

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

# Strange STORIES

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# Appointment With a Lady

By WYATT BLASSINGAME

*Author of "The Blank Face of Horror," "The Flame Demon," etc.*



Maloney saw the grim figure standing in the doorway

*Maloney Ran from His Date with Doom—But Fate Is a Jealous Jade Who Refuses to Be Jilted!*

THE doctor walked to the door of the hospital with Maloney, and there they shook hands. "You've had a close call," the doctor said. "It placed a great strain on your heart. Not many get that close and manage to come back."

"I have you to thank," Maloney said.

"No. You have to thank yourself. There wasn't much I could do for you. You pulled yourself back by the sheer, overwhelming will to live." The doctor looked straight into Maloney's

eyes. "I hope you'll remember that."

"I will," Maloney said. He hesitated, obviously embarrassed. "I won't try that—that again. I promise you."

The doctor put his hand briefly on Maloney's shoulder before they said good-by and Maloney went down the steps. The doctor stood in the doorway, looking after him. He saw Maloney walk to the corner and stop for the light to change. It was not a particularly busy corner, but Maloney was being careful. Any man who had been as close to death as Ed Maloney would be careful. When the light turned green, Maloney started across the street.

The automobile appeared so suddenly, it seemed almost to have materialized out of the air itself. It swept past the sedan which had hidden it from view, roared beneath the red light, and bore straight down upon Ed Maloney. Instinctively the doctor yelled a warning.

Maloney had already seen the car. He whirled, leaped back for the curb. Tires shrieked as the machine swerved toward him, then straightened again, missing the man and curb by the barest margin.

Instead of stopping, the car gained speed as it rushed on. It tore past the hospital. The doctor, still tense on the front steps, saw that the woman driver was its only occupant. He had a brief, fragmentary glimpse of her face as the car raced past, and quite abruptly he was shivering. He felt a cold sensation that was not altogether shock at the near accident.

The automobile whirled left at the next corner and somehow avoided upsetting. As suddenly and violently as it had appeared, it vanished.

**E**D MALONEY stopped at the first bar. He was still trembling and he felt a sick weakness in the pit of his stomach. That close brush with death had badly frightened him. He ordered brandy and soda, downed it quickly and asked for another. Sip-

ping the drink, he let his mind turn back to that other time. . . .

The papers had called it a suicide pact, and it had come close to being a successful one—too close, for Ed Maloney had never intended to die. The idea of death had never occurred to him until Mary mentioned it.

He finished his drink with a gulp, telling himself for the thousandth time that he had not killed Mary. She had wanted to die and he had merely allowed her to commit suicide. That other—the stage setting—had been necessary. It would not have helped for him to die also. He couldn't have kept her company in the grave. Why should he have killed himself simply because she had grown morbid, because she didn't want to live any longer the way they were living?

It was not pleasant to think of those last months. One job after another had slipped away from Maloney. For awhile they had managed to live on what Mary made. Then she, too, had lost her job because she couldn't carry on any longer. The baby was to be born in another month.

He remembered the queer flame in Mary's eyes as she had looked at him.

"I'm not going to have the baby, Ed," she had said quietly. "I won't do it. I won't bring a child into the world to live like this. I'll kill myself first."

But it would have done no good for him to die too. He was thinking that, his hands clenched on the bar rail as he ordered another drink. He was remembering the one thing he was always afraid to remember and which he could never forget. Again he heard the insidious softness of his own voice as he handed the sleeping pills to Mary.

"Take these. If we are going to—to do it, it'll be easier if we are asleep."

She had taken them without question, but he had dropped his own out the window.

He remembered how quietly she had lain there on the bed while the room filled with gas. He could almost feel

the gas, a light but tangible substance, like fluffed cotton as it piled up and up in the room. He had knelt with his nose close against the tiny crack at the bottom of the window, waiting for the neighbors to become aware of the odor, waiting for them to begin breaking in before he closed the window completely and stretched out upon the floor.

Mary had lain utterly still. He could no longer see her chest rise and fall with her breathing.

"She's already dead," he had thought. Then abruptly she had moved. She had stood up and stumbled toward him. On hands and knees before the window, he had tried to avoid her. But she had stumbled and fallen against him, knocking his head hard against the window-sill.

That was how the neighbors had found them, lying together on the floor.

"He doesn't have one chance in a hundred," the doctor had said, working on him. "The woman is already dead."

Maloney thought of that now as he paid for his drinks with money from the insurance.

"Death money," he thought, and desperately pushed the words out of his agonized mind.

**I**T WAS early twilight when he finally left the bar. Now the pavements gave back the fierce heat of the day. The faces of passers-by looked pale and tired. Maloney at last became conscious of the sweat oozing from his pores, of the weariness of his body. He wanted to go home and take a bath. But not the old home, of course, not the apartment where it had happened. His temporary home would be the apartment on the Drive which a friend who was leaving town that day had said he could use. At the next corner, Maloney went down the steps to the subway.

Although it was after the peak of the rush hour, the station was fairly

crowded. The crowd moved with a slow, weary surge toward the trains, back toward the stairs. Maloney found his way along the guard rail to the place where the traindoor would stop. The station filled with the echoing roar of oncoming wheels.

Someone must have stumbled against him, for he was suddenly shoved forward, straight past the end of the guard rail toward the tracks. He tried desperately to regain his balance, failed, and began to fall.

He had a wild glimpse of the train. It seemed to be expanding violently in size, thundering down upon him. He saw the contorted face of the motor-man. Then one flailing hand clutched the guard rail and he dragged his paralyzed body away with the strength of that hand. Somehow he managed to keep his feet, and he was safe an instant before the train ground past him.

Hardly anyone had noticed the near-accident. Maloney couldn't even tell who had pushed him. That woman in the crowd, going away from him? He had only a glimpse of her face. He couldn't be certain. But a man whom the woman had passed abruptly began shivering, hunching his shoulders together beneath his white linen jacket. "That's damned odd," Maloney heard the man saying to a companion. "All at once I felt cold all the way through."

Unreasoning fear took hold of Ed Maloney. He went reeling away from the train. He shoved people aside, began to run, fighting his way through the crowd and up the subway steps.

On the sidewalk, he kept going, not running now but walking fast with a kind of blind; fixed purpose that he did not question or understand. He pushed through the revolving doors of a bar.

"Whiskey," he moaned, and was holding out his hand before the bartender could pass the bottle and glass to him.

He stood and drank and kept his mind a tight, fierce blank. Twice he

paid his bill and went to the door. Each time he turned back to the bar again. He was afraid to go outside. He did not know why he was afraid, nor did he even know definitely that he was afraid. He did not want to face either reason or result. He did not want to think at all. He wanted to shrink his skull tight around his brain so nothing could move within it.

"Buddy, if you're going to keep drinking all night, you ought to eat something," the bartender said.

"Sure," Maloney grunted.

was keeping his mind too tight on nothingness.

"Take a cab uptown," he mumbled. "Tell the driver to be careful."

But when he reached the corner, a bus was parked there. He knew instinctively that it was long after the last bus should have run, but he got on. Buses were more careful than cabs.

"This ain't a regular run, mister," the driver said. "I'm through for the night." Then he shrugged. "Well, okay. It don't hurt the bus to take one more trip."

He ate what the bartender brought him. Then he began drinking again, unaware of time, surroundings or the occasional men who spoke to him.

"We're closing now, buddy," the bartender was saying. "You want me to call you a cab? There's a stand right down on the corner."

"I'll get one," Maloney replied. "I'm all right."

He walked quite straight without even the stiff-kneed motion of the drunk who doesn't want to stagger. The liquor seemed to have no effect on him. He did not feel it in his brain nor in his stomach either. He

Maloney had taken his seat and the bus was in motion before he realized that he was not the only passenger. A woman sat across the aisle from him. He was startled to see her there. He must have passed right by her without noticing. But now he stared at her with a kind of hypnotic unwillingness.

He was aware first that he could get no idea of her age. Nineteen? Thirty-nine? He could not have guessed. She had huge scarlet splotches of rouge on her cheeks. Her eyes were deep-sunken, her chin bony. She was hideous and yet she somehow exerted a definite attraction. Like—

Quite slowly she turned and looked straight at him. When she smiled, he tore his gaze away from her, swung around and stared out of the window. He was cold, frozen all the way to the marrow of his bones. He began trembling. His teeth chattered. He held to the edge of the seat with one hand, clutched the window-sill with the other and forced himself to stare out into the night.

The bus rolled on steadily with a low hum of motor and wheels. It did not stop at all. Street lights flickered past.

**B**YOND the lights, the dim park sloped down to the empty flatness of the Hudson. Beyond the river, other lights strung a thin misty necklace of diamonds above the Palisades.

In the window, Maloney could see a dim reflection of the interior of the bus, yet he could not see the woman behind him. He could feel her there, though. He could even feel sure that she was watching him. But because the reflection was poor, he could not see her. He turned slowly.

She was there, directly across the aisle and looking fixedly at him. All at once he had the wild, crazy idea that this was the woman in the automobile that had almost struck him, the woman in the subway station. At that moment she moved, and he knew that she was going to sit beside him.

He flung himself from the seat, went reeling down the aisle. He grasped the motorman by the shoulder.

"Let me off!" he cried. "Let me off here. Quick!"

The lurch of the stopping bus threw him forward against the windshield. Then the door opened and he was out, running. But he stopped quickly and turned to make sure the woman had not followed.

She was not in sight. He looked at the bus, but it was already in motion and he could not see inside it. She was nowhere in sight.

It was then the truck came swiftly

out of the side street and swerved in front of the bus, just missing it. Ed Maloney felt the muscles of his throat tighten spasmodically. If the bus had not stopped to let him off, it would have collided with the truck! If he had not got off when the woman moved to sit beside him—

He walked the rest of the way. Twice he stopped, listening, peering back into the darkness. But there was no one following him. An occasional car hummed along the Drive, and that was all.

Once a taxi pulled alongside, slowed down, then roared ahead. Maloney was tired now, but he was determined to walk the rest of the way.

"I'm drunk," he muttered. "That long strain in the hospital, and too much liquor tonight. I've been imagining things."

But though his legs had begun to ache, he kept walking.

The elevator boy had gone off duty when Maloney reached the apartment house.

He had to climb the stairs. He went up them slowly. The exercise made his heart beat in heavy, dull throbs. It ached a little as it squeezed the blood in and out until he finally reached the fifth floor.

He opened the door of his friend's apartment, entered, and closed the door behind him. He switched on the light. Standing there panting, he steadied himself.

He stood just inside the door, looking about him. The lights were not bright. The corners of the room were in shadow and the shadows seemed to flicker and move gently. He started toward the sofa, which was beside the door leading into the next room.

Suddenly he saw her for the first time. She stood there in the doorway, looking steadily at him.

He felt the coldness, the fierce, terrible upsurge of fear within him. But he was too tired to run now. He stood and gazed at her. She was hideous and attractive. Her bony cheeks were

splotched with rouge, her hair sprawling loosely upon her shoulders.

"You've been difficult to meet," she said. "You've struggled so hard."

Staring at her, he seemed to be hearing something the doctor had said, a long time ago, it must have been. "The sheer overwhelming will to live—"

But the woman was saying:

"I always keep my appointments. You should have realized that."

"Appointment?" he quavered. "I've made no appointment with you."

The lights were so dim, he could scarcely see the walls of the room. But he could see her there in the doorway.

"Don't you remember?" she urged.

"You and Mary. But only Mary kept her appointment on time."

"Then you—you are—" he said slowly.

For an instant his terror was greater than the weariness that held him. He screamed, a hoarse, horrible wail as he turned and went stumbling for the door.

But in the dim light he could not find it. The moving shadows confused him. They closed around him.

They filled the whole room and grew darker.

Then black, ultimate weariness rolled toward him. But he was still screaming and struggling to reach the door when it struck.

**T**HAT'S the man who tried to commit suicide about a month ago," the doctor said. "And then, his first day out of the hospital, he got drunk and climbed five flights of stairs. His heart was already weakened. It couldn't take the strain."

"Well, he didn't go without complaining," the ambulance driver said. "Folks said they could hear him screaming down in the basement."

"I thought we had saved him," the doctor mused. "When he left here—" A puzzled expression was in his eyes. He was remembering the automobile which had swept under the red light and almost struck Ed Maloney, remembering the queer, cold sensation he had felt as the car passed.

He shrugged and turned back to his work with a baffled, helpless feeling, like a blind man trying to paint with colors he has never seen.