foaming billows, as Turlogh took it. He was aiming for a small island that lay, with many other small islands, between Mull and the Hebrides. A modern seaman with charts and compass might have difficulty in finding it. Turlogh had neither. He sailed by instinct and through knowledge. He knew these seas as a man knows his house. He had sailed them as a raider and as an avenger, and once he had sailed them as a captive lashed to the deck of a Danish dragon ship. And he followed a red trail. Smoke drifting from headlands, floating pieces of wreckage, charred timbers showed that Thorfel was ravaging as he went. Turlogh growled in savage satisfaction; he was close behind the Viking, in spite of the long lead. For Thorfel was burning and pillaging the shores as he went, and Turlogh's course was like an arrow's.

He was still a long way from Helni when he sighted a small island slightly off his course. He knew it of old as one uninhab-

ited, but there he could get fresh water. So he steered for it. The Isle of Swords it was called, no man knew why. And as he neared the beach he saw a sight which he rightly interpreted. Two boats were drawn up on the shelving shore. One was a crude affair, something like the one Turlogh had, but considerably larger. The other was a long, low craft—undeniably viking. Both were deserted. Turlogh listened for the clash of arms, the cry of battle, but silence reigned. Fishers, he thought, from the Scotch isles; they had been sighted by some band of rovers on ship or on some other island, and had been pursued in the long rowboat. But it had been a longer chase than they had anticipated, he was sure; else they would not have started out in an open boat. But inflamed with the murder lust, the reavers would have followed their prey across a hundred miles of rough water, in an open boat, if necessary.

TURLOGH drew inshore, tossed over the stone that served for anchor, and leaped upon the beach, ax ready. Then up the shore a short distance he saw a strange red huddle of forms. A few swift strides brought him face to face with mystery. Fifteen red-bearded Danes lay in their own gore in a rough circle. Not one breathed. Within this circle, mingling with the bodies of their slayers, lay other men, such as Turlogh had never seen. Short of stature they were, and very dark; their staring dead eyes were the blackest Turlogh had ever seen. They were scantily armored, and their stiff hands still gripped broken swords and daggers. Here and there lay arrows that had shattered on the corselets of Danes, and Turlogh observed with surprise that many of them were tipped with flint.

"This was a grim fight," he muttered. "Aye, this was a rare sword-quenching. Who are these people? In all the isles I have never seen their like before. Seven—is that all? Where are their comrades who helped them slay these Danes?"

No tracks led away from the bloody spot. Turlogh's brow darkened.

"These were all—seven against fifteen—yet the slayers died with the slain. What manner of men are these who slay twice their number of vikings? They are small men, their armor is mean. Yet—"

ANOTHER thought struck him. Why did not the strangers scatter and flee, hide themselves in the woods? He believed he knew the answer. There, at the very center of the silent circle, lay a strange thing. A statue it was, of some dark substance

and it was in the from of a man. Some five feet long, or high, it was, carved in a semblance of light that made Turlogh start. Half over it lay the corpse of an ancient man, hacked almost beyond human semblance. One lean arm was locked about the figure; the other was outstretched, the hand gripping a flint dagger which was sheathed to the hilt in the breast of a Dane. Turlogh noted the fearful wounds that disfigured all the darkmen. They had been hard to kill—they had fought until nearly hacked to pieces, and dying, they had dealt death to their slayers. So much Turlogh's eyes showed him. In the dead faces of the terrible strangers was a terrible desperation. He noted how their dead hands were still locked in the beards of their foes. One lay beneath the body of a huge Dane, and on this Dane Turlogh could see no wound; until he looked closer and saw the dark man's teeth were sunk, beastlike, into the bull throat of the other.

He bent and dragged the figure from among the bodies. The ancient's arm was locked about it, and he was forced to tear it away with all his strength. It was as if, even in death, the old one clung to his treasure; for Turlogh felt that it was for this image that the small dark men had died. They might have scattered and eluded their foes, but that would have meant giving up their image. They chose to die beside it. Turlogh shook his head; his hatred of the Norse, a heritage of wrongs and outrages, was a burning, living thing, almost an obsession, that at times drove him to the point of insanity. There was, in his fierce heart, no room for mercy; the sight of these Danes, lying dead at his feet, filled him with savage satisfaction. Yet he sensed here, in these silent dead men, a passion stronger than his. Here was some driving impulse deeper than his hate. Aye—and older. These little men seemed very ancient to him, not old as individuals are old, but old as a race is old. Even their corpses exuded an intangible aura of the primeval. And the image—

The Gael bent and grasped it, to lift it. He expected to encounter great weight and was astonished. It was no heavier than if it had been made of light wood. He tapped it, and the sound was solid. At first he thought it was of iron; then he decided it was of stone, but such stone as he had never seen; and he felt that no such stone was to be found in the British Isles or anywhere in the world that he knew. It was a figure of a man who much resembled the small dark men who lay about it. But it differed subtly. Turlogh felt somehow that this was the image of a man who

had lived long ago, for surely the unknown sculptor had had a living model. And he had contrived to bring a touch of life into his work. There was the sweep of the shoulders, the powerfully molded arms; the strength of the features was evident. The firm jaw, the regular nose, the high forehead, all indicated a powerful intellect, a high courage, an inflexible will. Surely, thought Turlogh, this man was a king—or a god. Yet he wore no crown; his only garment was a sort of loin-cloth, wrought so cunningly that every wrinkle and fold was carved as in reality. It was as smooth and free from corrosion as if it had been carved yesterday, but for all that, it was a symbol of antiquity.

"This was their god," mused Turlogh, looking about him. "They fled before the Danes—but died for their god at last. Who are these people? Whence came they? Whither were they bound?"

He stood, leaning on his ax, and a strange tide rose in his soul. A sense of mighty abysses of time and space opened before him; of the strange, endless tide of mankind that drift forever; of the waves of humanity that wax and wane with the waxing and waning of the sea-tides. Life was a door opening upon two black, unknown worlds—and how many races of men with their hopes and fears, their loves and their hates, had passed through that door—on their pilgrimage from the dark to the dark? Turlogh sighed. Deep in his soul stirred the mystic sadness of the Gael.

"You were a king, once, Dark Man," he said to the silent image. "Mayhap you were a god and reigned over all the world. Your people passed, as mine are passing. Surely you were a king of the Flint People, the race whom my Celtic ancestors destroyed. Well, we have had our day, and we are passing, too. These Danes who lie at your feet—they are the conquerors now. They must have their day—but they too will pass. But you shall go with me, Dark Man, king, god, or devil though you may be. Aye, for it is in my mind that you will bring me luck, and luck is what I shall need when I sight Helni, Dark Man."

Turlogh bound the image securely in the bows. Again he set out for his sea-plowing. Now the skies grew gray and the snow fell in driving lances that stung and cut. The waves were gray-grained with ice and the winds bellowed and beat on the open sea. But Turlogh feared not. And his boat rode as it had never ridden before. Through the roaring gale and the driving snow it sped, and to the mind of the Dalcassian it seemed that the

Dark Man lent him aid. Surely he had been lost a hundred times without supernatural assistance. With all his skill at boat-handling he wrought, and it seemed to him that there was an unseen hand on the tiller, and at the oar; that more than human skill aided him when he trimmed the sail.

AND when all the world was a driving white veil in which even the Gael's sense of direction was lost, it seemed to him that he was steering in compliance with a silent voice that spoke in the dim reaches of his consciousness. Nor was he surprised when at last, when the snow had ceased and the clouds had rolled away beneath a cold, silvery moon, he saw land loom up ahead and recognized it as the isle of Helni. More, he knew that just around a point of land was the bay where Thorfel's dragon ship was moored when not ranging the seas, and a hundred yards back from the bay lay Thorfel's dwelling. He grinned fiercely. All the skill in the world could not have brought him to this exact spot—it was pure luck—no, it was more than luck. Here was the best possible place for him to make an approach—within half a mile of his foe's hold, yet hidden from sight of any watchers by this jutting promontory. He glanced at the Dark Man in the bow—brooding, inscrutable as the sphinx. A strange feeling stole over the Gael—that all this was his work; that he, Turlogh, was only a pawn in the game. What was this fetish? What grim secret did those carven eyes hold? Why did the dark little men fight so terribly for him?

Turlogh ran his boat inshore, into a small creek. A few yards up this he anchored and stepped out on shore. A last glance at the brooding dark man in the bows, and he turned and went hurriedly up the slope of the promontory, keeping to cover as much as possible. At the top of the slope he gazed down on the other side. Less than half-a-mile away Thorfel's dragon ship lay at anchor. And there lay Thorfel's skalli, also the long low building of rough-hewn log emitting the gleams that betokened the roaring fires within. Shouts of wassail came clearly to the listener through the sharp, still air. He ground his teeth. Wassail! Aye, they were celebrating the ruin and destruction they had committed—the homes left in smoking embers—the slain men—the ravished girls. They were lords of the world, these vikings—all the southland lay helpless beneath their swords. The southland folk lived only to furnish them sport—and slaves—Turlogh shuddered violently and shook as if in a chill. The

blood-sickness was on him like a physical pain, but he fought back the mists of passion that clouded his brain. He was here, not to fight, but to steal away the girl they had stolen.

He took careful note of the ground, like a general going over the plan of his campaign. He noted where the trees grew thick; that the smaller houses, the storehouses and servants' huts were between the main building and the bay. A huge fire was blazing down by the shore and a few carles were roaring and drinking about it, but the fierce cold had driven the most of them into the drinking hall of the main building.

TURLOGH crept down the thickly wooded slope, entering the forest which swept about in a wide curve away from the shore. He kept to the fringe of its shadows, approaching in a rather indirect route, but afraid to strike out boldly in the open lest he be seen by the watchers that Thorfel surely had out. Gods, if he only had the warriors of Clare at his back as he had of old! Then there would be no skulking like a wolf among the trees! His hand locked like iron on his ax-shaft as he visualized the scene—the charge, the shouting, the blood-letting, the play of the Dalcassian axes—he sighed. He was a lone outcast; never again would he lead the swordsmen of his clan to battle.

He dropped suddenly in the snow behind a low shrub and lay still. Men were approaching from the same direction in which he had come—men who grumbled loudly and walked heavily. They came into sight—two of them, huge Norse warriors, their silver-scaled armor flashing in the moonlight. They were carrying something between them with difficulty and to Turlogh's amazement he saw it was the Dark Man. His consternation at the realization that they had found his boat was engulfed in a greater astonishment. These men were giants; their arms bulged with iron muscles. Yet they were staggering under what seemed a stupendous weight. In their hands the Dark Man seemed to weigh hundred of pounds, yet Turlogh had lifted it as lightly as a feather! He almost swore in his amazement. Surely these men were drunk. One of them spoke, and Turlogh's short neck hairs bristled at the sound of the guttural accents, as a dog will bristle at the sight of a foe.

"Let it down; Thor's death, the thing weighs a ton. Let's rest."

The other grunted a reply, and they began to ease the image to the earth. Then one of them lost his hold on it; his hand slipped and the Dark Man crash-

ed heavily into the snow. The first speaker howled.

"You clumsy fool, you dropped it on my foot! Curse you, my ankle's broken!"

"It twisted out of my hand!" cried the other. "The thing's alive, I tell you!"

"Then I'll slay it!" snarled the lame viking, and drawing his sword, he struck savagely at the prostrate figure. Fire flashed as the blade shivered into a hundred pieces, and the other Norseman howled as a flying sliver of steel gashed his cheek.

"The devil's in it!" shouted the other, throwing his hilt away. "I've not even scratched it! Here, take hold—let's get it into the ale-hall and let Thorfel deal with it."

"Let it lie," growled the second man, wiping the blood from his face. "I'm bleeding like a butchered hog. Let's go back and tell Thorfel that there's no ship stealing on the island. That's what he sent us to the point to see."

"What of the boat where we found this?" snapped the other. "Some Scotch fisher driven out of his course by the storm and hiding like a rat in the woods now, I guess. Here, bear a hand; idol or devil, we'll carry this to Thorfel."

Grunting with the effort, they lifted the image once more and went on slowly, one groaning and cursing as he limped along, the other shaking his head from time to time as the blood got into his eyes.

TURLOGH rose stealthily and watched them. A touch of chilliness traveled up and down his spine. Either of these men was as strong as he, yet it was taxing their powers to the utmost to carry what he had handled easily. He shook his head and took up his way again.

At last he reached a point in the woods nearest the settlement. Now was the crucial test. Somehow he must reach that building and hide himself, unperceived. Clouds were gathering. He waited until one obscured the moon and in the gloom that followed, ran swiftly and silently across the snow, crouching. A shadow out of the shadows he seemed. The shouts and songs from within the long building were deafening. Now he was close to its side, flattening himself against the rough-hewn logs. Vigilance was most certainly relaxed now—yet what foe should Thorfel expect, when he was friends with all northern reavers, and none else could be expected to fare forth on a night such as this had been?

A shadow among the shadows, Turlogh stole about the house. He noted a side door and slid cautiously to it. Then he drew back close against the wall.

Someone within was fumbling at the latch. Then a door was flung open and a big warrior lurched out, slamming the door to behind him. Then he saw Turlogh. His bearded lips parted, but in that instant the Gael's hands shot up to his throat and locked there like a wolf-trap. The threatened yell died in a gasp. One hand flew to Turlogh's wrist, the other drew a dagger and stabbed upward. But already the man was senseless; the dagger rattled feebly against the outlaw's corselet and dropped into the snow. The Norseman sagged in his slayer's grasp, his throat literally crushed by that iron grip. Turlogh flung him contemptuously into the snow and spat on his dead face before he turned again to the door.

THE latch had not fastened within. The door sagged a trifle. Turlogh peered in and saw an empty room, piled with ale-barrels. He entered noiselessly, shutting the door but not latching it. He thought of hiding his victim's body, but he did not know how he could do it. He must trust to luck that no one saw it in the deep snow where it lay. He crossed the room and found it led into another parallel with the outer wall. This was also a storeroom, and was empty. From this a doorway, without a door but furnished with a curtain of skins, let into the main hall, as Turlogh could tell from the sounds on the other side. He peered out cautiously.

He was looking into the drinking-hall—the great hall which served as a banquet, council, and living-hall of the master. The hall, with its smoke-blackened rafters, great roaring fireplaces, and heavily laden boards, was a scene of terrific revelry tonight. Huge warriors with golden beards and savage eyes sat or lounged on the rude benches, strode about the hall, or sprawled full length on the floor. They drank mightily from foaming horns and leathern jacks, and gorged themselves on great pieces of rye bread, and huge chunks of meat they cut with their daggers from whole roasted joints. It was a scene of strange incongruity, for in contrast with these barbaric men and their rough songs and shouts, the walls were hung with rare spoils that betokened civilized workmanship. Fine tapestries that Norman women had worked; richly chased weapons that princes of France and Spain had wielded; armor and silken garments from Byzantium and the Orient—for the dragon ships ranged far. With these were placed the spoils of the hunt, to show the viking's mastery of beasts as well as men.

The modern man can scarcely

conceive of Turlogh O'Brien's feeling toward these men. To him they were devils—ogres who dwelt in the north only to descend on the peaceful people of the south. All the world was their prey to pick and choose, to take and spare as it pleased their barbaric fancies. His brain throbbed and burned as he gazed. As only a Gael can hate, he hated them—their magnificent arrogance, their pride and their power, their contempt for all other races, their stern, forbidding eyes —above all else he hated the eyes that looked scorn and menace on the world. The Gaels were cruel but they had strange moments of sentiment and kindness. There was no sentiment in the Norse makeup.

The sight of this revelry was like a slap in Black Turlogh's face, and only one thing was needed to make his madness complete. This was furnished. At the head of the board sat Thorfel the Fair, young, handsome, arrogant, flushed with wine and pride. He was handsome, was young Thorfel. In build he much resembled Turlogh himself, except that he was larger in every way, but there the resemblance ceased. As Turlogh was exceptionally dark among a dark people, Thorfel was exceptionally blond among a people essentially fair. His hair and mustache were like fine-spun gold and his light gray eyes flashed scintillant lights. By his side—Turlogh's nails bit into his palms. Moira of the O'Briens seemed greatly out of place among these huge blond men and strapping yellow-haired women. She was small, almost frail, and her hair was black with glossy bronze tints. But her skin was fair as theirs, with a delicate rose tint their most beautiful women could not boast. Her full lips were white now with fear and she shrank from the clamor and the uproar. Turlogh saw her tremble as Thorfel insolently put his arm about her. The hall waved redly before Turlogh's eyes and he fought doggedly for control.

"Thorfel's brother, Osric, to his right," muttered Turlogh to himself; "on the other side Tostig, the Dane, who can cleave an ox in half with that great sword of his—they say. And there is Halfgar, and Sweyn, and Oswick, and Athelstane, the Saxon —the one man of a pack of sea-wolves. And name of the devil—what is this, a priest?"

A PRIEST it was, sitting white and still in the rout, silently counting his beads, while his eyes wandered pityingly toward the slender Irish girl at the head of the board. Then Turlogh saw something else. On a smaller table to one side, a table of ma-

hogany whose rich scroll work showed that it was loot from the southland, stood the Dark Man. The two crippled Norsemen had brought it to the hall, after all. The sight of it brought a strange shock to Turlogh and soothed his brain. Only five feet tall? It seemed much larger now, somehow. It loomed above the revelry, as a god that broods on deep dark matters beyond the ken of the human insects who howl at his feet. As always when looking at the Dark Man, Turlogh felt as if a door had suddenly opened on outer space and the wind that blows among the stars. Waiting—waiting—for whom? Perhaps the carven eyes of the Dark Man looked through the skalli walls, across the snowy waste, and over the promontory. Perhaps those sightless eyes saw the five boats that even now slid silently with muffled oars, through the calm dark waters. But of this Turlogh Dubh knew nothing; nothing of the boats or their silent rowers; small, dark men with inscrutable eyes.

Thorfel's voice cut through the din: "Ho, friends!" They fell silent and turned as the young sea-king rose to his feet. "Tonight," he thundered, "I am taking a bride!"

A thunder of applause shook the noisy rafters. Turlogh cursed with sick fury.

Thorfel caught up the girl with rough gentleness and set her on the board.

"Is she not a fit bride for a viking?" he shouted. "True, she's a bit shy, but that's only natural."

"All Irish are cowards!" shouted Oswick.

"As proved by Clontarf and the scar on your jaw!" rumbled Athelstane, which gentle thrust made Oswick wince and brought a roar of rough mirth from the throng.

"Ware her temper, Thorfel," called a bold-eyed young Juno who sat with the warriors, "Irish girls have claws like cats."

Thorfel laughed with the confidence of a man used to mastery. "I'll teach her, her lessons with a stout birch switch. But enough. It grows late. Priest, marry us."

"Daughter," said the priest unsteadily, "these pagan men have brought me here by violence to perform Christian nuptials in an ungodly house. Do you marry this man willingly?"

"No! No! Oh God, no!" Moira screamed with wild despair that brought the sweat to Turlogh's forehead. "Oh most holy master, save me from this fate! They tore me from my home—struck down the brother that would have saved me! This man bore me off as if I were a chattel—a soulless beast!"

"Be silent!" thundered Thorfel, slapping her across the mouth, lightly but with enough

force to bring a trickle of blood from her delicate lips. "By Thor, you grow independent. I am determined to have a wife, and all the sqeals of a puling little wench will not stop me. Why, you graceless hussy, am I not wedding you in the Christian manner, simply because of your foolish superstitions? Take care that I do not dispense with the nuptials, and take you as slave, not wife!"

"Daughter," quavered the priest, afraid, not for himself but for her, "bethink you! This man offers you more than many a man would offer. It is at least an honorable married state."

"Aye," rumbled Athelstane, "marry him like a good wench and make the best of it. There's more than one southland woman on the cross benches of the north."

WHAT can I do? The question tore through Turlogh's brain. There was but one thing to do—wait until the ceremony was over and Thorfel had retired with his bride. Then steal her away as best he could. After that—but he dared not look ahead. He had done and would do his best. What he did, he of necessity did alone; a masterless man had no friends, even among masterless men. There was no way to reach Moira to tell her of his presence. She must go through with the wedding without even the slim hope of deliverance that knowledge of his presence might have meant. Instinctively his eyes flashed to the Dark Man standing somber and aloof from the rout. At his feet the old quarreled with the new—the pagan with the Christian—and Turlogh even in that moment felt that the old and new were alike young to the Dark Man.

Did the carven ears of the Dark Man hear strange prows grating on the beach, the stroke of a stealthy knife in the night, the gurgle that marks the severed throat? Those in the hall heard only their own noise and those who reveled by the fire outside sang on, unaware of the silent coils of death closing about them.

"Enough!" shouted Thorfel. "Count your beads and mutter your mummery, priest! Come here, wench, and marry!"

He jerked the girl off the board and plumped her down on her feet before him. She tore loose from him with flaming eyes. All the hot Gaelic blood was roused in her.

"You yellow-haired swine!" she cried. "Do you think that a princess of Clare, with Brian Boru's blood in her veins, would sit at the cross bench of a barbarian and bear the tow-headed cubs, of a northern thief? No—I'll never marry you!"

"Then I'll take you as a slave!" he roared, snatching at her wrist.

"Nor that way either, swine!" she exclaimed, her fear forgotten in fierce triumph. With the speed of light she snatched a dagger from his girdle, and before he could seize her she drove the keen blade under her heart. The priest cried out as though he had received the wound, and springing forward, caught her in his arms as she fell.

"The curse of Almighty God on you, Thorfel!" he cried, with a voice that rang like a clarion, as he bore her to a couch nearby.

Thorfel stood nonplussed. Silence reigned for an instant, and in that instant Turlogh O'Brien went mad.

"Lamb Laidir Abu!" the war cry of the O'Briens ripped through the stillness like the scream of a wounded panther, and as men whirled toward the shriek, the frenzied Gael came through the doorway like the blast of a wind from hell. He was in the grip of the Celtic black fury beside which the berserk rage of the viking pales. Eyes glaring and a tinge of froth on his writhing lips, he crashed among the men who sprawled, off guard, in his path. Those terrible eyes were fixed on Thorfel at the other end of the hall, but as Turlogh rushed he smote to right and left. His charge was the rush of a whirlwind that left a litter of dead and dying men in his wake.

BENCHES crashed to the floor, men yelled, ale flooded from upset casks. Swift as was the Celt's attack, two men blocked his way with drawn swords before he could reach Thorfel. Halfgar and Oswick. The scarred-faced viking went down with a cleft skull before he could lift his weapon, and Turlogh, catching Halfgar's blade on his shield, struck again like lightning and the clean ax sheared through hauberk, ribs and spine.

The hall was in a terrific uproar. Men were seizing weapons and pressing forward from all sides, and in the midst the lone Gael raged silently and terribly. Like a wounded tiger was Turlogh Dubh in his madness. His eery movement was a blur of speed, an explosion of dynamic force. Scarce had Halfgar fallen when the Gael leaped across his crumpling form at Thorfel, who had drawn his sword and stood as if bewildered. But a rush of carles swept between them. Swords rose and fell and the Dalcassian ax flashed among them like the play of summer lightning. On either hand and from before and behind a warrior drove at him. From one side Osric rushed, swinging a two-handed sword; from the other a

house-carle drove in with a spear. Turlogh stooped beneath the wing of the sword and struck a double blow, forehand and back. Thorfel's brother dropped, hewed through the knee, and the carle died on his feet as the backlash return drove the ax's backspike through his skull. Turlogh straightened, dashing his shield into the face of the swordsman who rushed him from the front. The spike in the center of the shield made a ghastly ruin of his features; then, even as the Gael wheeled cat-like to guard his rear, he felt the shadow of Death loom over him.

From the corner of his eye he saw the Dane Tostig swinging his great two-handed sword, and jammed against the table, off-balance, he knew that even his superhuman quickness could not save him. Then the whistling sword struck the Dark Man on the table and with a clash like thunder, shivered to a thousand blue sparks. Tostig staggered, dazedly, still holding the useless hilt, and Turlogh thrust as with a sword; the upper spike of his ax struck the Dane over the eye and crashed through to the brain.

And even at that instant the air was filled with a strange singing and men howled. A huge carle, ax still lifted, pitched forward clumsily against the Gael, who split his throat before he saw that a flint-pointed arrow transfixed his throat. The hall seemed full of glancing beams of light that hummed like bees and carried quick death in their humming. Turlogh risked his life for a glance toward the great doorway at the other end of the hall. Through it was pouring a strange horde. Small, dark men they were, with beady black eyes, and immobile faces. They were scantily armored, but they bore swords, spears, and bows. Now at close range they drove their long black arrows point-blank and the carles went down in windrows.

NOW a red wave of combat swept the skalli hall, a storm of strife that shattered tables, smashed the benches, tore the hangings and trophies from the walls, and stained the floors with a red lake. There had been less of the black strangers than vikings, but in the surprise of the attack, the first flight of arrows had evened the odds, and now at hand grips the strange warriors showed themselves in no ways inferior to their huge foes. Dazed with surprise and the ale they had drunk, with no time to arm themselves fully, the Norsemen yet fought back with all the reckless ferocity of their race. But the primitive fury of the attackers matched their own valor, and at the head of the hall, where a white-faced priest shielded a dying girl, Black Tur-

logh tore and ripped with a frenzy that made valor and fury alike futile.

And over all towered the Dark Man. To Turlogh's shifting glances, caught between the flash of sword and ax, it seemed that the image had grown—expanded—heightened; that it loomed giant-like over the battle; that its head rose into smoke-filled rafters of the great hall; that it brooded like a dark cloud of death over these insects who cut each other's throats at its feet. Turlogh sensed in the lightning sword-play and the slaughter that this was the proper element for the Dark Man. Violence and fury were exuded by him. The raw scent of fresh-spilled blood was good to his nostrils and these yellow-haired corpses that rattled at his feet were as sacrifices to him.

The storm of battle rocked the mighty hall. It became a shambles where men slipped in pools of blood, and slipping, died. Heads spun grinning from slumping shoulders. Barbed spears tore the heart, still beating, from the gory breast. Brains splashed and clotted the madly driving axes. Daggers lunged upward, ripping bellies and spilling entrails upon the floor. The clash and clangor of steel rose deafeningly. No quarter was asked or given. A wounded Norseman had dragged down one of the dark men, and doggedly strangled him regardless of the dagger his victim plunged again and again into his body.

One of the dark men seized a child who ran howling from an inner room, and dashed its brains out against the wall. Another gripped a Norse woman by her golden hair and hurling her to her knees, cut her throat, while she spat in his face. One listening for cries of fear or pleas of mercy would have heard none; men, women or children, they died slashing and clawing, their last gasp a sob of fury, or a snarl of quenchless hatred.

And about the table where stood the Dark Man, immovable as a mountain, washed the red waves of slaughter. Norsemen and tribesmen died at his feet. How many red infernos of slaughter and madness have your strange carved eyes gazed upon, Dark Man?

Shoulder to shoulder Sweyn and Thorfel fought. The Saxon Athelstane, his golden beard abristle with the battle-joy, had placed his back against the wall and a man fell at each sweep of his two-handed ax. Now Turlogh came in like a wave, avoiding, with a lithe twist of his upper body, the first ponderous stroke. Now the superiority of the light Irish ax was proved, for before the Saxon could shift his heavy weapon, the Dalcassian ax

lit out like a striking cobra and Athelstane reeled as the edge bit through the corselet into the ribs beneath. Another stroke and he crumpled, the blood gushing from his temple.

Now none barred Turlogh's way to Thorfel except Sweyn, and even as the Gael leaped like a panther toward the slashing pair, one was ahead of him. The chief of the Dark Men glided like a shadow under the slash of Sweyn's sword, and his own short blade thrust upward under the mail. Thorfel faced Turlogh alone. Thorfel was no coward; he even laughed with pure battle-joy as he thrust, but there was no mirth in Black Turlogh's face, only a frantic rage that writhed his lips and made his eyes coals of blue fire.

IN THE first swirl of steel Thorfel's sword broke. The young sea-king leaped like a tiger at his foe, thrusting with the shards of the blade. Turlogh laughed fiercely as the jagged remnant gashed his cheek, and at the same instant he cut Thorfel's left foot from under him. The Norseman fell with a heavy crash, then struggled to his knees, clawing for his dagger. His eyes were clouded.

"Make an end, curse you!" he snarled.

Turlogh laughed. "Where is your power and your glory now?" he taunted. "You who would have for unwilling wife an Irish princess—you—"

Suddenly his hate strangled him, and with a howl like a maddened panther he swung his ax in a whistling arc that cleft the Norseman from shoulder to breastbone. Another stroke severed the head, and with the grisly trophy in his hand he approached the couch where lay Moira O'Brien. The priest had lifted her head and held a goblet of wine to her pale lips. Her cloudy gray eyes rested with slight recognition on Turlogh—but it seemed at last she knew him and she tried to smile.

"Moira, blood of my heart," said the outlaw heavily, "you die in a strange land. But the birds in the Culland hills will weep for you, and the heather will sigh in vain for the tread of your little feet. But you shall not be forgotten; axes shall drip for you and for you shall galleys crash and walled cities go up in flames. And that your ghost go not unassuaged into the realms of Tir-na-n-Oge, behold this token of vengeance!"

And he held forth the dripping head of Thorfel.

"In God's name, my son," said the priest, his voice husky with horror, "have done, have done. Will you do your ghastly deeds in the very presence of—see, she is dead. May God in his

infinite justice have mercy on her soul, for though she took her own life, yet she died as she lived, in innocence and purity."

Turlogh dropped his ax-head to the floor and his head was bowed. All the fire of his madness had left him, and there remained only a dark sadness, a deep sense of futility and weariness. Over all the hall there was no sound. No groans of the wounded were raised, for the knives of the little dark men had been at work, and save their own, there were no wounded. Turlogh sensed that the survivors had gathered about the table upon which was the statue and now stood looking at him with inscrutable eyes. The priest mumbled over the body of the girl, telling his beads. Flames ate at the farther wall of the building, but none heeded it. Then from among the dead on the floor a huge form heaved up unsteadily. Athelstane, the Saxon, overlooked by the killers, leaned against the wall and stared about dazedly. Blood flowed from a wound in his ribs and another in his scalp where Turlogh's ax had struck glancingly.

The Gael walked over to him. "I have no hatred for you, Saxon," said he, heavily, "but blood calls for blood and you must die."

Athelstane looked at him without an answer. His large gray eyes were serious, but without fear. He too was a barbarian; more pagan than Christian. He too realized the rights of the blood-feud. But as Turlogh raised his ax, the priest sprang between, his thin hands outstretched, his eyes haggard.

"Have done! In God's name I command you! Almighty Powers, has not enough blood been shed this fearful night? In the name of the Most High, I claim this man."

Turlogh dropped his ax. "He is yours; not for your oath or your curse, not for your creed but for that you too are a man and did your best for Moira."

A touch on his arm made Turlogh turn. The chief of the strangers stood regarding him with inscrutable eyes.

"Who are you?" asked the Gael idly. He did not care; he felt only weariness.

"I am Brogar, chief of the Picts, Friend of the Dark Man."

"Why do you call me that?" asked Turlogh.

"He rode in the bows of your boat and guided you to Helni through wind and snow. He saved your life when he broke the great sword of the *Dane.*"

TURLOGH glanced at the brooding Dark One. It seemed there must be human or superhuman intelligence behind those strange stone eyes. Was it chance

alone that caused Tostig's sword to strike the image as he swung it in a death blow?

"What is this thing?" asked the Gael.

"It is the only God we have left," answered the other somberly. "It is the image of our greatest king, Bran Mak Morn, he who gathered the broken lines of the Pictish tribes into a single mighty nation, he who drove forth the Norseman and Briton and shattered the legions of Rome, centuries ago. A wizard made this statue while the great Morn yet lived and reigned, and when he died in the last great battle, his spirit entered into it. It is our God.

"Ages ago we ruled. Before the Dane, before the Gael, before the Briton, before the Roman, we reigned in the western isles. Our stone circles rose to the sun. We worked in flint and hides and were happy. Then came the Celts and drove us into the wilderness. They held the southland. But we throve in the north and were strong. Rome broke the Britons and came against us. But there rose among us Bran Mak Morn, of the blood of Brule the Spear-slayer, who broke the iron ranks of Rome and sent the legions cowering south behind their Wall.

"Bran Mak Morn fell in battle; the nation fell apart. Like wolves we Picts live now among the scattered islands, among the crags of the highlands and the dim hills of Galloway. We are a fading people. We pass. But the Dark Man remains—the Dark One, the great king, Bran Mak Morn, whose ghost dwells forever in the stone likeness of his living self."

AS IN a dream Turlogh saw an ancient Pict who looked much like the one in whose dead arms he had found the Dark Man, lift the image from the table. The old man's arms were thin as withered branches and his skin clung to his skull like a mummy's, but he handled with ease the statue that two strong vikings had had trouble in carrying.

As if reading his thoughts Brogar spoke softly. "Only a friend may with safety touch the Dark One. We knew you to be a friend, for he rode in your boat and did you no harm."

"How know you this?"

"The Old One," pointing to the white bearded ancient, "Gonar, high priest of the Dark One —the ghost of Bran comes to him in his dreams. It was Grok, the lesser priest and his people who stole the image and took to sea in a long boat. In dreams Gonar followed; aye, as he slept he sent his spirit with the ghost of Morni, and he saw the pursuit by the Danes, the battle and

slaughter on the Isle of Swords. He saw you come and find the Dark One, and he saw that the ghost of the great king was pleased with you. Woe to the foes of Mak Morn! But good luck shall fare the friends of him."

TURLOGH came to himself as from a trance. The heat of the burning hall was in his face and the flickering flames lit and shadowed the carven face of the Dark Man as his worshippers bore him from the building, lending it a strange life. Was it, in truth, that the spirit of a long-dead king lived in that cold stone? Bran Mak Morn loved his people with a savage love; he hated their foes with a terrible hate. Was it possible to breathe into inanimate blind stone a pulsating love and hate that should outlast the centuries?

Turlogh lifted the still, slight form of the dead girl and bore her out of the flaming hall. Five long open boats lay at anchor, and scattered about the embers of the fires lay the reddened corpses of the revelers who had died silently.

"How stole ye upon these undiscovered?" asked Turlogh. "And whence came you in those open boats?"

"The stealth of the panther is theirs who live by stealth," answered the Pict. "And these were drunken. We followed the path of the Dark One and we came hither from the Isle of Altar, near the Scottish mainland, from whence Grok stole the Dark Man."

Turlogh knew no island of that name but he did realize the courage of these men in daring the seas in boats such as these. He thought of his own boat and requested Brogar to send some of his men for it. The Pict did so. While he waited for them to bring it around the point, he watched the priest bandaging the wounds of the survivors. Silent, immobile, they spoke no word either of complaint or thanks.

The fisherman's boat came scudding around the point just as the first hint of sunrise reddened the waters. The Picts were getting into their boats, lifting in the dead and wounded. Turlogh stepped into his boat and gently eased his pitiful burden down.

"She shall sleep in her own land," he said somberly. "She shall not lie in this cold foreign isle. Brogar, whither go you?"

"We take the Dark One back to his isle and his altar," said the Pict. "Through the mouth of his people he thanks you. The tie of blood is between us, Gael, and mayhap we shall come to you again in your need, as Bran Mak Morn, great king of Pictdom,

shall come again to his people some day in the days to come."

"And you, good Jerome? You will come with me?"

The priest shook his head and pointed to Athelstane. The wounded Saxon reposed on a rude couch of skins piled on the snow.

"I stay here to attend to this man. He is sorely wounded."

Turlogh looked about. The walls of the buildings had crashed into a mass of glowing embers. Brogar's men had set fire to the storehouses and the long galley, and the smoke and flame vied luridly with the growing morning light.

"You will freeze or starve. Come with me."

"I will find sustenance for us both. Persuade me not, my son."

"He is a pagan and a reaver."

"No matter. He is a human—a living creature. I will not leave him to die."

"So be it."

TURLOGH prepared to cast off. The boats of the Picts were already rounding the point. The rhythmic clacks of their oar-locks came clearly to him. They looked not back, bending stolidly to their work.

He glanced at the stiff corpses about the beach, at charred embers and glowing timbers. In the glare the priest seemed unearthly in his thinness and whiteness, like a saint from some old illuminated manuscript. In his worn, pallid face was a more than human sadness, a greater than human weariness.

"Look!" he cried suddenly, pointing seaward. "The ocean is of blood! See how it swims red in the rising sun! Oh my people, my people, the blood you have spilt in anger turns the very seas to scarlet! How can you win through?"

"I came in the snow and sleet," said Turlogh, not understanding at first. "I go as I came."

The priest shook his head. "It is more than a mortal sea. Your hands are red with blood and you follow a red sea-path, yet the fault is not wholly with you. Almighty God, when will the reign of blood cease?"

Turlogh shook his head. "Not so long as the race lasts," and the morning wind caught and filled his sail.

Everyone knows the traditional price you pay when you sell your soul.

The Imitation Demon

BY ROBERT KUTTNER

JAMES TIBBETS had no need for the services of a demon. He had everything an educated young man of good family could desire: a beautiful fiancee, a promising career in advertising, a fine game of tennis, some fame as an amateur yachtsman and a rich uncle. At the last count, however, he was short the rich uncle. Old Eric Tibbets yielded one morning to a tired heart and sought his rest in another sphere. James, as favorite nephew, received at once the benefits that are inherent in all rich but sickly relatives. The bank attended to those details too worldly to engage the attention of a grieving nephew. James himself made the sacrifice of spending one evening away from his usual haunts to go through the personal effects of a man who had lived eighty years and had spent most of that time collecting personal effects.

TIBBETS MANOR presented a weedy appearance to the motorists who passed it on their way along the Hudson. It had been built when millionaires still indulged the whimsies of classic-minded architects. The natural

beauty of the region had proved too strong a rival for the manor and the building soon took on a dark, sulking atmosphere that grew in intensity through the years.

To Tibbets' eyes, the interior of the building offered no improvement over the brooding exterior. Nevertheless, in common with the motion-picture trained public, he accepted as a truism that wealthy eccentrics always lived in tomb-like houses on run-down estates.

The long drive up from the city had been very tiring. Tibbets found the liquor closet and poured himself a refresher several times the volume old Uncle Eric would have approved of. A glance about the halls convinced him that it would take more than one night to examine all the treasures accumulated by the old man. Tibbets had sense enough not to disturb the gun collection or to open the many glass gem cases. The woodcuts and paintings also escaped his touch. He had been in enough museums to suspect that such things had value. Drink in hand, he wandered into the library. First editions and rare books were somewhat beyond his ken. A pile grew at his feet as he swept several shelves free of their contents.

He had no particular need for money but on impulse wished to see if perhaps the books weren't masking a wall safe. Library safes, he knew, were common enough. Handling the dusty volumes reminded Tibbets of his thirst. He found his way back to the sitting room. One thing he would never sell was the rare brandies and old wines that filled the cellars and service cabinets. No connoisseur could appreciate the contents as well as he could. He smiled to himself as he filled his glass.

After more dreary work in the library and more trips to the liquor closet, Tibbets sat down and surveyed the ruin. Faded, torn books were scattered on the floor, empty shelves leered at him—and still no wall safe. He was mildly disappointed. At his elbow on an antique table lay several heavy tomes. Piqued at his failure, he hurled the books at their companions on the floor. One volume, however, stayed in his hand. The touch of it under his fingers had filled him with a sudden, cold revulsion. It was as if he had touched a living, squirming thing. The texture of the cover was soft and fleshy. He drew the book close to his face and felt sick again. The faded yellow binding was like parched human skin. Looking closely he could make out a few coarse black hairs that seemed to be growing from the cover.

Then he laughed weakly.

What was there to be alarmed about? Dead protoplasm was simply so much inert chemical. Protein matter, if he remembered his college biology correctly. Didn't they make his shoes from tanned cowhide? Tibbets laughed more strongly—pleased with his control over himself. He had reasoned away blind panic like an educated man. Now he examined the book with interest. Faint blue lettering traced out a pattern on the cover that seemed at first to be the aimless wanderings of subcutaneous veins. Then he found the tracings formed a word—he recognized one or two letters from the Greek alphabet. Tibbets cursed. This mysterious book was written in Greek—a language he had never mastered in school. Then looking again, he saw the title in English—in conventional newsprint capitals! "The Conjuration of Demons." He chuckled. A most obliging book. If you couldn't read it, it translated itself. The blue vein-like letters pulsed faintly on the page. Tibbets had the positive conviction that if he scratched the book deeply it would bleed an appalling amount of blood.

Some instinct of survival sent a hesitant shiver through his body. There was no more question in his mind that he was handling a supernatural object. For a few seconds he paused, then swiftly drained his glass and opened the book. The brandy had extinguished what little prudence he had. It came as a slight relief to find that the inside lettering was something other than living capillaries and that a fairly ordinary grade of parchment constituted the rest of the volume.

The technique for conjuring demons, as disclosed in the book, presented no unusual difficulties as far as methodology went. A few of the necessary magical ingredients were admittedly hardly obtainable in ordinary society but still not so rare as to deter a curious person. Near the end of the book he found a series of very life-like portaits which all bore signatures written in blood. The first pictures showed men with classic features, not a few of them wearing olive wreath crowns and appearing to be early Greek philosophers. Then came faces unmistakably Arab, then some Romans, one even with legion helmet and the look of an emperor; cowled monks followed, then kingly portraits, crowned and bearded, and finally faces that resembled modern makers of history—soldiers, writers, princes, scientists, bankers. On the very last page was the well-remembered features of Uncle Tibbets with his name spelled out neatly in caked blood. Tibbets roared with

laughter and stumbled out to refill his glass.

"So that's how the old boy got so filthy rich! I'll be damned if he didn't get damned in the process!" Then he laughed some more and returned to the book.

The last hundred or so pages were all illustrated. "A catalogue of satisfied users! What an advertisement—what a promotion scheme! Got to hand it to those devils. I'm ready to try a little magic myself." Tibbets shook with keen enjoyment over the situation. "That old demon is sure some salesman. If I had a little corpse fat I'd call him up and tell him so myself."

AS HE slammed the book shut a slip of paper flew out. It was a bookmark he hadn't noticed before. He picked it up and saw that it contained the neat handwriting of his uncle. The paper bore a list of substances and a reference to certain cabinets in the study. Tibbets sat up straight. This was a supernatural challenge! The ingredients were the ones needed to generate the most potent spell in the book. Already his shrewd mind was weighing the advantages of summoning a demon. He had not the slightest doubt about the effectiveness of the conjuration book. There were too many proofs presented in the book itself—in portrait form!

Tibbets raced into the study and began to search for the ritual materials. Some of the substances were obviously supplied by chemical houses, certain others could only have been procured by criminal means. From a lead cannister he poured a glowing powder onto the bare floor in the outline of a crude pentagram.

"Radioactive," muttered Tibbets drunkenly. "This is one modern demon! Real 20th century stuff."

His other preparations took three hours. The study had been fitted out partly as a laboratory and this allowed the rapid completion of many steps that would have occupied a medieval wizard many long days. Shortly before midnight he cast aside the last vestige of skepticism and began the incantation that climaxed the ceremony.

The response was almost instantaneous. A copper-hued individual of average size stood within the glowing pentacle. Tibbets had seen certain stained glass windows in European churches which professed to illustrate scenes from Hell. He had a new respect for those anonymous artists. What he had taken to be caricatures he now knew were mosaics modeled from life—exact down to the last goat-like detail. A few wisps of smoke carried across to Tibbets' nostrils the smell of burnt flesh.

This was no olfactory illusion since the demon had a very charred appearance. Tiny coals sparked on the creature's body and no amount of restless slapping could ever quite smother them all.

"It must be hot where you come from," said Tibbets in a flippant tone.

"Not at all," answered the demon blandly, turning to face Tibbets and giving up on a very persistent ember. "One can't burn up time answering a call without getting burned oneself. Friction, you know. That was a very urgent spell you used. I came as fast as possible."

"Are you—ah—in shape to do business?" asked Tibbets.

"Do not be concerned about me," said the demon. "What is it you wish for yourself?"

"First, tell me what are the conditions of any agreement we may draw up?"

"The same simple ones that are ascribed by legend and tradition to all supernatural pacts. For services rendered, we require the unconditional assignment to us of the one commodity humans possess that can be transferred to our continuum. The ego, soul, spirit—call it what you will. The natural resources of our own realm are too skimpy in this substance. We are forced to a blackmarket trade with humans for this material and as you can see, the journey to this world entails no little hardship for us. I am roundly singed. I wouldn't be surprised if seeing me in this condition has led many traders, possibly even you, to visualize my habitat as one having an unfavorable climate. Nothing could be further from the truth."

Tibbets was not so drunk as to believe this propaganda. But he was still ready to bargain. "What must I do?" he asked.

"Sign your name to the last page of the book and you shall have whatever you wish."

"You must have forgotten," smiled Tibbets. "The last page bears a facsimile of my late, lamented uncle."

"Look again," commanded the fiend.

Tibbets opened the book. Another page had appeared after his uncle's picture. He also noticed that a tiny thorn in the book had pierced one of his fingers. This was to supply the appropriate ink. Tibbets signed with his blood.

"It is done. Now, what do you wish?"

"I wish the powers of a demon! I command you to give me the supernatural attributes of a demon! I want power greater than yours!"

"I can give you power only equal to mine. There are laws of economy even in my universe."

"Then give me such power!" demanded Tibbets. "I will be a god among men!"

"With our power comes certain weaknesses. Churches, for instance, will be barred to you. Many who trade with us like the consolations of religion—especially when they near their end. This will be denied you. I knew a bishop who told me that were it not for his prayers, he would have lost his mind long before I came for him. Then there are other hazards—."

"Never mind! Power satisfies all wants. That is my choice. I have signed the book, you must give me what I ask. Power equal to yours!"

"It is yours," spoke the demon.

TIBBETS experienced no physical change. Doubt entered his mind. He pointed to a large desk. "Burn!" he commanded. To his incredulous eyes, every atom of wood and paint was instantly oxidized to ash. He gave a silent word of command and the ashes turned to gold.

The demon spoke. "Some things you cannot do, like creating life. Some things you dare not do, like taking life. Remember, this is a protected preserve. If you try to destroy it, powers greater than yours will dispose of you in a manner that even I find unpleasant to think of. And where I come from, unpleasantness is the ordinary run of things."

"Demon, you needn't worry," answered Tibbets elatedly. "I'll live like a benevolent god. Then, when you come for me, you'll see a power equal to your own ready to resist you. I'm immortal, as you are, and strong enough to keep you from being too persistent a caller."

With these words, Tibbets launched a lightening bolt at the demon who side stepped adroitly and began to disappear. All that remained was a persistent laughter that followed the dissolving fiend's parting words: "I'll see you—soon!"

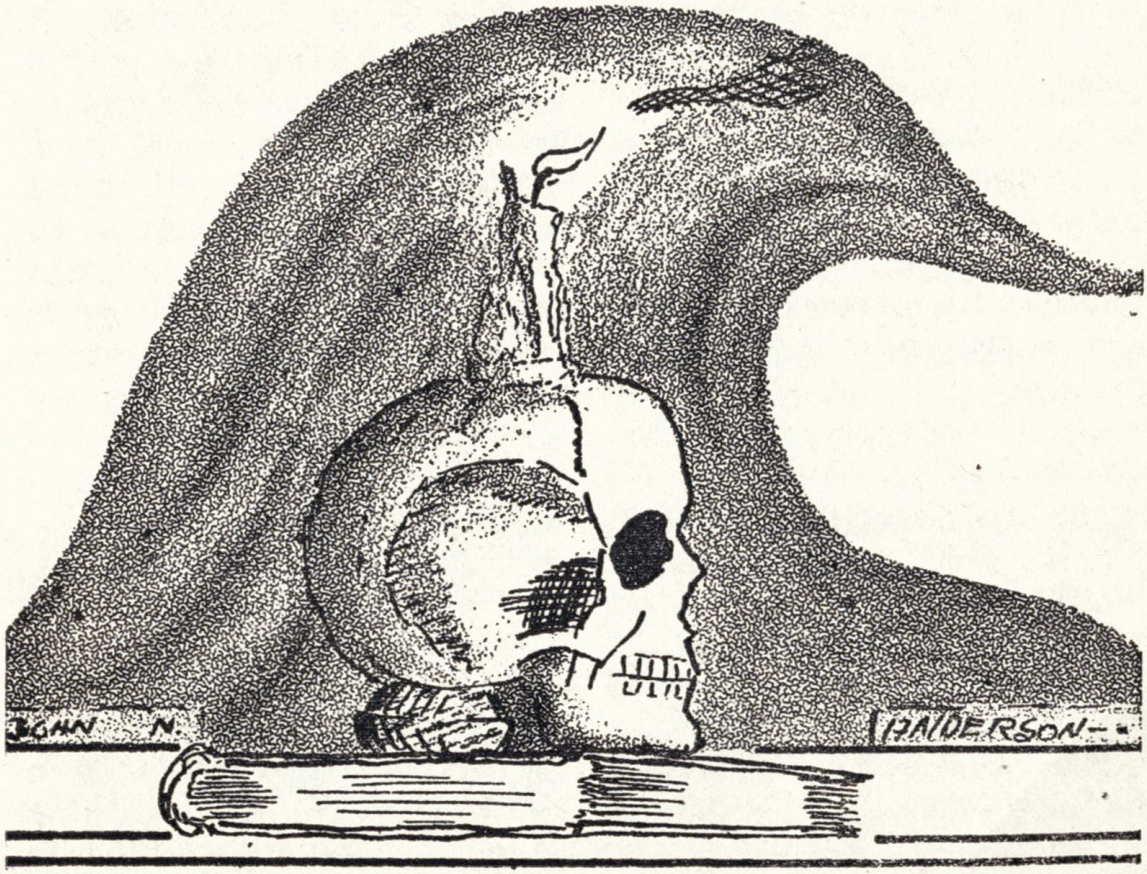
It took a minute for Tibbets to realize that the laughter was supernatural. He stopped it by preventing the air molecules from vibrating in the old house. This small triumph greatly encouraged him. In a vague sort of way, he realized that he drew energy from another sphere, where apparently it was more abundant, and that he could transmit it in any form to any place he could see, could remember, or could imagine. This energy also permitted considerable manipulation of matter—gross and molecular. He could transmute elements, levitate objects and even make solids condense into ether. The scope of his powers amazed him. He realized he still had a whole lifetime to ex-

periment and further perfect his talents. This gave him confidence to believe he could survive the inevitable return of the demon.

"As a fledgling demon, it's only right that I go out and celebrate," Tibbets said to himself. "But first to remove the evidences of my little session in sorcery."

TIBBETS stepped up to the chalked pentagram and tried to erase it with his heel. He was very surprised to find his feet would not penetrate the mystic diagram. Then he understood. No demon could pass the magic chalk—in either direction. He shrugged. A small matter. It merely proved he really was a demon. The second small disappointment came when he saw the conjuration book was missing. The demon had recovered his property before vanishing. Fair enough, Tibbets granted. Demonic power for a useless signature. He laughed some more as he restored the study to order. Then he drove back to the city at a speed greater than the manufacturer of his car would have believed possible.

New York City, as Tibbets rightly knew, contained places where even the damned were welcome And if you weren't



damned when you went in, you were by the time you left. He parked his car on the sidewalk, made it transparent, and walked into a very questionable den. He leaned on the bar and watched the dancers through the smoky haze. The small band itself was almost invisible in the dimly lit room. Sipping drinks which the bar man never realized he was pouring, Tibbets finally settled his gaze on the girl with the lowest-cut evening gown. She had green eyes, blonde hair and a form designed from blueprints hijacked from heaven. Her companion, suddenly hearing a large number of whiskey glasses tinkling in his stomach, rushed from the room and fainted. At the emergency hospital he was considered a prodigy by the operating room staff.

The girl eventually found herself at the only vacant space at the bar—next to Tibbets. A bottle appeared at her elbow and poured automatically into a glass.

"Soda or ginger?" asked Tibbets politely.

The girl gulped the drink quickly. "Did you see that?" she asked.

"Yes," said Tibbets calmly as the bottle poured another drink.

The girl gripped the edge of the bar tightly. "Am I drunk or are you a magician?"

"The latter," admitted Tibbets.

"Hypnotism! You should be on the stage."

"The stage? Oh, no! I think I'll become president first. Or maybe king of New York—with a harem, of course. How would you like to be the first queen?"

"You're drunk."

"Let's dance."

"No. Let's wait for that new Cuban rhythm. The Ghumba. They'll play it next."

"The Ghumba? Never heard of it," said Tibbets. "How do you dance it?"

"You'll see," answered the girl. "They're getting ready to play it now."

"This Latin-American music never made much sense to me. Can't make head or tail out of it."

"It's really very simple. Most of the music is really African. So is the rhythm. The slaves brought it with them. It sort of fermented in Haiti and Cuba for a while. Some of it has changed but a lot of it is still played like it was in Africa. Listen, don't those drums sound like tom-toms?"

"Yeah, thanks for the information. Let's try the step."

THE girl shook his arm off. "Wait! Listen first. Isn't it fascinating? Can't you just see natives in some tribal clearing doing this dance? Maybe they're

celebrating a wedding. Or bringing rain. Maybe its evil music. Voodoo music! That band leader, he's real sinister looking, just like a witchdoctor! I bet it's a dance to ward off evil spirits—to drive devils away from the village feast."

"Say, do you always get like this when you hear drums and a couple of rattles?" said Tibbets very disappointedly. He had seen education do this to a lot of nice-looking girls.

"Don't you see things when you hear music?" asked the girl.

"Are you sick?"

"No, Mr. Tibbets, are you sick?"

"No, say, how did you know my name?"

"I've been waiting for you all evening. And you should be feeling sick—or at least very dizzy. The band has been playing a very potent demonicidal composition for almost two minutes. That Voodoo chant is one of the strongest things against our kind this side of the Atlantic. A genuine Bantu purification rite—almost unchanged from the original. I'm used to exorcisms, of course, but I don't pretend to like them. Sort of wilts one, don't you think?"

Tibbets was now hanging from the bar. His knees had experienced a sudden weakness and every nerve tingled and burned. The demon, as usual, was lying because he didn't feel dizzy or sick. Just weak. He materialized a stream of silver bullets which he projected at the grinning fiend, now no longer camouflaged as a female. The bullets melted and silver-plated the demon's body. This armor protected the creature when Tibbets launched a shower of sharpened hickory stakes at the heart region of the fiend. Tibbets slipped closer to the floor and extravagantly sent the rest of his silver bullets, ordinary lead would have done as well, in the direction of the still chanting musicians. These also failed to reach their targets. By now the club was empty—the fleeing patrons confirmed teetotalers before they reached the door. One completely intoxicated customer stumbled into Tibbets' transparent automobile, drove it off by sheer reflex and later sold it to a circus.

The demon was bending over the half conscious Tibbets. "When the strain is too great, you will slip from this continuum into a region more suitable for an imitation demon. There you will be my sole concern for a very long time." The demon laughed cruelly in a way best described as demonic and vanished after Tibbets.

. . . each new victim becomes a recruit to the ranks of menace.

DE BRIGNAC'S LADY

BY KIRK WASHBURN

Heading by Jack N. Davis

CHAPTER I

DEATH STRIKES BONNE CHASSE

"IF THE end should overtake me before you arrive—"

This was my first word of Armand de Brignac in upward of two years. With his alarming, almost incoherent letter spread before me as I packed my bags, and with no more understanding than I had gained on first perusal, I read again:

Dear Wynne:

Can you come to Bonne Chasse? Rather, you must come! This is a matter that concerns not only myself, but the safety—the immortal souls—of hapless others.

If the end should overtake me before you arrive, you know the address of my attorneys. I have drawn my will in your favor, and arranged a power of attorney in your name, should I disappear with my death unestablished. In either circumstance, you will find old black Tante Celie somewhere about the place—though not within the house—and she will tell you enough to guide your future actions.

However incredible her story, if it happens you are forced to seek her out, you must believe her—you must believe her!

I have not, as you know, a single living kinsman; there is no other to whom I can turn in my distress. Do not fail me, Wynne; and come as quickly as you may. Hasten, mon ami!

Yours, as ever,
De Brignac.

Our lifelong friendship left de Brignac no room to doubt that I would answer his unusual summons without question, and with all dispatch; nor did any other course occur to me. Beyond the actual hours consumed in my rapid journey from the North, there was very little time to account for, from my receipt of Armand's letter to the moment I stepped from a noon train in New Orleans.

Bonne Chasse, plantation and country seat of the de Brignacs since French Colonial days, lies some twenty miles down-river from the city. I had telegraphed Armand to expect me, and the uneasiness I had felt since first reading his puzzling message was not allayed by his absence at the station, and the failure of a servant to meet me in his place.

Stepping into a telephone booth in the station, I called the number listed under Armand's name in the local-long distance section of the directory. At my insistence, the operator made re-

peated unsuccessful attempts to establish the desired connection, until I finally accepted her report that my party did not answer.

After some hesitancy, I determined first of all to call upon Armand's attorneys. In keeping with my lack of further definite plans, I left my bags in the depot checkroom, and consumed a hasty luncheon in a near by restaurant. A short while later I entered a dingy suite of offices that belied the repute of their occupants, and asked to see that grizzled old barrister, Judge Henry Claybourne.

I HANDED my card to an exceedingly pretty girl, who, I made note, had brown hair of a shade that was almost auburn, and a most disturbing pair of deep blue eyes. Now she smiled regretfully.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Randall, but the judge is in court, and young Mr. Claybourne is out of town. Could your business wait until later this afternoon?"

I considered for a moment, in some hesitancy, whether I should go on down to Bonne Chasse. Although I had wired Armand of my coming at the commencement of my journey, his failure to meet me at the train left me uncertain as to whether he had received my message and was expecting me. I wondered, also, at the failure of my attempt to telephone him from the station. However, I decided to go to Bonne Chasse.

"I don't think I can get back this afternoon," I told the young lady. "I intend to hire a car and go down the river to the de Brignac plantation, and I don't know just what my plans will be after I get there."

"Oh," the girl exclaimed, with sudden interest, "Mr. Armand de Brignac's place?" Then, in some confusion, she hurried on, "If you're going to hire a car, my younger brother has been using our car—that is—he—"

"Why, of course!" I responded. "I'd be delighted to let him take me down, Miss—er—"

"Jackson!" she breathed in relief. "I know where to phone Andrew, and if you'll sit down, I'll have him here in just a minute."

Miss Jackson's brother showed up in a little more than the minute she had promised, and I liked the boy on sight. He was an intelligent-looking youngster, hardly more than twenty-one or two. I speedily struck a bargain with him; and, after I had thanked his sister, we set out at once for Bonne Chasse.

When we had reached the plantation, I showed Jackson where to turn off the highway into a road leading across the estate, and we drove between

double rows of ancient oaks until we came to the Big House of the de Brignacs.

THE sun was bright, and had fulfilled its earlier promise of one of those balmy, spring-like days that I had sorely missed in the chill winter of the North. Even so, the shadows under the long double row of gnarled oaks that led from the highway to the house seemed too somber, and at sinister variance with the brightness of the day. The impression remained as, bidding Andrew to wait, I knocked at the closed door upon which I had never felt the need to knock before.

It was odd that the door should be closed at such an hour; odd, likewise, that I had seen no living creature about the grounds on my way up from the main road. Stranger still was the fact that I, who came in answer to a summons, should receive no answer to my knock.

Acting upon the thought, I moved aside from the door, and peered in at the windows opening upon the front veranda. I had not previously noticed that all the window-blinds were closed, and my testing fingers proved them thick with dust, as were also the panes of glass I could feel by prying between the wooden slats.

Taking Armand's letter from my pocket, I confirmed only what I already knew: that it specifically bade me to come to Bonne Chasse. In the face of this, Bonne Chasse lay shuttered and deserted, with dust and spiders' webs of more than one week's accumulation between the interstices of the blinds.

The house, like all those in that region of potential floods, was built upon high pillars, so that it had, in effect, a capacious basement entirely above the ground. The brick walls of this under-story were flush with the walls of the house proper, and the paved open space between them and the outer pillars supporting the floor of the veranda formed a sort of cool, covered pergola. I descended from my fruitless inspection of the porch, and made a round beneath it, with similar results.

Here below, the shutters were solid, and I could not peer between them, but the dust upon the pavement was a quarter-inch in depth—except in one place, beneath a window at the back of the basement. At this spot, the thick dust was shuffled away, in a kind of irregular path across the bricks, and footprints were plainly discernible. I stooped closer, and I do not know what faculty of intuition caused the chill feeling with which I recognized, among the large tracks a man would make, the unmistak-

able impressions of a woman's small and shapely foot.

I looked at the shutters over the window. The cracks in the joints of the hinges showed sharp and clearly defined, lacking the film of rust which quickly accumulates in the humid atmosphere of the region. The seal of spiders' web was missing. It was evident that this window was in use—but why, and by whom?

UNEASILY I debated whether to return to the city and again seek to consult with Judge Claybourne, or find black old Tante Celie, for what light she might shed upon this growing mystery. De Brignac's letter suggested both courses, but I decided upon the latter to begin with, as I was already upon the grounds. I re-entered the car, and Andrew drove, under my direction, to where I knew were situated the cabins that housed the plantation's laborers.

Although, in the light of what I had already seen and learned, I should have been in some measure prepared to find the quarters lifeless, the actual discovery of their appalling emptiness came as a shock. I shuddered, touched by something more oppressive than mere brooding silence, unnatural as that was. I was wondering of the cause. . . .

"Hallo!" I shouted, not knowing which cabin Aunt Celie might occupy—if, indeed, it was reasonable to hope that the silence hid the presence of any living thing.

The sound of my voice served only to emphasize the recurring stillness.

"There are some clothes hanging on the line behind that cabin, yonder," commented Jackson, pointing.

I followed the direction of his finger, and saw that what he said was true, but a second hail to the cabin produced no more result than the first, although the clothes upon the line had all the indications of recent washing. I noticed that the door of the cabin was slightly ajar, and placed my foot upon the rude steps that descended from the threshold directly to the ground. Suddenly, as I stepped upward, I knew that I wanted to turn around, to be away from that place as quickly as I might. Without going further, I knew that I stood upon the edge of unholy discovery, so it was very unwillingly I stepped through the door. At once, a faint sickening odor assailed my nostrils—the place stank with the foulness of a charnel-house—and I experienced a wave of nausea. Only the light coming through the open door relieved the shuttered obscurity of the room; but we could see, plainly enough, the

rude bedstead in one corner . . . the huddled shape. . . .

"Open the window!" My dry lips hardly framed the words.

Jackson threw back the solid shutter from the single unglazed window, and the clean afternoon sunshine had that much more chance to dispel the fetid murkiness of the room. I was thankful that I could see better, that I did not have to go closer to that corner. . . .

Upon the bed, clad in the torn remnants of a clean though faded nightgown, and partly concealed by the disordered coverings, lay a thing that once had been Armand's black Mammy Celie. The body was contorted, as if a struggle had preceded death, and there were great brown stains of dried blood upon and all about it, particularly the upper part. It looked as if the throat had been ripped wide open. A different kind of horror overcame my previous squeamishness, and I moved closer, staring.

"Looks as if a dog, or some kind of animal, chewed her throat to pieces," Andrew's awed voice sounded in my ear.

It looked just like that! Whatever did it, it must have happened in the night, judging from the evidence, and as recently as the night before. The blood stains were hardly dry and brown.

I pushed Jackson through the door ahead of me, and the air was like balm to our nostrils. We climbed into the car and sped back toward the Big House in silence. Our throats crawled too much with nausea to endure the strain of speech.

CHAPTER II

A CORPSE DISAPPEARS

NO WORD passed between us until Andrew applied brakes to the car, bringing it to a stop in front of the deserted mansion. Dismounting, I started to climb the front steps; but suddenly remembered that the doors were locked, and that I had no keys. Then I thought of the windows underneath the veranda, toward which led footprints in the dust upon the pavement, and which had shutters with hinges bright from constant and recent use.

Acting upon the thought, I walked around to try for entry at this window, Andrew at my heels. My suspicions were justified when, in response to an inconsiderable effort, the shutters swung easily open, and I raised the sash.

The basement, familiar enough to me, was divided into quarters for the house servants, and a large room used for storage space. The door to this latter compartment was locked, but we

were able to give the rest of the basement a hasty but unproductive inspection. Except under the window, where there was more dust than elsewhere, and some further evidence of the footprints likewise visible on the outside, there was no indication of any intrusion or disturbance. Ascending the stairs to the house above, we found the rooms there equally deserted, but all more or less in order.

The library was the last room to come under inspection. Conspicuous upon a table, was a leather-bound volume, reinforced with metal edges and supplied with a neat but efficient-looking lock. Gilt lettering on the leather cover proclaimed the book to be the diary of Armand de Brignac, and I felt that I was justified, in view of the disturbing import of my friend's letter, in forcing the lock which secured its pages. With some difficulty, and at the cost of complete ruination of the binding, I accomplished my purpose.

My inspection, however, was necessarily cursory, for I had to notify the authorities of the gruesome discovery of Aunt Celie's mutilated remains. Using the telephone in the hall, I soon apprised my old friend, Sheriff Grandison, of such details as I had knowledge.

"I'll notify the coroner, and be right over, Wynne!" In the sheriff's voice on the wire I seemed to detect an added quality of harshness.

The house was supplied with electricity from a plant in the basement, and as the dusk was fast gathering, I switched on the lights and we settled down in the uncomfortable desolation of the place, to wait for the sheriff's arrival. We had not long to wait.

Through a window, I soon observed a pair of flickering headlights coming up the road in the deepening murk of late twilight, and a decrepit coupé came to an abrupt stop in front of the house. I ran down to the basement, and out through the one open window, calling to Grandison as he started up the front steps.

HASTILY explaining the locked doors, I shook hands with the lanky, grizzled old officer, whom I had known all my life. Before I could give him my account of the tragedy in the Negro quarters, a second and quite obviously smarter car sped up and parked behind the sheriff's vehicle. I greeted Doctor Duplessis, fat and affable, who had been the parish coroner for as long as I remember.

"What's up, Wynne?" puffed the doctor, after he had wrung my hand in both of his.

As briefly as I could, I told them what Andrew and I had

found in Aunt Celie's cabin. They heard me through in silence, except for occasional cluckings from the voluble little doctor. The sheriff, who wasted few words, turned to Duplessis:

"All three of us can ride over to the quarters in your car; it would be a tight squeeze in mine."

Andrew had come out of the house and joined us. When I had introduced the youngster, Duplessis urged, with several dark hints I did not understand, that he be permitted to share the rumble seat with me, instead of remaining alone at the house. Obediently we climbed in, Grandison sharing the driver's seat.

As we rode, I wondered at the fact that, apparently, no plans had been made for the removal of the cadaver we were going to see. I voiced what was in my thoughts, and the sheriff favored me with a quick look over his shoulder.

"There ain't going to be any body!" The unexpected reply came clearly to me, through the open back of the car.

I repeated Grandison's statement in surprise, and demanded some sort of explanation.

"Wait." There was a finality about the word that made me understand the futility of further questioning. Duplessis drove ahead without saying anything; but I sensed his excitement, and that but increased my own puzzlement.

We came to the quarters, and I picked out the cabin we sought, with the aid of a powerful electric torch that Grandison handed me. The sheriff took over the flashlight as we quit the car, and hustled briskly into the shanty. The other three of us followed at his heels, Andrew and I somewhat less briskly.

Grandison played the beam of light from his torch in a wide arc about the room, until it rested upon the bed in the corner. . . .

"Well?" grunted the sheriff, while I gave vent to my surprise.

It was undoubtedly the same bed: there were the same bedclothes, with the same unmistakable dark stains upon them. Beyond those disordered coverings, those sinister dark patches that were not a part of their quilted patterns—the bed was empty. The body was gone!

"I told you so," said the sheriff, with glum satisfaction.

"Where did the body go, then?" I demanded. "You must have had it moved, since you were so sure it wouldn't be here."

"No," disputed Grandison, "I didn't have it moved, and I don't know where it is—I wish to God I did!

"You were sure the body

wouldn't be here," I insisted, "so you must have an idea what happened to it."

"Yes," grimly assented the sheriff, "I got an idea, all right."

"What sort of an idea?"

I waited for an answer, but Grandison remained obstinately silent.

"It's after sunset," Duplessis quietly interposed, "and when people die as folks around here are going to say old Celie died, they—come to life—between sunset and dawn!"

"It's all right for them to say so—but do you believe that sort of rot?" I scoffed, conscious of a chill along my spine in spite of my ridicule.

"Unless you leave Bonne Chasse very quickly," gently replied the doctor, "you're likely to learn that a lot of things you've thought were rot are horribly true." I was convinced, now, that his quietness of manner, so unnatural under the circumstances in one of his volatile temperament, was forced in order to cover up his actual excitement.

"We might as well be going back," Grandison curtly interrupted. Then, "Are you going to stop at Bonne Chasse tonight?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's your business, but I wouldn't, if I were you," the sheriff advised darkly.

"I'll chance it," said I, as we climbed once more into the car.

When we had come again to the hall, Grandison added, abruptly, "Got a gun?"

"Why, no," I answered, getting out of the rumble seat.

"It's just as well that he has not," observed Duplessis, between whom and the sheriff there seemed to be understanding. "The kind of ammunition he'd be using wouldn't be any good. I have a gun I'll give him —one that's loaded right."

I took the pistol he proffered with his words, a compact, vicious-looking automatic of blued steel.

"What will I need this for?" I asked.

"I hope you don't!" fervently declared the old sheriff. "But if you see Armand's wife, or old Celie—or Armand!—for God's sake don't hesitate to shoot! I mean that!"

I hardly knew whether to laugh or shiver. Before I could do either, Grandison bellowed a hasty farewell, and departed.

CHAPTER III

THE DIARY OF DREAD

I STARED down the road for a moment, then turned blankly to Duplessis. I wondered if the sheriff had suddenly lost his mind.

"He went off as if there had

been no murder," I protested, "or as if there were nothing for him to do about it, in case there has!"

"Corpus delicti, you know!" wryly enlighted the doctor. "There wasn't any body, and as far as Grandison knows, there wasn't any murder. That gives the sheriff all the excuse he needs, eager as he is to wash his hands of the matter."

I turned hotly to Andrew.

"Although the sheriff and the coroner seem indifferent," I cried, "the people of this house have disappeared, and you and I know that old Celie was murdered in her cabin. I am going to stay here and get to the bottom of all this, if it takes a year! I don't want to stay alone; are you game to stick with me, for at least a week—and begin tonight?"

Doctor Duplessis started to voice a protest, but I waved him aside. Andrew readily agreed to remain with me, stipulated the necessity of first making a flying trip back to town for some clothes, and to inform his sister of his plans, and make those various other arrangements which normally attend an unexpected absence from home.

I accepted the condition as being reasonable; the more so as it would have been necessary to send for supplies for our larder, in any event. I also wanted to get my own clothes in the handbags at the depot check room.

As I handed him money with which to purchase provisions for about a week, a further thought occurred to me. Having no desire to entrust my stomach to Jackson's ministrations, and still less to my own, I asked him whether it would not be possible to obtain the services of a temporary cook—one he knew to be steadfast and reliable. I was willing to guarantee a week's wages, and named a sum which I knew to be generous.

"I don't know—" Andrew shook a dubious head. Then, brightening, "Tommie might come! If it's all right with you?"

"By all means," I assented. I had not the least idea who Tommie might be, but he evidently had Andrew's full approval, and I was entirely content to have the problem solved so readily. Andrew climbed into his car.

"I'll be back by nine o'clock," he promised. Duplessis had stood silently by during this time, until Andrew roared down the road; then I felt his hand upon my arm.

"Come into the house, son," he said to me, gravely paternal. "There's a lot in the way of explanation—and warning—coming to you."

"It's about time!" I agreed shortly.

HE ACCOMPANIED me through the basement window, puffing as he was forced to climb the stairs to the floor above. I led the way to the library.

"Well, Wynne," commenced Duplessis, when we were comfortably settled in our chairs, "everything around Bonne Chasse has been in a state of unrest since Armand returned from the war with his wife. You knew she had died, of course?"

"Why, no," I exclaimed, considerably taken aback at this unexpected news. My irritation, which had mounted steadily for some time, prompted my complaint, "There seems to be a whole lot around here that everybody knows but me!"

"How well did you know Armand's wife?" The doctor puffed on a cigarette, ignoring my outburst.

"Not very well," I answered. "We met her together, in Paris right after the Armistice, and Armand married her after an unbelievably short courtship. Beyond the fact that she had been a Russian countess, and fled to Paris to escape the revolution, I know nothing at all of her—except, that is, that she was fascinatingly beautiful"—I hesitated, searching for the right words—"beautiful as Circe and Delilah must have been."

I did not add, aloud, that I had disliked Armand's Countess Helene on sight. I had seen progressively less of my friend during our remaining days in Paris, following his marriage, and only occasionally after we had returned separately to New Orleans.

My father died while I was in France, and his death left me alone and brought about the crash that swept away his shrunken fortune. I struggled hopelessly until, at length, an opportunity to rehabilitate myself offered in the North; and nearly two years passed before I again walked along the bayous, or gazed upon the moss-bearded oaks I loved so well. Until today, when I came at Armand's call.

Duplessis snubbed his cigarette; and, breaking in upon my musing, abruptly exclaimed, "Armand's tenants and plantation hands had a sullen, frightened hatred of his wife. I have seen with my own eyes, women snatch their babes from her reach, and even shield them from her mere glance—openly, on her own husband's estate.

"The house servants, most of whom had been employed at Bonne Chasse throughout their entire lives, gradually deserted their mistress—evasive reasons for their departures, or no reason at all. Finally, only faithful old Celie remained, of the original domestic staff."

The doctor paused long

enough to light another cigarette.

"The queerest part of it all," Duplessis continued, "was that it began to be noticed, by even the most casual observers, how Armand appeared to have developed the same deadly hatred for his wife that his dependents long had entertained. He plainly avoided her, and when he commenced gradually to show evidence of ill health—although I was his physician, he failed to ask my services—I surmised, at first, that he suffered from a nervous disorder, which could arise very easily.

"Then I observed, on two occasions when I happened to see him, that he appeared unnaturally weak, and his throat was wrapped with a silk muffler, although the weather was warm. That made me wonder . . ."

"Go ahead," I said.

"Then," he resumed, "two small children disappeared. One of them was an infant belonging to the family of a brutish moss-picker who had already faced one subsequently unproven charge of infanticide, some years ago. That passed. But another babe disappeared, this time from equally lowly but much more reputable folk.

"The plantation hands, the shrimpfishers and the moss-pickers on the bayous, said that Armand de Brignac's wife abducted them both! Abducted them for purposes upon which you may speculate for yourself!"

"What utter rot!" But I knew the possiblities of mongrel superstition.

"Wait," the doctor cried, his beady eyes alight, "wait until I tell you something that you will think more outrageous than all the rest of it, combined:

"Do you know what Armand told me? He said, 'She should have been burnt at the stake! I would have driven a stake through her foul heart, except that I told Father Lavalle, and he watched to see that I did not!' "

Ignoring my startled exclamation, the doctor rushed on, with the air of one determined to finish a matter and be done with it:

"There remains to tell you that Armand himself disappeared a few days ago, about a week after his wife's burial. I know that he made one trip to the city, and visited Judge Claybourne's office. That is all I do know—all that anyone knows—yet!"

Duplessis closed his words with an abrupt gesture, and awaited my comment with half-defiant expectancy. As a matter of fact, I was completely nonplussed, and do not remember to have said anything. Evidently with some relief, the doctor prepared to leave.

"Call on me if you need me,"

he urged, with another of his pats on the arm; "don't hesitate to use the phone at any time—day or night—if you need me for anything at all."

I thanked him and saw him to his car.

RE-ENTERING the house, I decided that the library would be the place to occupy my time until Andrew's return. I wanted to go through Armand's diary again.

I commenced at the first entry in the book, which was dated almost two years previously, and read through the pages that followed with systematic care. I found many vague references to Helene, of a nature to establish the fact of a progressive fear and horror of the woman he had married.

My search for pointed disclosures was first rewarded, however, where Armand's pen had scrawled words that spoke eloquently of the agitation that had unsteadied his hand:

"I am positive (I read) that she is what I have feared. My God! These tiny wounds in my throat, that will not heal, this awful weakness: this is her work! And this foul creature of the night is my wife!"

Entered a month later, another passage seemed to shout aloud from its smeared page:

"Someone has finally done it! The father of one of those pitiful babes, or someone else who knew or suspected enough to be in a frenzy of fear and hatred of my 'wife' (God pity me) fired from without a window of her room, and shot her through the head! There will be no hunt for the assassin—her executioner, I should say!—as Doctor Duplessis (who is the coroner) believed what I told him, and already had suspicions of his own. There were no witnesses, and Duplessis had the courage to sign a certificate of death from heart failure, in his other capacity of physician to my family.

"If only I could be sure that she is truly dead, that she can be killed in this fashion! I fear, instead, that there has been loosed upon the world a horror in all its fullness. I would have settled the point, but Father Lavalle will not believe me. He guards her body from the stake I have already sharpened . . ."

Then, this last entry:

"I have written Wynne, today, but I fear I have waited too long.

"I found a woman's footprints, this morning, in the dust of the pavement at the basement window I left open when I closed up all the other doors and windows. I forgot to lock it last night, or it may be that she called me in my sleep and I opened it for her. She was here in the house. There are wounds in my throat again, and I feel that accursed weakness. . . . But I do not understand why, when I awoke, my hands were soiled with fresh earth. . . .

"Ah, if Wynne can but come in time!"

If I but came in time! I still did not know whether I had, or not. I had found enough to cause me consternation and apprehension, but nothing in Armand's diary disclosed his present condition or whereabouts. My head spun from my efforts to review, in rational fashion, what I knew of the whole incredible mystery.

THE circumstances in which I found myself involved gripped me, however, with less than enough intensity to subdue my growing hunger. I had lunched in the early part of the afternoon, and found myself wishing that Jackson would hurry his return with the elements of a makeshift supper.

As I helplessly dropped the diary back upon the table, I heard a car coming swiftly up the road. It came to a stop in front of the house; and in a moment I heard Jackson's voice, and I thought I caught an indistinct reply. Good, thought I: the capable and enterprising youngster has kept his promise and brought us a cook, despite the shortness of the time he had in which to work.

I heard them walking over the bricks toward the basement window through which I had entered, and I started to meet them. The hall was lighted, and I had previously located a master switch near the stairway from below, that controlled the light in the basement. I turned it on, and I heard footsteps climbing the stairs.

I waited a moment, and suddenly started with surprise and disbelief in the evidence of my eyes. The girl who climbed the stairs was Judge Claybourne's secretary!

I stammered something, and the girl laughed. Close behind her, Andrew grinned triumphantly.

"I told you she'd come and keep house for us, didn't I?" he demanded.

"You did not!" I contradicted. "You said something about somebody named 'Tommie' coming back with you, but you certainly didn't mention this young lady—"

"Well, this is Tommie. I thought you'd remember meeting her in Judge Claybourne's office."

"Tomasine, Mr. Randall," the girl laughed. "Andrew isn't very definite at times, I fear. The young rascal—she gave his arm an affectionate squeeze—couldn't have kept me away after he told me what a perfectly gorgeous and goosefleshy mystery there is here. I've always wanted to be in on something really shuddery! Fortunately, I have had to defer

my vacation this year, until now; and I have two weeks of my own; beginning tomorrow. I did not have the means to do very much, and I was wondering how I was going to spend the time."

"Well," I stammered, "I—"

"After all," Tomasine reminded, with a smile that was the feminine counterpart of her brother's rake-helly grin, "you did want a cook, didn't you?"

I laughed. It was really funny, this idea of Judge Claybourne's attractive secretary filling my order for a cook. There was another side to it, however, and I sobered on reflecting that she might become involved in the events casting their somber shadows all about us. She read my thought.

"I'm capable of looking out for myself," she assured me. "I'm not given to hysterics, and that sort of thing. If Andrew can run risks, so can I; and besides, I know how much Judge Claybourne would like to have all this cleared up. He's an old dear, and if I can help you solve the mystery, I'll be doing him a favor."

When a woman—especially a young and very pretty woman—makes up her mind to something, a mere man might just as well give way. I surrendered (secretly pleased that I could not avoid it), and helped Andrew carry provisions into the kitchen.

I was really too near starvation to argue, anyway; and I did full justice to the tasty meal that Tomasine quickly put together, of cold canned food that I had never before known could be made so palatable.

CHAPTER IV

DE BRIGNAC'S LADY APPEARS

AFTER we had eaten and then assisted Tomasine in tidying up, I led them to the library, which I favored because of its comfortable chairs. What Andrew had told her, and what she had learned in Judge Claybourne's office, put Tomasine in possession of most of the facts about happenings at Bonne Chasse. I showed her Armand's letter and his diary.

"How are you going to start about unravelling things?" she asked. "I get the impression you don't expect much assistance from the sheriff?"

"You're right about the sheriff," I admitted. "And frankly, I don't know just how to go about getting at the bottom of this affair. All this talk—mostly insinuations—about vampires and that sort of thing—" I finished with a gesture indicating my bafflement.

"Do you believe that part of it?" Tomasine asked.

I hesitated. "That's rather a

strain on credulity, don't you think?"

"Well," Tomasine evaded, "what little I knew of Mr. de Brignac indicates him to have been a man not given to wild imaginings."

Here Andrew offered a practical suggestion.

"It's after ten o'clock," he said. "Suppose we turn in and sleep on it. In the morning we can start out fresh, and we may find something that will give us a lead."

"Good idea," I agreed, and Tomasine nodded. "If we can't make any progress tomorrow, I am going to call in private investigators and see what they can do."

LONG habit gave me a preference for sleeping alone; but I had previously given a thought to occupying a room that was furnished with two beds. I sensed an underlying disquietude in my surroundings that caused me to welcome the prospect of Andrew using the extra bed. Immediately adjoining this room was another comfortably furnished chamber, to which I showed Tomasine.

I am ordinarily a sound sleeper, but I had reached that state of mental fatigue where I was actually too tired to rest well. When I did finally drift into fitful sleep, long after Andrew's regular breathing betrayed his untroubled slumber, I slept uneasily, troubled with confused fragments of disordered dreams.

It must have been well after midnight when I started into full wakefulness, gripped with a feeling that all within the house was not as it should have been. Through the windows of the room poured a flood of moonlight, and it was plainly to be seen that here at least was nothing to account for the apprehension with which I had awakened. Clearly, there was nothing in this room, no sound within the house, to warrant my disquietude. Nothing in this room . . . the words ran through my tired brain, with a sinister insinuation in the repetition. In this room!

Impelled by an impulse I could not resist, I slipped out of the bed. At least, I could take a look around, and so convince myself of my own foolishness. In case something should be wrong—after a moment of indecision, I took from beneath my pillow the pistol Doctor Duplessis had given me. Quietly opening the door, I slipped into the dark, unlighted hall.

The feeling that something was amiss grew stronger. Suddenly I caught my breath. There was a thin streak of moonlight athwart the hall—and it should not have been there! There was no way in which the moon could

shine into that hall except through one of the rooms flanking it. The pencil of ghostly light came from within Tomasine's room—and I distinctly remembered seeing her close the door when she retired.

All my senses alert, I crept toward the barely opened door. I listened, straining my ears, but I heard no sound. The door was not sufficiently ajar for me to see within. Cautiously I opened it wider; and then I forgot caution at the scene that met my startled stare.

Tomasine's bed was near the windows, and I could partly see the outline of her body beneath the coverings. I say partly, because of the stooping figure that crouched over her, its back toward the door. The bending figure was shrouded in white, and there was something in its attitude that chilled me as I looked. Over all the scene the ghostly moonlight flooded.

I SAW that the intruder was a woman, but I did not then perceive why that realization should send fresh shivers along my back. Whoever this intruder, she had no right to be there. Whatever her motive—suddenly, dread intuition prompting, I gave a hoarse cry. The crouching figure whirled, and I cried out again, with horror in my voice, but nothing of surprise. Something had whispered swiftly that I would gaze—as I was gazing—into the flaming eyes of Helene de Brignac!

"What are you doing here?" I demanded harshly.

The white, dead face smiled, and the smile was more dreadful than any grimace of hate. The eyes, curiously lifeless and yet at the same time lit with a cold, feral glare—those eyes burned into mine, held me spellbound and helpless. I knew, in that awful moment, that here was a horror that had no right to walk the earth. And I stood helpless, bound by the grip of those hellish orbs. The whiteshrouded thing that had been Armand's wife glided toward me. Pallid arms reached out, white hands that were too white, with long slender fingers, reached under my chin . . . to bend back my head. . . .

At the touch of those cold fingers, clammy with the chill of death, something snapped inside me, breaking the spell that held me enthralled. I leaped backward, a strangled cry in my throat, and fired pointblank with the pistol in my hand.

The shrouded figure screamed with pain, and I knew that I had scored a hit. It backed away toward the windows, one of which was open; while a fleeting thought of wonder flashed through my mind that, if she

were what I thought, bullets could harm her. Then I remembered what the doctor had said about having the "right kind" of ammunition, and I felt swift elation.

"Silver bullets!" I cried, while the Thing screamed again and scampered for the window. She tumbled through the opening, spreading her arms so that her white shroud flapped in startling semblance of two monstrous, pallid batwings. I fired again as she leaped from the window-sill, and knew that I had missed.

NO MORE than a few minutes had lapsed since I had left my bed. Andrew was at my side, demanding:

"What's the matter? I heard your shot; what happened?"

"Wait!" I commanded. "Turn on the light and let us see to your sister."

The light snapped on, and we bent over Tomasine. She stirred and, gasping, struggled to a sitting position.

"Those eyes!" cried the girl. "Shining at me out of a dead face in the mist that seemed to come with her! . . . And her red lips . . . they were alive!"

"Who?" Andrew demanded. "Whose lips?"

"You aren't hurt," I soothed; I could see that her smooth, exposed throat bore no marks. Thank God I had been in time!

"For the love of heaven tell me what happened!" Andrew demanded.

"Something—some whisper of instinct—wakened me and sent me into the hall," I told him. "I saw Tomasine's door ajar, and knowing that I had seen her close it, looked inside. I saw—Helene de Brignac—bending over your sister! I shot her once, I think, and missed her with another shot as she jumped through the window."

"All those stories must be true, then," whispered Tomasine.

I nodded, slowly and reluctantly. "I'm afraid we've encountered something I didn't dream could exist."

"Hadn't we better look outside, under the window, and see if we can follow whatever it was that hopped through?" This practical suggestion came from Andrew.

"Yes," I assented. "If you will stay with Tomasine, I'll have a look."

"I'm going, too," Tomasine declared. "Wait until I slip on some clothes, and I'll be right with you—I don't think I want to sleep any more tonight!"

"I don't imagine any of us will sleep much more, tonight," I was forced to agree.

"Look," directed Andrew, "you hit her, all right! There's blood on the window-sill."

We hurried to the window,

verifying the fact that at least one of my bullets had found its mark.

"It's her blood; no mistake about it," I said.

"Hurry!" Tomasine excitedly exclaimed. "If she is hit, she may not have been able to get away—"

"And I can complete the job," I finished grimly. "You're right. Come on, Andy!"

We returned to our room and hastily pulled on trousers over pajamas, slipping our feet into shoes. Buttoning my coat, I stepped into the hall, Andrew following. Quick as we had been, Tomasine came through her door at the same time, fully clad.

I turned the master switch at the head of the stairs, lighting the basement. Mentally, I resolved to have a locksmith come over as soon after daylight as I could get one, and have keys fitted to all the doors.

WE UNLOCKED the basement window and stepped out. The window through which the Thing had leaped was on the opposite side of the house, and we hurried around. There was no mark in the turf to indicate that anything had leaped from the veranda, falling heavily to the ground. Andrew remarked as much.

"Of course not," Tomasine pointed out. "It was stupid of us to expect it—naturally, she ran down the steps."

This was logical, so we ran to the steps, hoping to pick up the trail there. Sure enough, a flashlight revealed another of the dark stains upon a step, although it was only a small spot.

"She wasn't hit hard, evidently," Andrew deduced. He took my torch and swept it in a wide arc, illuminating the brick pavement beneath the veranda. Suddenly he gave a startled exclamation. "There's another stain!"

"And another!" cried Tomasine. "It looks as if she went around that corner of the house, under the porch."

Such indeed seemed to be the case. We discovered several more of the bloodstains, fairly marking the direction our quarry had taken. And the trail led plainly to that basement window through which we had just come!

We stared at one another in bewilderment.

"She's gone back into the house," Tomasine whispered.

I shook my head. "She can't have got in that way," I reminded. "The shutters were barred on the inside, up until the time we opened them. I'm afraid we're up a tree though; I suppose we may as well go back in the house, and wait for daylight."

While it seemed evident that nothing could have gained entrance to the house through the

barred and solid shuttered frame of that window, I was nevertheless careful to look about as we went inside, searching for more of the telltale stains that we had followed. I found none, however, and called attention to the fact with some relief. Again fastening the shutters, and then the window, we passed to the floor above.

CHAPTER V

THE TRAITOR

NONE of us felt that we wanted further sleep. We stayed in the kitchen while Tomasine made strong coffee, which we then took into the library, preferring to drink it there. Tomorrow, I vowed, would see the end of the terror that gripped Bonne Chasse. I said as much, aloud.

Tomasine regarded me with a sudden puzzled frown.

"One thing that we seem to be taking very lightly," she pointed out, "is the fate or whereabouts of Mr. Armand de Brignac. If we could locate him, we should be able to solve the mystery."

"All we should discover," I disagreed, "would be Armand's own fate. As far as concerns what we have to do, I think I know that already. Much as my intelligence rebels at the idea, the evidence compels the belief that Helene de Brignac—whom we saw tonight—has become one of those monsters whose existence outside of folklore and legend I would previously have ridiculed: a vampire."

Tomasine shuddered, and her brother stared at me across his empty cup.

"Fortunately," I continued, with an uncomfortable feeling that, in spite of all we know, belief in such things was ridiculous, "very fortunately, the legends of vampires and werewolves that have come down to us from olden times, also tell us how to kill such horrors. Tomorrow, I intend to open Helene de Brignac's grave, and do what there is to be done—"

I saw Tomasine, who was sitting facing the door, gasp suddenly, and her eyes open wide, while a familiar voice interrupted:

"It won't be at all necessary, my dear Wynne!"

I whirled, and beheld, standing in the doorway to the hall, none other than Armand de Brignac!

"Armand!" I cried, and rose to offer him my hand. Strangely, he made no move to accept it, but walked over and seated himself in an unoccupied chair.

"I've been away," he muttered vaguely. "I've just got back from —er—a trip. Sorry not to have been here when you arrived,

after sending for you and all that, but I'll explain it satisfactorily in the morning; it's too long a story to tell now."

This did not seem at all like my friend of old, and there was an air about him, as well as a certain elusive suggestion, that perturbed me.

I looked at him, for a moment, somewhat at a loss for words. Then, using what tact I could, I blurted out an account of our recent disturbing visitation. Armand listened in silence, and with astounding indifference. When I had finished, he ignored the entire subject! As if he had heard not even a word of what I said, he coldly observed:

"I see you have Judge Claybourne's secretary here"—he had dismissed Andrew with an uninterested glance—"which is fortunate, as it happens. I am faced with the necessity of again leaving Bonne Chasse—for a long period of time, I fear, and there are some changes I would like to have made in my will. A codicil—I believe that is the correct term for it, Miss Jackson?"

Acknowledging Tomasine's affirming nod, he asked, "As you seem indisposed to sleep, would you mind taking down the changes I have in mind—now? I am somewhat pressed for time. You can transcribe your notes on the typewriter on that table in the corner."

"Why do you want to draw up a codicil to your will at this ungodly hour, Armand?" I asked. "Can't it wait until morning?"

"I can't be here in the morning," Armand answered. "I want to be sure of certain arrangements, and there is no telling what may happen, nor when."

"I don't mind," Tomasine said. "I believe I have a ruled notebook in my handbag. If you'll wait until I get it—"

I thought, at the time, that she left the library with more haste than was necessary, as if she feared, oddly, that her departure might be hindered. I have since realized that her feminine perceptiveness, more delicately attuned than my own, in a measure warned her of what was to follow.

"It was good of you to come, Wynne," Armand said, after a moment of silence. "I certainly owe you an explanation—and, in due course, you shall have one." It seemed to me there was a curious, underlying irony in his flat, almost perfunctory words.

"There's a lot more than your failure to meet me in need of an explanation," I answered, rather forcibly, as Tomasine reentered with a notebook and pencil.

SHE was hardly seated, her pencil poised, when Armand, as if he could not restrain

his eagerness to be done with it, commenced to dictate.

He directed that I, as before, was to continue his sole legatee, inheriting his entire estate in the event of his death. There was one reservation, however, which constituted the simple substance of the codicil, and which was curious enough in its way. His house, with five acres of ground of which it was the center, was to be shut up and securely boarded, to remain for ever unaltered or unoccupied by me, my heirs or assigns, or any other persons whatsoever! A trust fund was provided to take care of taxes on the property thus reserved.

"Type it, quickly!" Armand urged Tomasine, when he had cease dictating. He was positively in a fever to be finished with the matter.

Obediently, Tomasine sat down at the machine in the corner, and swiftly, yet, so it seemed, apprehensively and anxiously, Armand read through her finished draft; after which he borrowed my fountain pen and affixed his signature. Returning the paper to Tomasine, he requested that she and Andrew sign as witnesses. To me he explained that, as I was his heir, it probably would be better to leave me out of it.

"I shall mail it to Judge Claybourne," he concluded, "along with a letter explaining that I am leaving the country for an indefinite period—perhaps for ever. I have no doubt," he informed Tomasine, with what sounded like sinister insinuation, "that your signatures can be verified, if necessary."

He rose from his chair, straightening to his full height. With the action he discarded the mask that he had, with obvious impatience, compelled himself to wear.

"Now," he abruptly addressed himself to me, "where is the weapon with which you wounded my wife?"

"Why," I stammered, taken aback at this sudden and unexpected turn, "I put it back under my pillow, in the bedroom."

"Ah!" breathed Armand. "Good—very good! And that being the case, let me show you something my dear friend!"

Puzzled, but still unsuspecting, I watched as he walked over and took down a pair of bright rapiers from their pegs above the mantel. I noticed, as he flexed the long blades and tested their points with satisfaction, that Tomasine was watching him with a sort of tense expectancy. I heard her breath catch sharply, and vaguely wondered why, as Armand laid one of the weapons on the near-by table, raising the other in almost the same motion.

Tomasine fumbled in sudden desperation at something in her

bosom. Then, to my utter stupefaction and horror, just as Tomasine jerked out the revolver I had left beneath my pillow—with an air of cold detachment, Armand buried his slender, vicious blade deep in Andrew's body!

CHAPTER VI

A DUEL WITH THE DEAD

TOMASINE'S weapon exploded as her brother clutched his side and, with choked cry, fell to the floor. She had acted too late, however; for, with the same flick of his wrist that served to withdraw the epeé after his thrust, Armand's blade lashed across her wrist like a whip, deflecting her aim and sending the gun spinning.

For one frozen second I had stood staring and rooted in my tracks, while Armand felled Andrew. Now I leaped for the pistol, determined to end this creature whom I saw revealed a fiend.

"One moment, my dear Wynne!" de Brignac mocked, the point of his swift blade forcing me back.

"You are another such thing as your wife!" I gasped, flinching in spite of myself before eyes that glowed redly in the dead waxen mask of his face.

"Is it not splendid," he leered, in tacit admission of my charge, "that, after the foolish hatred—at least on my part—that marred the association of our natural lives, my dear wife and I should finally be reconciled and share a closer kinship, a greater passion, than we could ever have known before?"

I made a furious gesture of revulsion, held in my tracks by the blade, the nonchalant, careless poise of which deceived me not at all. Armand—the Thing that had been Armand—wagged his head in mock reproach.

"How you misjudged her!" he chided. "How I misjudged her! All the while I loathed her, thinking her a thing of evil, intending only evil toward me, her lover and husband. Yet she sought merely to introduce me to that state of forbidden but transcendent ectasy I now enjoy."

"Why then, did you write me, begging me to save you from the obscene condition of which you now—damn you!—so glibly boast? You, whose least foulness is the murder of that boy: I ask you—why?"

"Because I was blind," he answered regretfully, "and did not realize what I did. I have since learned much. I have learned delights that burn in their intensity; of nights that are a delirium of joy. Doubtless the days I spend in the cold earth with my Helene would not be pleasant,

except that we sleep the dreamless, unknowing slumber of death. But out night together, when we revel to our satisfaction . . . ah, the nights!"

"Monster!" I grated, calculating my chances of keeping him distracted as I glimpsed Tomasine, even as she knelt tearfully beside Andrew, feeling for the gun. Then I saw her finger reach its butt—and I knew that Armand saw.

"Silver bullets!" The phrase came shouted from my lips.

With a yelp of fear, de Brignac leaped away, and with one last snarl of mingled fright and rage, scampered down the hall before Tomasine could fire. Seizing the pistol from her hand, I rushed in hot pursuit.

CHAPTER VII

TOMASINE DECLINES TO QUIT

ARMAND was not in sight in the hall, and I had an instinctive conviction that he had scuttled down the stairs to the basement. And the door to the stairs was open. . . .

Hastily I threw on the light switch, and bounded recklessly below. Although, I ransacked the basement from end to end, there was no sight of Armand. Then I thought of that window which was, so far, the only way into and out of the house. As I had suspected, the bolt was drawn, the heavy shutters slightly ajar. This was the way my bird had flown. I knew that the pursuit into the night was useless; and above was Andrew, wounded, perhaps killed, by the monster who once had been my dearest friend. Again I barred the window, and retraced my way upstairs.

I found Andrew half unconscious and very weak, apparently from loss of blood. Tomasine had already summoned Doctor Duplessis, with whom she was acquainted through her connection with Judge Claybourne. We put the youngster to bed, making him comfortable and stanching his wound as best we could. To do him justice, Duplessis was not long on the way. We heard his car speeding up the road and, shortly, the doctor bustled into the basement and up the stairs. With only a few words about what had happened, I let Tomasine hurry him in to her brother.

After a careful examination, Duplessis greatly relieved our fears by expressing his belief that Andrew's hurt was not grave. No vital organ appeared to have suffered injury.

Naturally, the doctor was consumed with curiosity, and demanded full details of our encounter with Armand, and his wounding of Andrew. So I led him once again into the library,

where Tomasine served the coffee she had hastily prepared.

As I rapidly related what had happened, from the time of Armand's startling appearance to his escape, with me in hot pursuit, Duplessis listened with absorbed interest. When I had finished the narrative, he rose to take his leave.

With grave friendliness, and an assuring hand upon my shoulder, he promised: "If there's any way I can help you, Wynne, I've already told you I'll be glad to do it. I'll be back to see the young man, some time in the morning. If you'd like me to, I think I can arrange to stay a while and help you settle this affair."

I thanked him sincerely, gladly accepting his offer. With a kindly word of encouragement to Tomasine, the doctor took his leave. I accompanied him to our basement exit, then hurried back to the girl.

"I've just looked in at Andrew," she said, "and found him sleeping." A shadow of anxiety clouded her eyes. "I do hope that funny little fat doctor is right in saying his wound is not serious."

"I am confident that he is right," I soothed her. "Some of the people down here are rather primitive, and knife and gunshot wounds are probably less a novelty to Doctor Duplessis than to most of his urban colleagues."

"I don't want to go back in that room alone," Tomasine complained irrelevantly. "I'm so sleepy I can hardly hold my eyes open, but I'm afraid to go back to sleep."

"Well," I suggested, "why not curl up in that big chair and rest a while? We've only about two hours to wait for sunrise. . . . It sort of gives me the creeps, too, to think about sleeping in his house at night."

Tomasine shivered and nodded. "Yes," she agreed, "at night, when those—Things—are alive."

I SAT and watched her, settled comfortably in the depths of the great soft chair, saw her succumb to the weariness that showed in her heavy eyes, in the droop of her tired mouth. She slept. A surge of tenderness swept me. Tomasine was so sweet, so brave and capable! Under the strain of what she had endured, the average woman would have been a hysterical wreck. Well, tomorrow she must leave, go back to town and away from this breeding-place of horror. Meanwhile, I made sure that the pistol, with its remaining bullets of silver, lay on the table, ready to my hand. Until sunrise brought safety, I would watch and guard her.

But I, too, was tired. Just for

a moment, I closed my eyes, so heavy had they become. Just for an instant, and then I would rouse, throw off this creeping lethargy. My lids felt as if they must have been weighted with lead. . . . I was so . . . tired. . . .

Morning came. I awoke with a guilty start, and much the same feeling that must come to a sentry on wartime duty who awakes to the realization of having slept at his post. The sun was streaming in through the windows. My feeling of guilt gave way to a sense of thankfulness that the night of horror was safely past.

Taking care to make no noise, I rose and slipped from the room. Entering the bedchamber on tiptoe, I first satisfied myself that Andrew still lay in apparently normal sleep; after which I went to the kitchen, and there set about brewing the black coffee with which every true Louisianian begins the day. When the last drop of scalding water had been dripped slowly through the fragrant coffee, I filled two cups and carried them into the library.

Tomasine had barely wakened, and was sleepily rubbing her eyes open with her knuckles. Her nose wrinkled appreciatively at the aroma which accompanied my entrance.

The piping coffee dispelled a measure of the fearful reality of the night just past, but it did not serve to lessen my determination that Tomasine should be sent back to the city. I broached the subject over my cup.

She, as I had half expected, refused to consider my proposal.

"There won't be any need for me to go back," she protested. "You have already said that there were ways in which to really kill those — things — haven't you?"

"Yes," I admitted, "granting the existence of such beings (which it seems that we, at least, certainly must do!), there are prescribed means of dealing with them."

"Well, then," Tomasine triumphantly made her point, "you will have to do it in the daytime, won't you? And you surely aren't going to wait a week!"

She had the right of it, at that. I admitted that I intended to do what must be done, that very day, and as quickly as possible.

"I am waiting only for Doctor Duplessis," I told her. "Folklore is a hobby of his, and his assistance will be valuable. His status as coroner, of course, makes his presence as a witness to what happens particularly desirable. Armand, unlike his wife, isn't even officially dead, you know."

Tomasine nodded understanding. "You can go with him as soon as he has looked at Andrew.

He and I will be perfectly safe here during daylight."

There was plenty of time to pack her off to town later, if I failed to accomplish before nightfall what I planned to do. We agreed to let it go at that, for the time being, and went into the kitchen to fix breakfast while waiting for Duplessis.

The doctor drove up, and I admitted him, just as we had finished the meal.

Andrew had awakened and called to Tomasine, while the doctor was coming into the house. The youngster grinned weakly as I followed Duplessis into the room.

"How about some breakfast?" he demanded. "I don't have to starve, on top of everything else, do I?"

Duplessis, after examing his patient, expressed complete satisfaction with his condition, and told Tomasine she might give him the food he demanded.

CHAPTER VIII

WE DRIVE THE FIRST STAKE

WHILE Tomasine busied herself with Andrew's breakfast, Duplessis casually led me aside. Without preamble, he plunged into the subject which was uppermost in both our minds.

"Judge Claybourne sneered at me," the doctor reminded, a shade of bitterness in his words, "when I hinted to him of certain fears I entertained, and which, in the light of last night's events, seem well grounded. I take it for granted you agree that we have to deal with creatures who have no place in a normal world—in short, with vampires?"

"Twenty-four hours ago, I would have considered the existence of such creatures an impossibility. Today"—I spread my hands in a gesture of helplessness—"well, as you say, I have no choice except to admit that they do exist."

Duplessis nodded, and remarked that, fortunately for us, the same legends which told of the vampire also told how he was to be dealt with. "Do you follow me?" he asked.

"Oh yes," I answered, rather inanely, I felt, "they have to be shot with silver bullets, or caught in their graves during daytime, and wooden stakes driven through their hearts to render them forever harmless."

"Well," Duplessis indicated significantly, "we drive some stakes, do we not?"

"Yes," I exclaimed—"we drive some stakes! Let us be about it!"

"Good!" cried the doctor, smacking one fat fist into the palm of his other hand. "I have some sharpened stakes, that I

brought along for the purpose, out there in my car." He hesitated a moment before adding, "They have been sprinkled with holy water that I obtained from Father Lavalle. I not only finally succeeded in convincing him of what he has until now refused to believe, but also obtained something else from the good priest—the giving of which, if the archbishop knew of it, would call forth thunders of wrath. Our parish priest, if you understand me, was once a simple French peasant."

"What is it?" I demanded, with natural curiosity. Duplessis shook his head in refusal.

"That I have promised not to tell. I will say this much, however: It is something with which to—torture—the things which were Armand and his wife, either or both of them, into telling us what we must know before we can complete what we have to do."

My face must have expressed lack of understanding, for the doctor went on to explain: "You comprehend, do you not, that several children, mere babes, have disappeared since Helene de Brignac came to Bonne Chasse? And that she is suspected by most people hereabout of being responsible? In short, that the victims of a vampire themselves become vampires—and we must make her tell us the whereabouts of her victims, since they did not (as ordinarily would have been the case) gradually succumb in their homes to her secret visitations, and so be buried in places known to us? We must find those poor little babies!"

"How horrible!" I cried. "The others are bad enough, God knows, but infant vampires—"

The little doctor nodded wretchedly; his revulsion was not less than my own. He repeated my own earlier words:

"We drive some stakes, you and I. . . . Let us be about it!"

I called Tomasine from her brother's bedside; and without any details, told her we were off to find the daytime resting places of our visitors of the previous night, and kill forever the terrors of Bonne Chasse.

"There is no danger—to you?" she whispered.

"None, not in the good daylight," I reassured her. I had seen something in her eyes that, as I went with Duplessis to his car, gave me the feeling that all the charnel horrors of earth and hell were things of little consequence.

DUPLESSIS and I set off in silence. Both of us knew where we were bound. Armand's wife—I wondered about Armand himself—naturally would lie in the de Brignac family plot in the cemetery of the parish church.

This was our destination, and we were not long in arriving. Duplessis stopped the car on the roadside and we dismounted.

The doctor got an iron maul and stout wooden stakes from the rear of the coupe. The stakes were about two feet long and pointed on one end. To me he handed a small iron pinch-bar.

We entered the cemetery, which was set some distance back of the church, well off the road, and screened from view of the casual passer-by by a tall, thick hedge along an iron fence. The burial ground was tended by a part-time sexton, who was elsewhere just then. I suspected that Duplessis had connived to insure his absence. We found the grave we sought, unquestioned and unseen. Duplessis took the pinch-bar from my hand, placing it beneath the new marble slab covering the grave. The slab was heavy, but it slid to one side with more ease than I had anticipated.

"Well," said the doctor, "now we dig." And dig we did. We dug great shovelfuls of earth from the oddly loose dirt that presumably covered Helene de Brignac, working in haste and piling a growing heap to one side. My shovel struck something that resisted its thrust. A few more scoops and a casket lay uncovered to our view.

Duplessis took a deep breath. We hesitated. After all, we had no enthusiasm in despoiling the grave of what it rightfully claimed. Then I think we realized, simultaneously, that we were there but to confirm the grave in its own, and that we had a task in which necessity, rather than our liking, played the principal part. Duplessis pried at the top of the casket. It came off, with the same unexpected ease that marked our shovelling of the dirt from the grave. I swore, and Duplessis made a sound that was like a woman's high-pitched scream. . . .

The body in Helene de Brignac's grave was not her own!

"Aunt Celie!" I whispered, between lips that grudged the words. Duplessis laughed hysterically.

"Of a certainty," he cried. "Armand's wife forced him before he finally died of her attentions, to prepare another resting-place for the two of them! Naturally! She foresaw that we would make this visit, and so forestalled it. For the time being, it is checkmate."

"At least," I dismally suggested, "we can relieve poor old Celie—?"

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "at least we may do that much."

I motioned with my hand and turned away; Duplessis understood that I left the deed to him. From earliest memory, poor,

faithful old Aunt Celie had held a place in my affections, and I had not the doctor's professional callousness. I walked farther away.

DUPLESSIS drove the stake. With the first sharp impact of his maul against the wood, there burst upon my ears an awful screaming, a crescendo of shrieking agony that ripped my taut nerves in shreds. Despite my inclination, I whirled and looked back. Of the turbulence and writhing agony, the livid hate and anguish within that grave at which I looked, I leave all unsaid but this. Duplessis, his swarthy, rotund face for once a putty gray, grimly mauled home the stake.

All at once the writhing, screaming thing lay still beneath the doctor's blows. The soft fingers of contentment smoothed hate and torment from the poor black face at our feet. For one brief instant it seemed that the old Tante Celie I had known and loved looked up at me, ineffable peace and a message of great thankfulness in the depths of her dim, tired eyes.

"It is finished," croaked Duplessis. He sprinkled a few clear drops from a small vial down upon the quiet figure. "Now, poor soul, go find that "Land of Jordan" of which you loved so well to sing."

Tears rolled slowly down upon my cheeks as we shoveled back the earth and restored the violated grave. We were glad to leave that place.

Once, midway of our return to the house, Duplessis stopped the car. He took a pint flask from a door pocket, and passed it to me. "I think a little of that would help," he said, simply. I drank, as did he when I returned the flask. The sunshine, as much as the whiskey, served as a stimulant that raised our spirits by the time we had come again to the house. We sat awhile in the car and talked.

"I'm afraid that you'll have to endure another night of it, Wynne," the doctor sighed. "Helene and Armand put old Celie in Helene's grave, in the hope, I assume, that they would have done away with us before we had time to accomplish what we have just come from doing. Where they have made their own den, where they have hidden their other victims—those poor little babes—we do not know. We must find that out, tonight—from them."

"Then Tomasine goes back to town," I asserted. Duplessis looked dubious.

"She ought to go," he agreed, "but I doubt that she will. Her brother should not be moved, and I do not believe she will go away and leave him here." He

found the heart to chuckle, giving me a sly glance from the corners of his eyes. "It might be that she would refuse to leave anyway, even if he could go with her! Eh?"

"She's going, just the same," I rejoined, half angrily because of the flush I felt creeping upward to my ears.

But the doctor was right, as I found when we entered the house. Tomasine refused, point-blank, what she termed the desertion of Andrew.

"Then I'll send to the city for a dozen private policemen, and keep every light in the house burning all night," I promised, when I found that argument was useless.

"You can't do that," Duplessis objected. "It would only cause those fiends to seek elsewhere for victims not so well prepared to receive them. We want them to come here, and fight on what is as much our ground as theirs. . . . You must remember that each new victim becomes a fresh recruit to the ranks of the menace we are fighting."

"We have only one gun," I warned, realizing the weight of his contention, "and but four of the silver bullets in it."

"I brought along three revolvers more," Duplessis promptly returned, "all loaded with silver, and a half-dozen extra bullets for your own. We fight, my boy, and I feel that we shall win."

"You're staying with us?" I asked.

"I'm staying," the affirmed quietly. "This is as much my fight as yours."

CHAPTER IX

VAMPIRES STRIKE—AND TOMASINE DISAPPEARS

THERE were not very many preparations we could make against the coming night, but the locksmith to whom Tomasine had telephoned came and fitted keys to the front and rear doors of the house, and to the other two that opened upon opposite sides of the veranda. At least, I thought, we no longer had to come and go through the basement window. This gave me another idea—that of securely nailing shut the one open lower window, and, as a further precaution, spiking all the others to prevent them being opened. I felt, when I had done it, that we were secure against attack from that quarter.

Later, after lunch, Duplessis advised spending the afternoon in sleep. The soundness of his suggestion was obvious; and Tomasine and I, in particular, were quick to follow it.

When we awoke, toward the close of day, we faced the coming of darkness with more confidence

than exhaustion and jangling nerves would have permitted. Duplessis, who had not needed as much sleep as we, had attended Andrew regularly between short naps. He announced the boy to be even less seriously hurt than he had already believed, and able to withstand any nervous shock he might experience. The doctor went so far as to give him one of the four pistols we had, which Andrew fondled with grim satisfaction.

"One crack at that guy"—Andrew was never quite able to register the idea of vampires—"one crack with this thing is all I want!"

"I hate to disappoint you, old son," I told him, "but I've locked your windowblinds together to make sure they don't get in! What's more, I've either nailed or padlocked every other window, and all the outside doors except one. If we have any visitors tonight, they'll come in at the front door!"

"With a reception committee ready to greet them!" Duplessis grimly added, and we settled down in the dimlit entrance hall.

The night wore on. There was no sign of our expected visitors, and I began to wonder if our precautions had not been so complete, and our guard so obvious, as to have made our quarry shun the trap. If so, we had utterly failed of our purpose. We could not stand watch every night; and if we could have, we but diverted a ravening evil to spread and increase itself in other quarters.

It is difficult to keep small talk alive, over a period of hours, in an atomsphere of tense expectancy. It must have been close to midnight when Tomasine eventually abandoned pretense and got a book from the library; but from the restless way she skipped back and forth through its pages, I doubt whether it occupied her mind as well as her slender fingers. Duplessis fidgeted and perspired, and smoked innumerable cigarettes that he rolled himself. It may have been the smoke that made my eyes smart and grow heavy; but I was fast becoming tired.

The thought of coffee recurred insistently. There is perhaps no other people, except the Arabs, with whom the beverage is so much a part of the ritual of living as those among whom I was born. To those unacquainted with the custom, this may seem a trivial thing. Yet, it was my wish for coffee that afforded the peril crouched behind our backs (while we fatuously awaited it at the front door!) opportunity to pounce upon us. . . . God grant I never place Tomasine in like jeopardy again!

The long, broad hall in which

we sat ran entirely through the middle of the house. Curtains, hung from the ceiling and loosely caught back against the side walls, gave the long passage the semblances of division. From where I sat, I could see down its entire length, except that the far end was lost in shadow. It happened that I was staring vacantly beyond the curtains, when it seemed to me that there was dim movement in the murky reaches of the hall. As I dismissed what indifferent assumption told me was a trick of the shadows, it suddenly appeared that one of the loose curtains move slightly, although there was no stir of air. I blinked my eyes and sat erect, only to observe that, as I had thought, the curtain was perfectly still.

"Can't we make some coffee?" I demanded. "My eyes are getting so tired they're playing tricks on me. When I stare at anything for long, it seems to move."

"I like the idea of coffee, myself," Duplessis approved, snubbing a cigarette.

We decided, after brief reflection, to leave the doctor on guard at the door, while I went with Tomasine to the kitchen. As we started down the hall, I half thought I heard a door opened, softly but in haste. I listened, alert at once, but there was no further noise. It had sounded like Andrew's door, but I could see, as we passed, that it was closed; and I refrained from opening it for fear of disturbing the youngster. The noise I heard —if, indeed, I heard a noise— could have been merely the racket of a mouse. I shrugged and followed Tomasine into the kitchen.

We made coffee, but it was never drunk. A high-pitched, startled cry rang through the house; the cup I was raising to my lips dropped unheeded from my hand. It was Andrew's voice!

"You stay here—where you'll be safest!" I snapped the command to Tomasine in tones that brooked no argument—and it would have been better had she disobeyed. I left her and rushed headlong to Andrew's door, from behind which his cries and panted curses mingled with shrill piping gurgles and low, evil laughter, to combine the noise of bedlam.

Duplessis, pistol in one outstretched hand, reached the door a leap ahead of me, yanking it open without missing a stride. I charged through upon his heels. For one brief instant we stopped—staggered by the sight that met our eyes.

ON THE far side of Andrew's bed, crouched so low behind him that she must have been on her knees, Helene de Brignac—

or what had been she—strove with him for possession of his gun. But the supreme abominations were the twin diminutive horrors—the more horrible because diminutive!—that swarmed over the coverlet and worried Andrew, crawling, about his head, clawing at his eyes with evil, chubby little fingers. He spared an arm to fling them off, and they were back upon him in a flash. I felt sick and weak at the sight of those two round, tiny faces, still plastic in the mold of immaturity, but alight with lust and evil that was old when the world was young.

Helene secured the gun. Andrew had fallen back and lay still, faint from exertion and the pain of his wound. I think I laughed—insanely, if I did laugh—at the grotesque spectacle of the vampire turning to her own account the weapon designed for her undoing. The gun roared; I heard the bullet thud into the plaster of the wall behind me. Surely the world was mad when a vampire shot at men with silver bullets!

This thing that had been a woman crouched low behind Andrew, shielding herself with his body. Duplessis took careful aim, as coolly as though he were at target practice. As Helene leveled her gun for another and more careful shot, the doctor fired. The vampire screamed and fell backward, her weapon falling from her fingers to the bed. Duplessis leaped around toward her, drawing from his pocket what looked like an ordinary cigarette case. I seized the pistol from the bed, and flung aside the pair of tiny, vile things that worried Andrew. On the instant, they transferred their attack to me, and so engaged my attention in beating off their onslaught, astoundingly fierce and disproportionate to their size, that I was unable to assist or even attend Duplessis' struggle with Helene.

Those wretched infant horrors leaped about as if they were made of steel springs, swarming up my legs, clawing at my eyes, scratching, gouging. They hardly should have had teeth in their drooling little mouths, yet I repeatedly felt them bite. I flung them off, and they sprang back, leaping about until they seemed almost to fly. Their obscene little arms waved and beat the air, causing me an odd thought of wings—bat's wings—as they thrashed about. When I cast them off, they floated lightly to the floor.

Helene screamed in awful anguish. My vile little adversaries left me like a flash, throwing themselves upon Duplessis with fury and abandon. I had a moment in which to see the doctor, kneeling upon Helene's prostrate, writhing body, pinion-

ing her to the floor with his knees and one hand. With the other hand he held the silver case against her breast. I could see Helene's dead-white flesh quiver and shrink from its touch. One of her arms was limp, shattered by the doctor's bullet; the other hand clawed agonizingly at Duplessis. Whatever the doctor's case held that Father Lavalle had given him, its touch was direst agony to his victim.

"Will you tell?" he grated. "Will you tell me where you lie by day—you and Armand?" Then the two mites of hell were upon him, and the vigor of the attack I had sustained was mere play compared to the insensate fury of their onslaught upon Duplessis. They took all of his attention. While he fought one from his face, the other pounced upon his shoulder, biting fiercely at his fat, swarthy neck.

Blood streamed suddenly over the doctor's collar, and I quivered with horror at the avid sucking noises of the little monster clinging to his shoulder. Duplessis plucked it off, and calmly and dispassionately pistoled it through the head with cold precision. It went weakly limp, and the doctor dropped it to seize and mete like treatment to its mate. It, too, crumpled up, and Duplessis cast it down; so that they lay side by side in two small, broken heaps upon the floor. They were nothing, now, but two shattered babes.

I HAD scant leisure for pity, just then. Helene had seized her opportunity, and scrambling over Andrew to get past me, was making a frantic rush for the door. Instinctively I raised my hand that held the pistol, and fired full at her. Without thinking, I had aimed at her head, and I do not often miss. She fell, literally blown off her feet at short range.

"Now you've done it!" Duplessis cried. "I would have made her tell where they have made themselves a grave to lie in during the day. Then"—he spread his hands in a characteristic—gesture—"then I would have shot her. . . . Armand still remains, you know!"

"Yes," I blurted out, feeling a sudden uneasiness at the thought of Tomasine alone in the kitchen, "yes, Armand still remains—"

As if to justify my apprehension, there came the noise of something overturned and falling, from the direction of the kitchen and a woman's cry, abruptly cut short.

"Tomasine!" I cried. Duplessis swore, staccato fashion, and I bolted from the room under the impetus. I raced the last few steps.

I knew, something told me,

even as I ran, what I would find. The kitchen table was overturned, the coffee pot lay in scattered sections upon the floor, and Tomasine was gone!

"The front door!" Duplessis shouted, and we ran in that direction. One hand before me to fling it aside, I rushed at the screen door—and my hand ripped through the unyielding wire. The door was hooked—on the inside!

"I was sitting close to it, you know," Duplessis breathlessly recalled, "and dropped that hook when I got up and ran back to see what all the noise was."

"And every other door out of the house is both locked and nailed shut."

"Then she—and Armand—they are in the house!" the doctor exclaimed, with logical conviction. "Let us search, let us hurry!"

We ran through every room, switched on every light. There was no sign of Tomasine.

"The other doors are nailed, the front screen is latched on the inside." I sought desperately to reason things out. "The door from this floor to the basement is locked; the basement doors and windows are all nailed shut . . ."

Some thought of my subconscious mind strove for comprehension. There was something that, could I but remember, would solve the puzzle, show us the way out—if I could grasp what it was that had clicked in the back of my head when I spoke of basement windows. . . . They were nailed shut, had all been locked, anyway. They were locked—I had it, I had it!—One had not been locked, before I nailed it shut!

"Duplessis!" I shouted. "The basement—the window that was open when I came—to the basement, man!"

The doctor excitedly tried the door to the stairs, shrugging with despair when it proved fastened. I brushed him unceremoniously aside, jabbing its key into the lock. I explained as we leaped down the stairs:

"That was a duplicate key, they are all duplicates—"

"And Armand has the originals!" Duplessis excitedly supplied. "The storeroom, that is where we look, eh?"

I DID not pause to answer, but he was right. It was to that rear part of the basement that I ran, to the partitioned space that made a storage room for all those odds and ends that every household ordinarily accumulates in the attic. I remembered that a great part of it was floored with heavy boards laid, unfastened, upon the earth. It would not be difficult to move them aside, to dig. . . .

CHAPTER X

DELIVERANCE

THE door upon which I pushed was locked, and I had no key for it. It was a heavy door, and though the doctor and I threw our combined weight against it, the stout panels held. We wasted precious minutes vainly hunting for something heavy enough to use in battering our way in.

"Shoot through the lock," Duplessis urged. "If it should strike Tomasine, at least a bullet is cleaner than what she faces if we do not hurry."

I accepted his advice. Silently praying that Tomasine might not be in its way, I sent a bullet from the heavy gun crashing through the lock. The door still held, but with weakened grip that we broke with one mad lunge of our shoulders. I prayed, again, that we might be in time.

The place was dark. The shutters kept out whatever light the moon might have furnished, and this part of the basement was not wired for electricity. Duplessis, however, had kept a small electric torch on his person since the beginning of our night's vigil. Tensed for instant action, we watched while the inadequate beam of light played over stacked boxes and old trunks, over broken furniture and debris that littered the floor and piled against the walls. The light seemed to hesitate of its own accord upon one corner, where a space some six or eight feet square was clear of storage. A miscellany of trunks and crates screened the floor in the corner from our view so effectively that their random disposal took on more than casual significance.

"There!" whispered Duplessis, pointing with his torch. I agreed.

"Move up," I told him, in the same low voice. "Keep your light on the floor, and I'll raise the loose planking."

We threaded through the crates in our way, and I stooped and tugged at a heavy cypress plank, rough-sawn to about two inches thick and twelve wide. The board turned over atop the one beside it, and I put my hand where it had been. I touched no earth, but my arm went downward to the elbow in empty space. There was, as we had expected, an excavation beneath the planks!

As I jerked my arm up, I thought there was a swift sound of movement beneath my feet, like the swish of a heavy knife cleaving the air. I could feel malevolence saturating that dark corner. I grasped another board and turned it aside. Now I could see below me, in the pit I had disclosed, the phosphorescent glare of twin points of feral light

that blazed hate up at us. Duplessis saw, also, and swore breathlessly. We had our quarry holed, and there was no further need of silence.

"Throw off another board, Wynne, and shoot the dirty beast in its head!" Duplessis cried. "Throw off another board, so that I can find him with the light!"

I SEIZED a third plank, almost to my undoing. The heavy lumber slipped in my grasp, and I jerked away my hand as a splinter of its rough surface stabbed beneath a finger nail. An arm, with a dead-white hand, flashed out of the pit. Something glittered in the light of Duplessis' torch, something bit wickedly into the plank where my hand and wrist had been. We had holed a snake that had fangs!

"He has a butcher knife from the kitchen!" the doctor shrilled. "Grab the planks at this end, where they rest on solid earth!"

I had been beforehand with the same thought, and was acting upon it even as he spoke. I heaved over two more of the planks with considerably more strain and effort, but in comparative safety—so I thought! Duplessis' light now picked out the monster in the pit: I saw a quick movement of his arm, and heard something streak past my ear as I crouched. Duplessis cried out, and the flashlight dropped and bounced into the yawning hole at our feet.

"He got my arm—not badly," the doctor snarled. Then, more brightly—"But perhaps now he is unarmed!"

THE hole was no more than three or four feet in depth, and the flashlight burned steadily on as it lay at the bottom. The feeble light dimly disclosed Tomasine, prone and still upon the earth. Just beyond her, in the farthest corner of the pit, was a crouched shadow, with two red, luminous eyes that burned up at us with hate and fear. I sensed that Duplessis raised his gun, and I hastily pushed aside his wrist.

"No, no!" I cried. "Don't shoot—the light is too bad, and you might hit Tomasine."

"I can hit him," the doctor obstinately insisted. "Get out of the way!"

The thing in the hole reached swiftly out of his corner, pulled Tomasine's limp body close, and held it before him in his arms. For the first time since we had run him to earth, the monster spoke:

"You can't shoot without hitting her! Go away—or let me go away, and I will agree never to bother any of you again. I wanted

her, myself, but let me go, and I will give her back to you—she is unharmed."

I did not know what to do next, and I do not know what I growled in answer.

"You could wait until sunrise, and have me then," the horror gibed, "but you would not have your Tomasine!" His voice quivered with fury, and with hate that was more intense because it betrayed his awful fear. "Let me go, or you will need to drive no stake for Tomasine! My teeth are not as they once were, Wynne. They are long and pointed, and so very sharp! I would have bitten this soft, white neck so gently, so caressingly, and made her all my own. Let me go and I will give her up—let me go or I shall bite, not softly, but so deeply you will never need your cursed stakes for her!"

I saw a dim, ghostly white hand slide over Tomasine's throat in an obscene caress.

"This white, soft throat—" The whisper mourned as well as threatened, but the words fell wholly vile upon my ears. I went berserk.

Without being able to consider the possible consequences to Tomasine, I think I must have flung myself in a headlong dive toward the source of that foul whispering. I threw aside my gun as I leaped: I wanted to tear, to rend and break, with only my bare hands. I seized another throat—a cold, waxen-clammy throat—between my hands, and I knew that my fingers had reached their mark before Tomasine was harmed.

We writhed and thrashed, that thing and I. How Tomasine escaped with no more bruises than she did sustain from our heels and flailing arms and elbows, is something that remains a mystery. I found I was the weaker, but held on grimly, calling for Duplessis. I felt the fat little doctor tumble in with us, and thought he had gone mad when one groping hand—I knew it was his, because I felt its warmth and pudginess—threw a cloth over my head. It was his coat, and I thought, for one desperate instant, that the strain he had undergone had snapped his reason. I did not hear him tell me, then, and it was only later that I understood his wish to save me from the burn of the gun he pressed between me and my murderous antagonist.

The pistol roared. I felt Armand go limp, and I had to clutch him closer to keep from being overbalanced. For a brief moment, it was as if I held him in my arms. I am glad that it was so, gladder still that he was able to whisper:

"Good-bye, Wynne! You've done what I wanted you to do, when I wrote for you to come.

. . . Thank God! Good-bye—and —forgive."

I think I sobbed. God knows I had hated the thing I fought, hated it through that time of horror since I had come back to Bonne Chasse; but that thing had not been Armand. I had played with Armand in our childhood years, fought beside him in the mud of France. I am glad it was Duplessis who fired that last shot, glad that Armand could still whisper. For it was the old Armand, the Armand I had loved, who whispered and then lay still in my arms.

WE LEFT him, for the time, in the hole he had made for himself and that Helene who —I swore it!—should never lie again beside him. We had Tomasine to care for, and Andrew besides; and in Andrew's room there was a shambles that had to be considered. We carried Tomasine upstairs, and Duplessis forgot everything except his calling.

"She has only fainted," he said, at length. "Horror and fear were too much for her. I doubt if she knows anything about that infernal hole we found her in—" He looked up at me, and I understood his thought.

"If she doesn't know now, she never shall!" I fervently assured him.

The doctor nodded, and left to see to Andrew. Tomasine opened her eyes. Returned terror crowded swiftly on her consciousness, but gave way when she realized that it was I who held her fingers in my own.

"It is over, Tomasine," I gently reassured her. "There is nothing more to fear."

Yes, it was over, and there is little more to tell. Duplessis drove off toward the river, after a while, with one bulky, white-wrapped burden, and another, much smaller, that might have been the two poor little things I had last seen upon the floor in Andrew's room. They were well tied, and I think they were weighted, although I have never asked Duplessis any questions.

Tomasine was not hurt, beyond a bruise or two, and she had no memory of what had happened, other than her fright when she was seized by Armand in the kitchen. Andrew had withstood his shock remarkably well, and his struggle with Helene had not, as we had feared, opened his wound.

There was one thing more we had to do. Armand's death had to be given logical explanation, and he himself had prepared the way for that. He must have planned to burn down the house above his self-made daylight hiding-place. I would never again want to live at Bonne

Chasse, and his plan seemed the best way out.

We bundled Andrew carefully into the rear of his car, after moving it to a safe distance. Tomasine, Duplessis and I stood in the dawn watching the holocaust to which we had given Armand and his hall. We had spread a drum of kerosene through the house, and there were two drums of gasoline in the basement which had been arranged to explode shortly after we quit the place. The flames would be a roaring inferno before curious folk of the countryside inevitably gathered.

Duplessis spoke, as if he were explaining to no one in particular, or to anyone who might want to know, exactly how the fire originated.

"The light went out—a short circuit somewhere, probably. There was a drum of kerosene, and also two drums of gasoline, in the basement under the house. Our host, Mr. de Brignac, went down alone to get some kerosene to fill some lamps, taking a lighted candle with him. Shortly afterward the house was rocked by a tremendous explosion, and we were able only to leave the building in all haste. There was no possibility of saving him as he must have been killed at the moment of the explosion.

"This should be a warning to others not to keep kerosene and gasoline under their houses—or, if they must do so, to stay away from it with lighted candles."

The doctor smoothed his tie with a chubby hand, and turned complacently to me:

"Sometimes it is a good thing for the coroner to be along, isn't it?"

I WATCHED the flames without making answer. I had loved this place better than any other except my own old home that I had lost and the river had since taken. I would never have wanted to live there again, but I could not see the flames destroy it without a feeling of sadness. I expressed something of my thoughts to Tomasine. She put her fingers lightly on my arm, looked up into my face with eyes that were wistful and something more. She knew that she could be quite sure of herself.

"You'll never want to live down here, after this," she told me. "You will have Armand's money—you will take it because he wanted you to have it—and you can afford to live in town, anywhere you like." Her eyes dropped, at this point, and there was a faint flush upon her cheeks that was not altogether of the fire we watched. "There is an old house in town, in the Garden District, that was ours before it went like everything else. I love it, and I think that you—"

Not all the fires, coroners, nor thoughts of all the vampires in the world could have kept me from sweeping her into my arms. Vaguely, I was aware of a discreet but very complacent cough from Duplessis.

"Sometimes," he admitted, as if merely speaking aloud to himself, "sometimes I suppose it would be a good thing for the coroner to be somewhere else!" I heard him chuckling as he turned away.

This Night

By DOROTHY QUICK

THE fog comes in from the sea
And the wind blows over the marsh,
While the scent of hay on the lea
Is noisome, cold and harsh.

The moon is under a cloud
The shadows are dark and grim,
All land is wrapt in a shroud
At some mysterious whim.

This night is full of a sound
That no other night could hold.
While man is horror-bound
And strangely, strangely cold.

Whence does the terror come?
Why should dark fear remain?
Man, with his senses numb
Prays to be sane, again.

THE EYRIE

(*Continued from Second Cover*)

May I add my congratulations to those of many other readers and compliment you on your change of format. WT *is now easier to file. How about an index of each year's tales in the January issue?*

Keep it up, and do not neglect the old masters.

Arthur Cameron,
Moncton, N. B. Canada

Interplanetary Athletics

WE DON'T consider space ships and interplanetary travel to be WEIRD TALES usual fare, but as a side issue—and somewhat on the fantasy side—some thought was given recently in our presence to the question where, if interplanetary travel becomes practicable, the Olympic Games should be held. For this point might offer some interesting considerations based on the size and density of various heavenly bodies. An athlete whose terrestrial record for the running broad jump is twenty-two feet, for instance, would be able to cover three to four times that distance in a single leap on the surface of Mercury where he would weigh only five-sixteenths of his earthly weight. On Jupiter, however, he would have to take most of his exercise sitting down; if he weighed a hundred and sixty pounds on Earth he would weigh four hundred pounds there. Mars offers an excellent field for saltatorial feats, for the 160-pound man would weigh but 58 pounds on the red planet, and could skip through the air with the agility of a flea. Weight-throwing contests on Ceres, the smallest asteroid, would be interesting but inconclusive, since almost anyone could throw a stone from this tiny sphere, only 485 miles in diameter, so far out into space that it would never return.

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Editor's Choice in Science Fiction, compiled by Samuel Moskowitz • Mr. Moskowitz is known in all magazine offices as an indefatigable reader, commentator, critic, and an enthusiastic promoter of fantasy and science fiction. Although this anthology represents the choice of the editors of various magazines in the field—WEIRD TALES among them—it also reflects the compiler's wide knowledge of, and keen perception concerning his subject. The result is a comprehensive collection of stories, offering a wide range of plots and atmosphere in the genre.