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Vol. IV

APRIL, 1942

No. 1

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*A RED STAR Magazine*

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ALL STAR LOVE

# An Unnatural Feud

By NORMAN DOUGLAS

*The hate that was killing his life, was keeping his enemy alive*

## I

FAR away, among desolate peaks, in that voiceless wilderness of stone and ice where the clouds linger, a horde of rivulets, bursting from patches of eternal snow, joined their waters and sped away. And the stream leaped downward through groves of bearded fir, or glided in a smiling flood over smooth meadows of foxglove and tiger-lily and marigolds, caressing their roots with its eddies.

To the country folk who lived in the valley below, the stream was a living and a spiteful thing. They called it Elf-water. Its waves were dull, bluish, insipid to the taste, and fraught with unhealthy chills from the snows above—none cared to drink of them; and its shores were encrusted with fanciful stone shapes of grass and moss—elves' work, like the ice-crystals on the window-panes in December.

And none cared to build houses near the water, or to own the fields on either side. For, sometimes, in the bluest days of midsummer, the stream suddenly swelled to a furious torrent and over-leaped its flowery banks, drowning the lush meadows far and near. "The elves!" the old folks would then whisper, shaking their heads. They knew its elfish and wayward tricks, and some of them, maybe, still believed in such creatures. And the young men would come out to view the mischief, and gaze into the

sunny sky and up at the hills, and talk together and look wise, secretly wondering.

Only one man could foretell the floods. He had lived on the Elf-water all his life. But he is dead long ago. His cottage is deserted: the roof has fallen in, the wooden beams are decayed, and green moss sprouts between the planks of his floor. He used to look up at the hills and see a small vapory cloud anchored against one snowy peak, and say nothing. Whenever they asked him to explain, he merely smiled, as if the Elf-water kept no secrets from him.

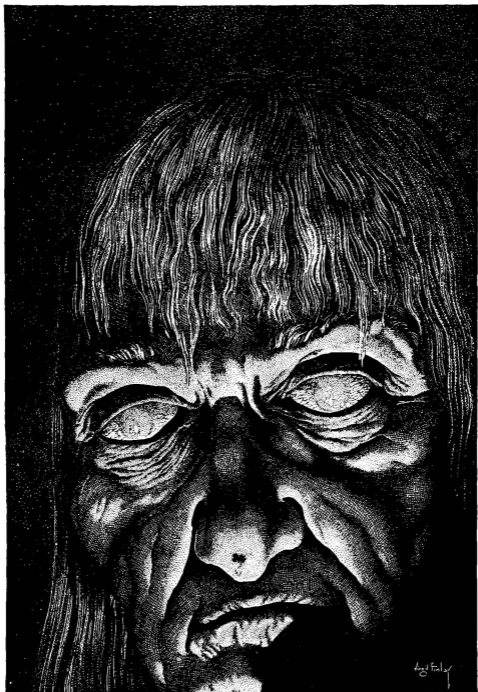
Meanwhile the fair meadows were flooded, and the crops buried till only a few bright green tips showed above the seething foam. And up in the forest, where all should be still, the shriek of the torrent could be heard from afar. It thundered among the ravines and roared for freedom in its narrow prison, churning the boulders with hideous din and tumbling the tall pines, whose painted boles, loosened at the root, shivered and rocked like the limbs of some convulsed giant. The pale wood-flowers nodded helplessly in the tawny spray. The stream was unearthly in its rage.

And, then, with as little show of reason, its elfin wrath melted to a smile, and it shrunk back into a silvery thread of water, hushed and clear. It was ashamed of its freak, and weary.

But the harm was done, and only this one man's meadows were spared, for

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She was no dreamer—old, ninety or maybe even a hundred years, she knew about everything and believed in nothing. Her eyes, in the dark, glowed like opals, filmed over but still holding their fire

they lay out of reach of the wildest floods. They were remote from the valley by a many hours' climb—damp, sloping meads fringed by dark firs, on the shady side of the stream that rushed in a deep strid below the cottage. The people called them "elf-meadows," perhaps because, in times of flood, two or three tall columns of spray could be seen rising up from the gulf below and bearing some fancied resemblance to white elves or fairies.

The man had often watched these misty pillars swaying gracefully. He loved the Elf-water; he had learned to identify himself with all its moods. The ripple of its gray wavelets was the voice of an old friend, a friend of his boyhood—the sound that met his ears in the earliest morning and that charmed him to sleep at night; and he often thought of the days when, as a child, he used to hang over the dim forest pools and watch the bubbles and harken to rare music streaming upward from the depths. It was the pebbles dancing in the current; but to his childish ears it sounded like the faint songs of the water-fairies, disporting themselves on the crystal floor.

And, if by chance he dropped anything into the stream, the elves were sure to bring it to the surface again. Everyone, indeed, was agreed upon that point. Scythes and axes and sickles that had fallen into the deep pools, were always churned up again and found lying on the banks. "sharper than before," the owners said. And once, a heavy cart, loaded with hay, was overtaken by a sudden flood and borne away. Next day, wonderful to relate, they found it standing upright and unharmed on the bank. If there are no elves, who had done it?

Even the man's old mother was sometimes amazed at these things, although she generally scoffed at the mountaineers' beliefs. For she came from the green plains, far beyond the hills, where the folk are quite different. She laughed at the dull peasants and their ways.

She was no dreamer. She knew about everything and believed in nothing. They feared her, but she feared none. She was calm and upright, and even-tempered, and prodigiously old—ninety years, maybe, or even a hundred. But she was lithe and strong, and her back was straight as a lance. Her husband had died long ago. She had lived in that lonely cottage with her son all his life.

## II

"WILL she live forever?" he often wondered. He hoped she would die, and that soon.

For these two hated each other. And yet, strangely enough, both were just and honest, and even kind, according to their lights. And they lived together, thinking that they were fulfilling a duty.

In that low-ceilinged room, with its wooden wainscoting stained and blackened by age, they often sat and looked at each other for many hours without speaking a word.

"You are your father's child," she would at last say, regretfully. She never reproached him with aught else, for he was a good son. And he never dreamed of vexing her, for she was his mother.

And then she would look at him again, and he would look back and say nothing.

What should he say? It was true enough; he was like his father in all things—short and heavy-chested, indifferent to cold and heat, with dark eyes, and crafty features that reflected in their harshness the crags and chasms of his home; slow to laugh, slow to speak, slow to decide, superstitious, gentle, but pitiless in resolve—a peculiar compound of strength and weakness. She would have wished to herself another son, tall, gay, ambitious, instead of this contented and crooked creature of the mountains.

And, perhaps, she thought of her own home in the rich plains, with their white-domed cities and laughing merchant-folk. Did she regret having exchanged it for a hard life among the mountains? Doubtless. But she was never heard to

complain of her lot, and, much as people disliked her, none could find an evil word to say of her. She had a sense of duty and an unbending will such as would have driven her, in other times and places, to seek a martyr's death rather than yield in her conviction. She had served her husband faithfully up to the day of his death, and, although she had exacted blind obedience from the child, she never treated him with harshness.

But from his earliest youth he had never understood his mother, and after his father's death he smiled seldom. He soon learned to close the channels of his heart, to retire within himself, wondering and dismaying, and leaving unspoken many thoughts. Even in the olden days it had been a strange love that they bore each other. There was little charity in that house.

The old woman, accustomed to have her own way, treated him like a child long after he was grown to manhood, and such was his piety that he seldom ventured to cross her wishes.

Her mind was stronger than his, but he was warmer of heart.

"Why, then, do you not leave me and return to your own home?" he would sometimes ask. He longed for her to take him at his word, but she never left him. She evidently thought this a passing whim on his part; indeed—what vexed him most of all—she seldom entered seriously into any of his ideas, regarding him rather as an idle visionary whose fancies must be humored or—if mischievous—repressed.

"Leave you? Leave you, my son? And why leave you? My people are all dead. And what would befall you without me?" She seemed to doubt whether the man of fifty could provide for himself!

And, yet, she was not wholly insincere; there was something of pity mingled with her contempt. He was her son—her weak son, indeed; how else could he suggest such a thing?

"You drove *her* away!" he once dared to reply, trembling with rage. "If she

were here there would be no need for you to stay. Since that day I have suffered!"

He spoke of his lifelong grief, and wondered at his own boldness in thus reproaching his mother.

"These are foolish words, my son." She looked bravely into his eyes. "Foolish words."

But she teared inwardly, for he spoke the truth. The matter of the man's wife was the only one she dreaded to discuss with him—the old woman knew that she had made a mistake. But it was against her nature ever to acknowledge a fault, and she therefore affected to ignore his grief.

And, in truth, she could not easily bring herself to comprehend such an enduring affection.

"Twenty years have passed since then," she mused. "Why does he not forget?"

In this one thing the man had thwarted his mother—he had brought home a bride who was not to her liking. But the victory had sapped his energy, and he was too weak, or, maybe, too pious, a common enough story, to profit by it and bid the old woman begone. There followed a few short years during which the mother regained her power over her son and tormented in a thousand ways the young wife, who finally fled in despair, never to return.

The cottage remained the same, with its cool meadows and dark belt of forest, but the light of love was gone out, and an undying hatred kindled.

That terrible morning when he found himself deserted, the Elf-water was in flood, convulsed in its deep bed and howling in the hollow caverns that it had torn into the mountain's side. The man climbed up to a certain little knoll—there where the earth slopes away in a steep ledge above the thundering cataract, and where he had often sat with her who was now departed. The current below this point was so fast that it might well have carried away the strongest man. Had she perished in the

water? Surely not. The water was his friend; it restored to him all that he ever lost.

He looked down the stream. There was sunshine and peace in the valley below, but here all was gray desolation and loneliness; the torn clouds stuck among the pines. And ever and anon a ghostlike pillar of spray rose up from the noisy depths and drenched the meadows. Sometimes one remained upright, swaying in the wind like a shrouded human form.

"She cannot be dead," he thought. "She will return."

In the course of time disquieting rumors of her, the absent one, had reached the valley. It was said that she well deserved all that she may have suffered, since she deserted a good husband for no cause.

But the man cared nothing for evil report. He knew the truth, and that the trouble had been all his mother's work. And each time he looked upon his mother's face—a hundred times daily—he was reminded of that other one who had suffered through her. But the old woman always knew the direction of his thoughts, and stared back at him fearlessly, though without unkindness. She knew her power over him, and exerted it freely, returning his look so steadfastly that he often felt the strength oozing out of his bones, as after a long illness.

Often they sat thus in that dark room, confronting each other. They stared for long, long hours, striving for the mastery. And never a word was spoken. He longed for her to yield—to confess with her eyes, at least. But she never admitted any fault; and there was nothing to be read out of her eyes, pale-blue, cold and lively as the ripples of a mountain river, and fringed with bristly white lashes. Her long curls dropped over them—for her oval forehead was overarching down to the nose with thick locks, white as driven snow—and stiff hairs curled over her lips and out of her nostrils. She had a strange, deep voice,

gruff as a cracked bell, and a complexion clearer than a child's. Under its transparent skin could be seen the veins wandering about like little red rivers. And even in her old age she was taller than her son.

Likely enough she had been comely in her youth, but now she was grown monstrous.

She used to say: "Look you, what could you do without me? I must care for you like a little child. Do not I work for you, make your food and clothing?"

It was true enough, like everything that she said. He had grown idle and listless in latter years. But he thought: "How different it might have been! How happy I was, an' how little would have contented me!"

Then he would sigh to himself, grievous, and the customary look of reproach, which she was awaiting, did not come. For he left the room silently with bowed head.

And as often as he returned he found her sitting upright on her bench beside the stove, with her long fingers working at her wool, ever ready to take up the mute challenge. To the man, thus peering into her glassy eyes, they seemed to swell till they dominated his whole being. He clenched his fists and looked away.

Sometimes, after such a struggle, a strange feeling of rage and power entered into him. It made his whole body tremble. He thought it was an evil spirit tempting him. It used to whisper in his ear, but he could not understand the words.

And, as the years went on, mother and son spoke less with each other. Silence and hatred lay heavy upon that home. The man's black, curly hair was already streaked with gray. The woman grew old—old, but she never changed.

### III

"WILL she live forever?" he wondered.

"Aye, we are a long-lived race," she said aloud. For even when he was yet a

child she always guessed his thoughts as correctly as if he had spoken them out. "I am old—I have lost count of the time—but I shall live yet many years and work for you. Be thankful. We are a strong race—our blood is good—we live long—"

"Too long," he thought, and would have told her so, but the impious words stuck in his throat and choked him.

The old woman, meanwhile, fixed her eyes upon him, knowing his thoughts.

"Surely," she said, trying to sweeten the gruff tones of her voice into persuasive pleading, "surely you would not drive your mother out in her old age to die by the roadside?"

"Surely not," he replied, moved by a return of his natural piety. But, how different it might have been!

As he stepped out of the doorway he found, lying upon the threshold, a log of wood with some blood-stains upon it, and a bunch of gaudy feathers. They were those of a jay—doubtless the old familiar bird that visited the cottage at times. His mother must have killed it, after waiting for her opportunity all these many years. She hated it on account of its history, for it was the young woman, the absent one, who had caught and tamed it during her short life at the elf-meadow.

The man, although generally callous to the sufferings of the wild things of nature, was strangely affected, in his present exasperation, by the sight of these poor remains. His mother had chosen an evil moment. He carried in the feathers and held them before her eyes.

"Look!"

"I see."

"Why have you killed it?"

"Because it was thievish. And because I disliked it," she added truthfully. She was never so sure as now of her ascendancy over him.

But he was enraged at the hard words. He thought of the absent one—it was as if a link between himself and her had been cruelly severed. He said fiercely:

"You killed it! Even as you killed her! This cannot endure!"

"All this is foolish talk. Will you never be reasonable?"

"Even as you killed her!" he repeated hoarsely. There was a tingling in his ears, and the veins in his forehead suddenly swelled.

Then the Evil Spirit came—it had come so often of late—and spoke to him. He understood what it said. It said: "Now!"

"You killed her! This cannot endure. One of us two shall die—even as she died! Ah! Do you understand? Do you confess? You killed her! And I will kill you!"

And, for the first time in his life, he seized her in a grip of steel and shook her till the white curls danced over her face. A rain of fiery sparks was falling before his eyes, and still he shook her, regardless of her shrieks. How light she was! She reeled under his arm, and he would assuredly have shaken the last breath out of her old body but that something in the touch of her cold, dry skin brought him abruptly to his senses again.

"Let me go!" she growled, as boldly as she could, gasping with rage and breathlessness. "Would you raise your hand against your mother? You are no man."

But he was inwardly glad, in the spell, he thought, was broken. He used to fear her, but now he had seen her weakness.

"She is only a woman—only a weak woman," he said.

Nevertheless, his energy soon melted away, and, as after his marriage, he lacked courage to bid her begone. He had felt his strength, but he feared to use it.

And the woman had felt her weakness, but she sought to hide it. She would show no signs of defeat. Yet, whenever she spoke to him, she was sensible of a strange twitching in her jaw, and a new tone in her voice—the sound of fear, which she tried to conceal, but could not. Therefore, she wisely ceased

to speak altogether, and the man likewise preferred silence, since he foresaw that he could no longer reckon upon his self-control in the event of a dispute. Thus, neither daring to address the other, many days and many months would pass without a word being said, although they looked at each other from time to time in a way that left little to be misinterpreted.

In his dumb contest with those relentless eyes, the man was worsted. The old woman, without a word, gradually cowed him into submission and re-established her empire. And the man now only clung with luxurious self-torture to the bitter-sweet remembrance of other days.

The absent one, at that distance of time, had become invested with a sacred and well-nigh supernatural character. He would not believe in her death. Surely she would return to him. His superstitious mind would have deemed it little of a miracle to have encountered her, in saintly guise, during his wanderings in the forest or on the banks of the stream where they had often lingered together. She was no longer a human creature, but a shadowy being crowned with a halo of immortality.

As for the old woman, she lived on for many years.

"Will she live forever?"

Aye, she was clearly fated to live forever, and he no longer cherished any hope.

He would repeat: "This cannot endure. One of us two must die!" But it endured.

"You are no man!"

It was true enough, like everything that she said. You are no man! He laughed at his own weakness—a bitter laugh. Should he kill her? He shuddered at the idea. Besides, he dared not.

Once, indeed, after an unhappy day and many hours of sleepless torment, the Evil Spirit came again and spoke to him in the same manner as before.

And he crept up to where she slept, hardly knowing what he was about to

do. It was midnight. She lay with folded palms, half-reclining, in her accustomed attitude, on the bench beside the stove. She breathed softly.

But her eyes were not shut! They were open, and glowed like lamps in the dark. The man stepped back, awe-stricken.

"I see you," she said calmly, without moving so much as a finger—hated words, that haunted him ever afterward.

She was satisfied with her triumph, and said nothing; but the man's last spark of courage was crushed out of him. Thenceforth he walked with down-cast head and averted look. Never again would he raise his hand, or even his voice, against her.

At times, to escape from his care, he descended into the valley and drank fiercely. But more often he wandered through the lonely forests, loudly praying for forgiveness, for guidance, and for release from those awful eyes that, vampire-like, sucked out the strength of his body. His soul was humbled to the dust. The trees, the rocks, and the wild waters were witnesses of his heartfelt supplications.

He prayed thus for many years. And, in the end, his prayer was heard.

#### IV

FOR the old woman grew blind. The blue fire faded out of her eyes. They became milky, as it were two white opals, though the flame still burned dimly within. For a long time she hid the change from her son, but he found out in the end, and thanked the Great Being who had heard his prayer.

"You wax blind, mother. Your eyes are filmy."

"Nay, you mistake; I see well," she answered, looking boldly toward him, for she knew that he was watching her.

She struggled on with an iron will. Whenever his glance fell upon her she must have felt it, for she at once stared back into his face, and so steadily that he often wondered whether he was in-



deed not mistaken. But her task became harder every day. And she began to fear mightily, for although her old body was healthy and tough as an oak, she foresaw that, with the darkening of her sight, her power over him would wane.

"The film grows upon you, mother."

"I think not. I see my wool," she croaked back. But slowly the crystal of her eye clouded to dull horn.

Again he insisted. "You see me less plainly than before," strangling, as best he could, the joy that quivered in his voice.

"I see you well enough."

But she saw him not at all! She was stone blind. And when her son spoke there resounded a horrible note of triumph and menace in his voice. She thought: "He will kill me if he discovers the truth," for thus she interpreted his crooked peasant nature.

Yet she still contrived to hide her tear, even as he hid his joy, casting about meanwhile for some new device to overawe him. At last she hit upon a cunning and bold deceit, worthy of her fearless mind.

"I am not blind! I see you—I see every hair on your head! And I look into your eyes—I pierce them through—"

He turned aside from her fixed stare.

"Is it possible?" he wondered.

"I see! This film, of which you speak, is in your own eyes! I can see into your very heart, and read your evil thoughts and wishes. Are you not ashamed?"

Such words she often repeated, and each time the man heard them it was as though a lash had struck him. And he looked at her, endeavoring to read the truth out of her calm face, and his superstitious mind grew afraid.

"I see you," she repeated, and she dissembled so well that he began to believe. His blood curdled with fear.

Was it possible—?

He took to prowling stealthily as a lynx, hoping to avoid her glance and, by taking her unawares, to satisfy himself of her blindness. But she was too quick for him—her pearly eyes always

discovered his whereabouts, and her words sank into his heart.

"I see you! I see everything!" she growled.

She had duped him!

But a nameless dread fell upon the man. He went out of the door and passed through the forest, and did not return for many weeks.

## V

ONE sunless morning in the early spring he staggered home from the village. His gait was unsteady, but there was a steady purpose in his heart. The old woman lay in her accustomed attitude on the broad bench beside the stove. She never moved: she slept. She slept much in these latter days. The man crept nearer, craving to look into her face.

She slept on, and her sharp ears never heard his approach, for the Elf-water was in flood, writhing and screeching in its narrow channel till the cottage trembled with the fury of the water. As he bent down to look at her, the door was burst open by a sudden gust of wind. But she slept on.

He turned back to shut it, and, as he did so, he looked out upon the landscape. There was sunshine and peace in the valley below, but here all was gray desolation and loneliness; the torn clouds stuck among the pines. And ever and anon a ghost-like pillar of spray rose up from the noisy depths and drenched the meadows.

It was on such a morning, he remembered— How long he had waited! Surely she, the absent one, would come soon.

And he returned to look down upon the old woman, the cause of all. She slept on.

Then the Evil Spirit drew near and spoke to him. It said, "Now!"

And already his teeth were set to the work. But at that moment she awoke of her own accord, and opened her eyes. They were like disks of polished lead. And when she had done so, and never

so much as took notice of him, he knew the truth. She was blind—blind as a stone. He stepped back a pace, breathing heavily with the weight of unexpected joy.

And then an immense wave of love and compassion swept over him, submerging every other thought or feeling. He pitied her misfortune, and would fain have forgiven her all. He would love her doubly. He would humble himself in ministering to all the wants of her old age.

But the woman soon felt the human presence, and, in mingled fear and defiance, shrieked aloud, little dreaming what effect the words would have:

"I see you! I see everything!"

Hated words, that turned his love to very madness. It was as if a crimson flame leaped up before him, burning away the remembrance of all that was or had been. And he held her gently, and said—his words sounded like a lesson learned beforehand:

"Enough. Come."

"Begone, fool! Will you raise your hand against your mother? Leave me!"

But he only drew her nearer to him.

Then the truth flashed upon her, and her voice broke from its troubled depths to a scream that drowned the howl of the wild waters.

"Out upon you, monster! You wish to kill me, but I wish to live! Are you not satisfied with my blindness?"

She thought by this confession to appease his wrath. But it was too late—her words were lost.

Perhaps he would have obeyed if he had heard, for his piety was fervent. But he saw and heard nothing. There was a din in his ears as of crashing thunders, and a mighty curtain of blood swayed heavily to and fro before his eyes. He merely uttered that one word, "Come." It sounded dreamlike and distant, as though another man, not himself, were speaking.

The woman, undeceived as to his intent, struck out bravely with her arms, fighting like a mountain-cat; but he

gathered energy from her resistance and picked her up as he would a child—for, though tall, she was thin and light—and carried her out of the cottage and across the damp meadow. The Elf-water shouted for gladness.

He returned alone and sat still a while, pondering painfully. Slowly, reluctantly, one by one, the memories crept back, building themselves up into the hideous fabric of his crime.

"Ah!" he remembered it all. But a pallid fear shook him. What if she had not died? And if the Elf-water yielded her up again, even as it yielded up all else? If she were still alive—she was strong and active—

His teeth chattered, and his eyes remained fixed upon the half-open door, for he dreaded every minute to see her return with dripping garments to the accustomed seat, and then, turning, to confront him with that leaden stare. But, as she did not return, he finally crept across the meadows to the water's edge, peering into the misty depths below. Then he looked down the stream. There was nothing in sight.

And, then, suddenly, he saw, or thought he saw, a pale gray shape moving in the water far away. Soon it reached the shore and disengaged itself from among the boulders. It stood upright. How tall it was! Its garments were long and clinging, and it climbed slowly toward him, stumbling often among the stones. It seemed to be weak, for it paused at times to gather strength or to bethink itself. Was it a specter? Surely not. Surely it was his mother, escaped alive from the Elf-water.

The man raised his hand to his head, where the moist perspiration had gathered. He was unnerved with fear. But the shape had reached the narrow path, and, after resting a while, suddenly stretched out its arms, as though feeling the way, and seemed to drift straight toward him at a rapid pace. It had evidently decided. It came nearer.

He waited no longer. He was seized with a blind, unreasoning panic and fled

upward, past the cottage, into the deepest shades of the dripping forest.

And there, sheltered under a huge fir, he remained many hours, terror-stricken. Evening closed in upon him. At last he reasoned away his fear and turned his steps homeward in a quieter frame of mind. And, yet, he could not rid himself of the notion that the horror was somewhere near at hand, lurking in the darkling shades.

And as he silently walked on, his alarms grew apace. Like a startled child he dared not turn his head, but walked faster and faster through the dark trees till, on the meadows, his pace increased to a run—a horrible, breathless race. He entered his home and looked around him, fearful of some unspeakable calamity.

The shape had arrived before him. It sat, upright and stern, on the accustomed bench, and its eyes—those awful eyes—stared at him with fixed determination across the darkened room. They seemed to say:

“One of us two shall die—”

He felt his hair raise itself under his thick fur cap. He would have fled, but his feet refused to move, and there began a strange throbbing in his head. He was constrained to stand still and gaze.

Aye! It was his own corporeal mother! Her clothes were dripping, and a little pool of water had collected on the floor. She remained immovable as a rock, save for an occasional spasm of shivering. She had apparently not yet heard him. There was a line of human suffering about the mouth, as of one who would weep, but cannot. And the man saw a small stream of blood oozing from a wound on her head. It trickled slowly and stained her white locks with crimson. At that sight there fled across his disordered mind a shadow, a fleeting mockery of the former feeling of love and contrition.

But the old woman made a slight movement. She must have become aware of the human presence.

Then the man, by a last effort of will, tottered forth, vanquished. His temples ached fiercely; bereft of reason, he strayed into the gray twilight to the water's edge. And lo! not far away from a certain little knoll—there where the earth slopes away in a steep ledge above the thundering cataract—another frail white shape floated lovingly toward him. It enveloped him in its dewy shroud.

The spray fell in showers upon his burning head, but his arms sought the yielding form, and he fell prone into the void, meeting its chill caresses with a responsive kiss.