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THE NEW MYSTERY MAGAZINE

SHOCK



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A Century of the Killer Curse

THE scream ripped through the night like a dagger through black fabric. Josiah Hudson stirred in his sleep, opened his ancient, watery eyes and sat up in the wide bed. A gibbous moon cast her beams through the half-raised window and haloed his hair with silver. Outside the wind moaned faintly and the surf thudded dully against the rocky coast a half-mile away.

The echoes of the scream evanesced in the corridors of the old house. It was followed by a muffled sound of racked sobbing. Josiah Hudson threw back his blankets, shivered, and thrust his thin legs out of the bed. His stiff toes groped on the cold floor for his slippers. He stood up, draped a flannel robe over his bent shoulders, reached for his stick and went out into the hall.

There was no light in the corridor. But Josiah Hudson had lived in this house for sixty-five years and he walked through the darkness with the sureness of a blind man. After eight paces, his hand stretched out and closed without fumbling on the doorknob of the room which his niece, Thelma, shared with her husband, Nick Worthington.

Josiah Hudson entered the vast, old-fashioned bed chamber. The slim body of his niece lay in the huge bed, covered by a single sheet. Her face was buried in

the pillow and her fair hair glowed in the illumination of the yellow shaded lamp. Her body moved convulsively. Broken sobs stuttered into Josiah's ears.

On the edge of the bed sat Nick Worthington. His handsome, youthful face was taut with anxiety. His clear eyes were troubled. He looked up as Josiah advanced and silently mouthed a sentence:

"I've phoned for Doc Anders."

Josiah nodded. He came closer to the bed, stared with anxious eyes at Thelma. He said, "What's the matter?"

Nick Worthington made a gesture which adjured Josiah to silence. He said aloud, "Nothing. A slight touch of hysteria. Nothing to worry about."

His wife swung her head around on the pillow. She stared at her uncle. Her face was completely drained of color. Her eyes were wide and flooded with horror.

"Hysteria!" she cried and her voice broke. "Uncle Jo, I've murdered Chippendale."

She buried her face in the pillow once more and sobbed like a tortured child. It was then that Josiah Hudson saw the cat.

Chippendale was not a valuable cat and as feline chronology is considered, she was almost as old as Josiah. She lay on the floor at the side of the bed. She lay in a stiff, distorted position and she lay very still.

By D. L. Champion

Josiah bent down and peered closer. The cat's eyes bulged glassily from her head and her tongue, colored like a bruise, thrust itself grotesquely from her mouth. The fur about her neck was ruffled and awry. Obviously, the animal had been strangled.

Josiah Hudson straightened up. A chill wind swept in from the sea, crossed the window-sill and breathed coldly on the old man's bare legs. A shiver ran through his frame. He became suddenly aware of a sickening emptiness at the pit of his stomach.

He said, "Good Lord, Nick, Thelma didn't do that!"

"Of course not, Uncle Jo. That's what I keep telling her."

The trembling girl turned her head and looked up at them. "There was fur under my nails," she said in a dull monotone. "Chippendale's fur."

"Rot," said Nick and his voice was utterly without conviction. "It's your own hair. You picked it up when you brushed your hair before going to bed."

"And blood," she went on as if he had not spoken. "Look. There's blood on my hand."

She held out her delicate fingers. Josiah saw a tiny red stain at the base of her thumb.

"Nail polish," said Nick. "You spotted yourself when you put it on."

Josiah drew a deep breath. The crimson stain was three shades brighter than the polish on Thelma's nails.

Headlights stabbed the night beyond the window pane. Brakes grated and a car pulled up on the gravel driveway.

"It's Doc Anders," said Nick. "Wait here. I'll let him in."

JOSIAH nodded. As Nick left the room, he seated himself on the edge of the bed. He took his niece's hand in his and stroked it gently. His eyes deliberately avoided the dead cat as his mind deliber-

ately avoided all thought, all conjecture.

There was black and evil sap in the Hudson family tree. The insane strain had lain dormant for more than a hundred years until it had evinced itself horribly in Micah, Josiah's great uncle, when Josiah was a lad of sixteen.

A short, gray-haired man came into the room. He said, "Hello, Josiah. Nick's in the library. You'd better join him there. I'll be along later."

Josiah Hudson said, "Very well, Doctor," and left the room. The hall outside was cold and drafty but there was a greater searing chill in the heart of Josiah Hudson.

The library was a huge, rectangular room, three sides of which were lined with books that stretched to the ceiling. Nick Worthington sat in an armchair, staring out the window into the night. He sighed and turned his head as Josiah entered.


"The cook and Jane Harkins are awake," he said. "I've ordered some coffee."

Josiah nodded dumbly. His gaze moved to the sideboard where three cut-glass decanters glittered. It was not coffee he needed. Brandy alone would rout the awful coldness within him. He crossed the room and filled a glass.

The liqueur was warm and good on his tongue. Josiah Hudson was a connoisseur of brandy and now he was grateful for the stimulus it imparted to his chilled blood. He put down the glass and seated himself beside Nick Worthington.

"For heaven's sake," he said, "what happened?"

Nick's strained face turned to his. "It was terrible," he said miserably. "I awoke to find her on her knees at the side of the bed. Her hands encircled the cat's throat. She was muttering some awful gibberish. And the expression on her face—on her sweet face, Uncle Jo—it was unbelievable. She looked like some murderous harpy."



*“There was fur under my
nails—” she said— “and
blood. . . .”*

*Long ago virile Micah Hudson rotted in madhouse
chains. And now that same kill-curse was crawling
in the mind of a lovely heiress.*

His voice broke and he buried his face in his hands.

Josiah Hudson's eyes were bleak and empty. He murmured, "I've been afraid for fifty years. Ever since—"

Nick glanced at him. "You mean Micah? Thelma told me something about him. You mean that maybe—"

The massive door opened and Dr. Anders came into the room. He put his black bag heavily on the floor and came toward them.

Josiah said, "What do you think, Doctor?"

Anders shrugged his shoulders. "I am an old man and only a general practitioner. I don't know much about these things. It is best to get an expert opinion."

Josiah said, "Do you think it is hereditary? Over a hundred years ago, there was Jabez. And in my lifetime there was Micah."

"Perhaps. Eugenics is still something of a mystery."

"What was wrong with Micah?" said Nick harshly. "He was a—a killer, wasn't he?"

Josiah avoided his eyes and looked at Anders.

The doctor said quietly, "He has a right to know, Josiah."

Josiah Hudson nodded. He cleared his throat and spoke slowly and reluctantly. "Micah Hudson was my great uncle. He was a huge man, well over six feet. He was kind and gentle, and as a child I loved him. When I was sixteen, they took Micah away. They took him away in chains and a straight-jacket. They said he was a homicidal maniac."

Nick stared at him, wide-eyed. "You mean he actually committed homicide?"

"He first killed a dog. It was my dog and I loved it. Micah murdered it with his bare hands. I thought at the time that nothing worse could ever happen. But it did. His second victim was our house-

maid. After that, they took him away, my Uncle Micah. I know nothing of the condition of asylums today but then they were vermin-infested death traps. They took him away and chained him to a post in a common room peopled with a hundred shrieking maniacs.

"They neither washed him nor fed him decently. I saw him once before he died—a dirt encrusted, hairy old man with the horror of Hell, itself, in his rheumy, sunken eyes."

Nick Worthington's face was an ashen mask. He said hoarsely, "Doctor, you don't think that Thelma—"

"Get an expert," said Doctor Anders. "Get the best opinion there is."

"I know a man," said Nick suddenly. "He's considered very good. He—"

"Don't bother with a man who's very good," said Anders. "Money is secondary with you people. Get the best there is. Get Weldon."

There was a moment's silence. "Can we get him?" asked Josiah. "I've heard of him. He's the most famous psychiatrist in the country. He's a busy man. Can we get him at once?"

Anders opened his mouth to speak but before he uttered a word, Nick said, "I'll get him. One of the clients of our advertising agency plays golf with him. I'll get Weldon."

"Good," said Anders. "You can accept Weldon's opinion as Gospel."

Josiah moved uneasily in his chair. "Anders," he said, "do you really believe that she is—" it took an effort for him to pronounce the final word—"mad?"

"If she is not," said Anders, "brooding upon this thing as she has done will make her so."

Josiah Hudson drew a deep breath. There flashed across his mind a vivid picture of a half-naked, chained old man with black and burning eyes. He said fervently, "I would rather see her dead than like Micah."

There was a taut silence in the room, then the thin, frightened voice of Jane Harkins, the maid, said, "Here is the coffee, gentlemen."

JOSIAH HUDSON'S niece and himself were the sole remaining members of a once flourishing family. His delight at her marriage some eight months ago was engendered by the fact that he believed that her children would some day inhabit this ancient, desolate house, bringing back some of its former life and gaiety.

Now all such hope had abandoned him. His head whirred; his aged body trembled. He groped for his stick and returned to his bedroom.

Josiah Hudson passed the following day in dazed misery. Almost every hour he tiptoed to Thelma's room only to find her sleeping restively.

Nick returned from the advertising agency in the late afternoon. He nodded to Josiah, then went at once to his wife's bedroom.

The two men ate their dinners in silence. Over the coffee, Nick spoke. "Well, we'll soon know. I've fixed things up with Weldon's office."

Josiah nodded dully. He was afraid that he knew already.

Nick handed him a slip of paper. "We're to call Weldon tomorrow for an appointment. I've got to do some business in the morning. Will you phone him? The number's there. Have him call as soon as possible. I'll be home early."

Josiah took the slip of paper, folded it and put it in his pocket. He went to bed early but slept little.

Once during the night, he thought he heard a cry. He sat up in bed and listened with all his being. It was not repeated. He lay down again and closed his eyes. Dawn paled the sky and still he had not slept.

He was drinking strong black coffee in the dining room when Nick came down

to breakfast. Josiah glanced up and the matutinal greeting froze on his lips. Nick wore no tie and his shirt was open at the throat. Around his neck was a bandage.

Josiah Hudson stared and blinked his eyes. He said in a quavering voice, "Nick! Not you! She didn't—"

Nick Worthington nodded miserably. "I awoke to find her clawing at my throat. But she didn't know what she was doing, Uncle Jo. She was asleep while she was doing it. I'll swear she didn't realize what she was doing."

"Neither did Micah," said Josiah with dull resignation. He got up from the table. "I'm going to phone the doctor now. The sooner he comes, the better."

The maid announced Doctor Noble Weldon shortly after lunch. He was a squat little man with a Van Dyke beard and a brusque manner. He smoked an excellent cigar as he listened to what Josiah told him of Thelma Worthington, Micah Hudson and the monstrous case history of an ancestor who had lived more than a hundred years ago.

He frowned, coughed, asked to see his patient alone. He spent a good half hour in Thelma's bedroom while Josiah sat in the library staring out the window at a gloomy autumnal landscape.

Weldon returned to the library and delivered his opinion without preamble. "It is a rare, though well-documented form of insanity," he said. "A form of schizophrenia, split personality. That in itself is common enough. However, in this instance the savage sadistic urge comes upon her only while she sleeps. She commits these outrages somnambulistically. Awake, her natural and normal instincts are powerful enough to combat the evil which is latent within her. That is not the case when her conscious mind is sleeping."

Josiah said unhappily, "What are we to do, Doctor?"

"I can not answer for what may happen

if she remains here, even under the care of a professional nurse. She must go to a sanatorium. I understand you are well off. I suggest she go to a place I can highly recommend, a private establishment run by an excellent doctor."

Josiah said, "Is there any—any hope that she will recover?"

"There is always hope," said Weldon. "I have spoken to her. She knows she is ill. She is quite willing to go away. It would be well if both you and her husband signed the commitment papers."

"Anything you suggest," said Josiah. "Where is this sanatorium?"

"Twelve miles from town. It is run by Dr. Springer, an excellent man. If anyone can help her, he can. I'll send you the necessary papers in a day or so. Then her husband can take her there. I shall make the arrangements."

"Is there anything we can do for her in the meanwhile?"

Weldon shook his head. "Medicine is of no use in a case such as this."

"There is brandy in the cellar," said Josiah. "Brandy two hundred years old. That wouldn't harm her?"

"By all means, give her the brandy," said Weldon. "Especially if she is faint. Old brandy has a remarkably salutary and revivifying effect."

When Weldon had gone, Josiah quietly opened the door of his niece's bedroom. She apparently was awake but she did not look at him. Her face was white as a gardenia. She stared hopelessly at the ceiling. Josiah watched her for a moment and his heart was wrung.

He closed the door silently, then made his way through the corridors of the old house and descended to the cellar. He came into the library again bearing a cob-webbed bottle. He laid it carefully on the sideboard.

It was four o'clock when Nick Worthington arrived. Josiah greeted him gravely.

"Nick," he said, "it's bad. She—"

Nick said, "I know. I called Weldon at his office. I suppose we've got to do as he says."

"We have no choice, my boy."

Nick nodded dumbly.

"Oh," said Josiah, "you see that bottle on the sideboard? It's brandy. It was bought by my grandfather and it was old when he bought it. The doctor said it might do her some good. At least, it might bring some color to her cheeks."

Nick said, "Thanks," in the tone of a man who is not listening.

JOSIAH HUDSON ate a late breakfast. Nick had left for his office some two hours before. Josiah sipped his coffee without tasting it, found no savor in his boiled egg. Idly he turned the pages of the morning paper propped up against the silver coffee pot.

He was far too preoccupied with his own affairs to pay much attention to those of the world in general. On the third page, however, his eye caught an item which interested him. The County Medical Association had given a dinner the previous evening in honor of Dr. Noble Weldon. Josiah read the report slowly.

He finished the story and had pushed the paper away from him when a thought came to him. He seized the paper again and examined the type carefully. The story stated that Dr. Weldon's office was situated in downtown Grand Street.

Josiah knew that neighborhood. Moreover, he knew quite well that the telephone exchange for that part of town was Evergreen. Yet the number he had called when summoning Weldon had been Royal 6657.

It was unimportant, he thought, but it aroused his curiosity. He went out to the hall and procured a telephone book. He turned to the W's. Dr. Weldon's office number was Evergreen 9080. Directly below it was listed his suburban home, the exchange for which was Humphrey.

Josiah blinked. He picked up the newspaper again. Listed there were the three hospitals with which Weldon was connected. It was quite likely, he considered, that he had reached Weldon at one of these. Slowly he looked up the telephone number of each hospital. None of them was in the Royal exchange.

For a moment he was puzzled. Then he put the whole thing out of his head and poured himself another cup of coffee. But the odd circumstance of those telephone numbers kept recurring to him. His puzzlement grew to a vague, uneasy suspicion.

At twelve o'clock he knew what he must do. He went upstairs to his room and dressed carefully. Then he went out of the house, called a taxicab, and drove to Dr. Weldon's office on Grand Street.

A few minutes later he found himself in an elegantly furnished reception room facing an even more elegant receptionist.

He bowed with old fashioned formality and said, "I want to see Dr. Weldon."

The girl looked up at him. "Have you an appointment?"

"No. But I must see him. At once."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid—"

"It is a matter," said Josiah Hudson, "of life and death."

There was a searing sincerity in the words. The girl looked at him oddly for a moment, then stood up. "Come this way," she said.

* * *

Josiah Hudson emerged into the chill wind of Grand Street and huddled, momentarily helpless, against the building. What little physical courage he had was almost gone. His mind refused to function. His senses were the confused senses of a drunken man. But desperation impelled him.

He *must* see Nick. Nick would explain things to him. On the other hand, perhaps Nick—but he dared not think of that.

Nick Worthington was not in his office. An efficient stenographer explained that Mr. Worthington had had an appointment and doubtless would go to lunch before he returned. Josiah Hudson left the building.

He knew Nick was in the habit of lunching in the grill room of the Leighton Hotel. He marched to his destination like an ancient scarecrow, his coat flapping in the wind.

He entered the grill and looked around with wild eyes. He did not see Nick Worthington. He approached the head waiter, and asked:

"Has Mr. Worthington been in for lunch?"

The waiter shook his head. "Not yet, sir. Perhaps he is in his suite."

Josiah blinked. "He has a suite here? I thought he lived in the suburbs."

"He does, sir. He keeps the suite to rest in during the afternoon. Mrs. Worthington joins him when she is in town, I believe."

"Mrs. Worthington?"

The head waiter had flitted away to greet a middle-aged couple.

Josiah Hudson left the grill and went into the lobby. In response to his query the clerk said, "Mrs. Worthington? Suite 1200, sir."

Josiah walked to the elevator. His heart was thudding against his chest and his eyes were wide with something close to panic. His gnarled knuckles beat against a door marked 1200.

A blonde opened the door. She was a well-built woman with black eyes which were heavy with mascara. There was a trifle too much makeup on her face, and there was a hard line to her lips.

Josiah said, "Are you Mrs. Worthington?"

"Sure," said the blonde. "What about it, mister?"

"Are—are you Mrs. *Nick* Worthington?"

"That's right. What do you want?"

"Nothing," said Josiah Hudson and fled down the hall.

He was no longer a rational being. He knew that ominous danger hung over his niece's head. He was rather less aware of the sudden threat to himself. He knew he must get home. He must get Thelma out of that house, away from the monstrous evil which was about to envelope her.

He fought his way on a crowded bus, closed his eyes and clung to a strap. An awful knowledge burned into his brain—a knowledge he was terrified to contemplate.

HE ENTERED the old house at a dog-trot. He ran up the stairs and went to Nick's room. He searched the bathroom medicine chest feverishly. Then, in a bottom bureau drawer he found what he had feared he would find.

It was a small square box containing pink capsules. Its label read: *Seconal*.

He put the box in his pocket and ran out into the hall. As he did so, he heard Nick's car coming up the driveway. Panic was suddenly upon him. He raced like a scared child into his own room, locked the door behind him.

He remained there for twenty minutes trying desperately to summon the last reserves of his courage. He knew he was very close to death and he knew he was in all likelihood a physical coward. But he was not a moral one and more than his own life was at stake.

He stood up. He buttoned his coat about him. He squared his shoulders pitifully and walked down the stairs to the library. The muscles of his stomach were constricted and his heart thudded against his thin chest.

Nick Worthington was standing at the sideboard. He turned his head as Josiah seated himself in a leather arm chair. Josiah stared at him. He wondered vague-

ly how he had ever thought Nick handsome. Now, those blue eyes which had once seemed gay and laughing were cold and relentless as the Polar Sea. His full red lips were sensual and cruel. Lines of dissipation which Josiah had not observed before were etched deeply in his features.

Josiah said in a voice he fought to keep steady, "Nick, I have something to say to you."

Nick Worthington laughed without mirth. "I have something to say to you, too. You've been snooping in my affairs today. I gather you've been digging in my bureau. You've also seen my girl, haven't you?"

Josiah nodded. "I've seen Doctor Weldon as well."

Nick frowned. "What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I saw him only long enough to know he is not the man who came here to treat Thelma."

There was a long silence. A flurry of rain pattered against the windows. The ancient grandfather clock ticked imperviously. Josiah Hudson felt a great need to cry out, a tremendous urge to flee from the house. The tight reign of his reason held his emotions in check like a savage bit holding a spirited horse.

"And," said Nick easily, "I assume you have reached certain conclusions?"

"I have," said Josiah. "After I had seen the doctor, it occurred to me that you wanted Thelma committed to an asylum in order to get her money. I knew she trusted you. You had but to ask for it and you could have had her whole fortune."

"So you decided I didn't want her money?"

"No," said Josiah. "I decided you wanted her money and that other girl as well." His calm cracked like a levee in flood time. "How could you do it?" he cried. He took the sleeping pills from his pocket and flung them on the table.

"Night after night you've drugged that girl into uneasy sleep. You killed a cat and scarred your own throat, then told her she had done it. You put blood on her hands and fur under her nails. My God, were you trying to drive her mad?"

"Not necessarily," said Nick. "If she'd gone mad, so much the better. I wanted to send her to Springer's place. That was all."

Josiah Hudson's entire body trembled. "What are you saying!"

"I'll say it all," said Nick Worthington. "It's simple enough. I love that other girl. Not Thelma. But I'm not going to give up Thelma's money. Nor yours either. I knew about Micah and the insane streak in the family. I did what I did to have Thelma committed."

"But if you divorced her on the ground she was insane you'd lose your right to her money."

Nick eyed him coolly. "What gives you the impression that she'd live too long in that madhouse? Micah didn't. Springer will take care of that. I'm paying well."

Josiah shuddered.

Nick went on:

"No one would have questioned anything except, perhaps you. I took care to allay your suspicions. You even would have signed the commitment papers."

"That's why you pretended that man was Weldon?"

"Of course. Anders said Weldon's opinion was gospel. I wanted to avoid any suspicion from you. I reasoned that no one ever checks on a phone number if someone else gives it to him. When you thought you called Weldon, you called Springer at his home. The secretary knew what to do when someone asked for Weldon. An opinion which you and Anders believed came from the great Weldon would keep all suspicion from me when I inherited Thelma's money—and yours."

"You—you could do that to Thelma?" Josiah's voice was a dry husk.

"WHY not? The most important thing in the world to me is my own life—to live it as I see fit."

Josiah closed his eyes for a moment. A sudden thought occurred to him.

"How do you dare tell me all this? I'll testify against you."

"You'll testify against no one this side of hell," said Nick Worthington. "Your spying today has compelled me to change my plans, to take more direct action."

Josiah Hudson said nothing. His thin fingers tightened on the arms of his chair. Nick pointed to the cobwebbed brandy bottle on the sideboard. Josiah noticed that its cork had been removed.

"That bottle has been touched by no one but yourself," said Nick. "The glass at its side I took from your room. It doubtless has your fingerprints on it. Holding that bottle with a handkerchief I am going to pour a drink from that bottle into that glass. I am going to give it to Thelma with your compliments."

Josiah gasped, "You've poisoned it!"

"Right. I took some cyanide from the photographic room at the agency. I have dumped it into that brandy. Recall now, you said before two witnesses—Doc Anders and the maid, Jane Harkins—that you'd sooner see Thelma dead than crazy. What more likely than you mercifully poisoned her?" Nick paused for a long time. His hand thrust itself into his coat pocket and withdrew an automatic. Then he added quietly, "And blew your own brains out afterwards."

What Josiah did was sheer physical and nervous reflex. His brain was paralyzed. He uttered a terrible shriek. His clawing fingers reached out and seized a heavy glass ash tray. He hurled the ash tray directly at Nick.

The hurtling object struck Nick in the chest. He staggered back under its impact and his head struck hard against the edge of the marble mantelpiece.

The library door flew open. Jane Har-

kins ran into the room. She stared at the unconscious form of Nick Worthington. She said, "Mr. Josiah, what's wrong? I heard Mr. Worthington cry out."

Josiah Hudson caught his panting breath. He pulled himself together and said, "He's had a slight accident. I think he's unconscious."

The girl stared about the room. Her eyes fell on the old brandy bottle. She said, "Shall I pour him some brandy before I call the doctor?"

On Josiah Hudson's next words hung a

human life. He who had never harmed a living creature, hesitated.

It didn't matter much what happened to him. He had lived his life. But there was still Thelma. He would do what he must do and await the judgment of a merciful God.

"Brandy?" he said in a voice he scarcely recognized as his own. "Of course, give him brandy. I have it on the word of Mr. Worthington's personal physician that brandy has a remarkable salutary and revivifying effect."
