

SPICY MYSTERY STORIES

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CONTENTS

HERITAGE OF MADNESS.....	4
Robert Leslie Bellem	
CURSE OF DR. VECCHIO.....	16
Morgan Grant	
THE GLASS COFFIN.....	28
Robert A. Garron	
BEHIND HELL'S VEIL.....	42
Rex Norman	
OLGA MESMER.....	54
Watt Dell	
ACROSS 6 YEARS.....	56
Curtis Blount	
SUMMONS FOR SATAN.....	68
C. A. M. Donne	
DEATH IS A TREASURE.....	80
William B. Rainey	
THE THIRD MAN.....	92
Colby Quinn	

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By **REX
NORMAN**

BEHIND

Paul was in love. Perhaps that explains why it took him so long to understand the secret of the pictures turned face to the wall

Her knife slashed through the canvas.

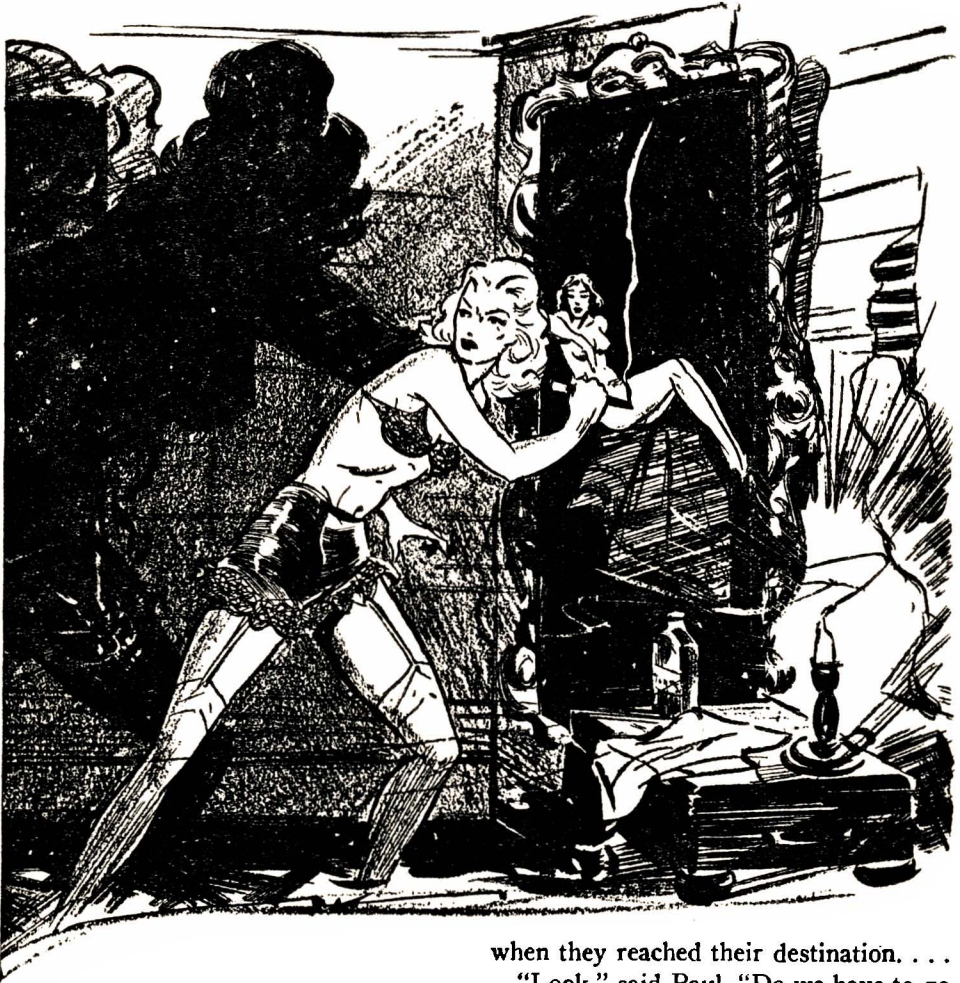


THE TREES seemed to be getting thicker, to be crouching lower over the road as though to block their passage, to be menacing them like a horde of bearded giants. The twin beams of the headlights dipped and swung crazily as the car jarred and bounded over the rough road. Paul Borden's strong artist's fingers spun the wheel as they started to skid; then when he had pulled the car back on to the highway, he stole a glance at the girl who sat beside him.

"Some road!" he said. "Was it always this bad?"

"Why do you keep on asking me questions like that?" she burst out. "I

HELL'S VEIL



told you I haven't been back here since I was five . . . and that was sixteen years ago!"

Paul frowned slightly. An outburst of that sort was so unlike Lisa. He had felt she was under a strain, that she was forcing herself to do something that frightened her when they had left the city that morning, but he had not realized that she was on the verge of hysteria. Of course, the wild, desolate country they were driving through was enough to set any one's nerves on edge. That, and the fact that

when they reached their destination. . . .

"Look," said Paul, "Do we have to go on, darling? I don't want to marry your family; I just want to marry you! I don't care what they're like if. . . ."

"Not 'they'," said Lisa. "Father's dead and there's only mother. And we've gone over all this before. I must go back once before I can marry you. I must find out why I'm frightened to death of my own home, of the place in which I was born. Find out why I've never been allowed back since I was about five years old, why I've never even gotten a letter from my mother in all these years."

PAUL stepped on the brake as they went over a rickety wooden bridge; the canvases, palettes, and packages of brushes in the back of the car rattling together.

"This Doctor Kelvin who's acted as your guardian, wouldn't he tell you anything?"

"No," she answered. "I haven't seen him either. He lives somewhere near here and I've only corresponded with him. He always ignored the questions I asked in my letters."

Paul shook his head. "I don't like it," he said. "I don't like anything about it. The way the people at the last village looked at us when we asked the way. The fact that you can't remember anything about the place, as if your mind had deliberately blanked out something horrible." He stole another glance at her pale, set face. "And if your name is Field, why is it called 'the old De Campo place'?"

"De Campo was the name of my mother's family. They've been in this part of the country for a long time. Dad came here only after he married mother."

Paul nodded. The note of strain seemed to be leaving her voice as she talked. That was what he had hoped would happen when he had asked her questions whose answers he already knew. Suddenly the probing fingers of the headlights gleamed white on a high stone wall at the side of the road.

"Isn't that it?" he asked, slowing the car. "They said it had a stone wall around it."

Lisa did not answer and when he looked questioningly at her, her face was whiter than before. It was as if her terror had left her for a moment and then come back with redoubled strength. Pursing his lips together, he swung the car toward the heavy wooden gate in the wall and stopped. He opened the door and got out.

"I'll go see if the gate's locked," he said. "If it's not, I'll open it and you drive the car through."

She nodded without speaking and he walked up to the gate. He pushed it tentatively and found that it was locked, but there was a lever near its middle and, when he pulled that down, there was a creaking sound and the gate swung back. He waved to Lisa and she drove the car through the opening. He followed and had just gotten inside when, of its own accord, the heavy gate slammed shut. The heavy click of the lock snapping closed startled Paul and he whirled around.

Then he saw something that gave him the first real touch of fear, apart from his concern over Lisa, that he had felt since they had started on their strange trip. The inside of the gate was perfectly smooth, having no sign of a lock or knob. It could not be opened from the inside! It had made so that it was possible to get into the De Campo grounds, but not out!

LISA had stopped the car a short distance up the driveway and as he walked toward it, he had to fight an impulse to break into a terrified run. Something had happened to him since he had come through that gate, something that he had not known since he was a child. He was gripped by a wild, unreasoning fear, a fear that peopled the darkness with unseen shapes. A fear that made him feel that his every move was being watched by malignant eyes. He forced a smile to his lips as he reached the car.

"Well, it won't be long now," he said with attempted cheerfulness as Lisa looked at him with dark, troubled eyes. She tried to force a smile also, but was not very successful. She moved over to let him get back into the driver's seat and as she did so, her eyes went past his shoulder. They dilated suddenly.

"Good heavens, Paul!" she gasped. "What's that?"

He whirled around but he could see nothing, only the solid darkness, yet the feeling of some Presence was even more intense than before.

"Where?" he asked sharply. "I don't see anything!"

"There! To the right! Something . . . black!"

How could black be seen in blackness? It was just her nerves which were. . . then, as he strained his eyes in the direction to which she pointed, he saw it too! In the darkness a yet darker darkness was moving! An inchoate, formless shape seemed to be materializing!

A moment longer he stood there, staring. Then, because it was the thing he most feared to do, because he had to prove his mastery over his own frightened body, he ran toward it.

"Who's there?" he called. "Who are you?"

The black shape did not seem to move, yet when he reached the place where it had appeared to stand, it was not there.

"Where are you?" shouted Paul again. There was thick shrubbery lining the road and he thrashed his way through the clinging branches in hopeless pursuit of a thing he did not believe really existed. He heard Lisa's frightened voice calling him back, but he ignored it. Both fear and rage were struggling for mastery within him. He passed a moment to get his bearings, to see if he could locate that black shape again, when his nostrils dilated and he sniffed. He smelled something more than the dank, charnel odor of rotting leaves and mould; a faint, indescribable fragrance. An eerie scent that was both excitingly feminine and yet somehow repellent.

His eyes ached as they tried to pierce the darkness, then somehow he knew that the thing he had pursued was standing

before him, that it had materialized soundlessly out of the night again. His hands went out uncertainly, fumbling. They seemed to touch some tenuous stuff that was almost impalpable. It was almost as if his fingers were passing through something that was too vaporous to be felt, yet a shock of surprise shook him. This Thing before him, whatever its species might be, was nevertheless feminine!

An animal heat seemed to be bathing him. His fingers, still fumbling mechanically, seemed to trace the curving swell of a full, feminine breast. Every second the Thing seemed to be taking more solid form. His fear had been swallowed up in a strange unaccountable excitement. It was as if the essence of all that was dark and agelessly feminine was slowly becoming perceptible and palpable before him.

It seemed to be pressing closer to him. He still could not see it, but its warmth enveloped him. The butterfly light touch of soft lips seemed to be brushing his face and his hands dropped to his sides. A drowsy torpor seemed to be coming over him. His eyes closed. The not-quite-felt lips traveled fleetingly over his own, down to his throat in a delicate caress, then they fastened themselves there hotly, hungrily. A sharp pain stabbed him. With a startled cry he staggered back, but now the Thing had body and a pantherish strength.

It was as if the taste of the warm blood had made it real for the first time. It pushed away his clawing hands, crushed heaving breasts tighter against his chest, writhed a sensuous, subtle body against him so that he was almost borne over backward. Then, just as his knees weakened in both fear and strange ecstasy, a high, wailing call sounded from somewhere in the distance. He felt the Thing, whose eager mouth was fas-

tened to his pulsing throat, stiffen. Again the eerie call sounded and just as he roused himself somewhat from his strange daze and tried to tear this clinging Thing from his throat, it gave a low whimpering cry and then was gone without a sound, as suddenly as it had come.

A MOMENT longer Paul stood there, a curious mixture of shame and excitement filling him. Then he turned and stumbled back to the car. All that had happened must have taken place in only a few moments for Lisa, a frightened look on her face, was only now opening the door to get out and come look for him.

"What was it, Paul?" she asked. "I was afraid that. . ."

"Nothing," he answered. "Probably just imagination." He did not meet her eyes as he got into the car. Then with a startled cry she pointed to his throat.

"What happened to your neck? You're bleeding."

He glanced in the mirror and there on his throat, where that Thing had glued its hungry mouth, were two little punctures, a tiny drop of blood still oozing out of each one. A shudder racked him.

"Must have scratched myself on some thorns," he muttered and, throwing the car abruptly into gear, he sped down the muddy driveway as if he had only just realized that the place was accursed.

The house loomed up before them almost before they knew it, a monstrous, rambling pile without a light showing in any of its narrow windows. Paul pulled up before the heavy front door and silently helped Lisa out. She looked at him for a moment with troubled eyes as if imploring a reassuring word, but he was busy with his own dark and disturbing thoughts and hardly noticed her glance. Setting her lips bravely, she walked up the steps to the door, lifted the heavy

knocker, and let it fall with a sullen clatter.

The sound seemed to bring Paul back to himself. He put an arm around Lisa and pulled her to him, crushing her lithe young body against his, feeling the sweet softness of her young bosom, the fluttering of her heart, against his chest. He bent down and kissed her.

"Don't worry, my dearest," he said. "Whatever happens, remember I love you. I won't let anything come between us. . . ever!"

She sighed and cuddled even closer to him, seeming to draw strength from his embrace. Then they heard the rattle of chains and bolts and drew apart. The door opened a few inches and a black, glittering eye peered out at them.

"Who's there?" croaked a hoarse voice. "Who is it?"

"It's Lisa Field. I've come home to see my mother."

THERE was a gasp from behind the door. A moment longer that eye studied Lisa, then the door swung back and an old, dried-up woman stood there, a candle in her hand. Her face was yellow, lined. She must have been tall once, but now she was stooped, yet her black eyes were quick and beady. She did not see Paul standing to the side of the door. She looked only at Lisa.

"Ha-ha!" she cackled. "So you came home, eh?" She spoke with a trace of a foreign accent.

"Who are you?" asked Lisa.

"You don't remember me, eh?" asked the old woman. "Well, I remember you. I'm Maria."

"Maria," repeated Lisa as if the name awakened some faint memory in her.

"Wait here. I'll go get her." Shielding the candle with a clawlike hand, the old woman turned and disappeared into the gloom.



He stood there transfixed,
staring.

Paul felt Lisa shudder as she stood near him in the darkness. He could feel the eerie menace of the old dark house himself and he knew that old fears, memories of her childhood must be coming back to her. He started to step close to her again, to slip a comforting arm around her, then he heard a rustling and tapping sound that grew louder as it drew nearer to them.

The faint radiance of the candle appeared again in the blackness and he saw Maria's face and beside it, that of another woman who was even older. Her face was patrician but showed the ravages of time. Her nose was hooked, her mouth pinched, her white hair piled high on top of her head in an antique coiffeur. She wore an old fashioned black dress which rustled as she moved and she helped herself along with an ebony cane.

"Mother!" cried Lisa running toward her. "Oh, mother!"

She bent to kiss the old woman who turned up a yellowed cheek.

"Well, daughter," she said in a rasping voice. "So you finally decided to come home eh? All the De Campo do, at last." She cackled meaninglessly, then shook her aged head. "We've missed you, Serafina and I."

Serafina? Paul had never heard that name before. He moved forward to greet the old woman who had not seen him as yet.

"Yes, mother. I've come home. And I've brought . . ." Both Lisa's mother and Maria caught sight of Paul at the same time.

"A man!" shrieked Maria, her eyes widening in horror, the candle shaking in her hand.

"A man!" repeated Lisa's mother. "A man! Send him away! Quick! Blood! Blood on the floor! A trail of blood. Like your brother. Like your father. . ."

Her voice trailed off incoherently in terror.

"But . . . but, mother," said Lisa, "It's Paul. The man I'm going to marry!"

"Marry!" Mrs. Field's voice rose to a scream. "Oh, God! Not. . . ." Then her eyes rolled up and her body went limp, the stick falling from her hand. Both Lisa and Maria seized hold of her, supporting her. Paul leaped forward to help but, with a snarl, Maria stopped him.

"Don't touch her!" she croaked savagely. "You've done enough damage already. We'll take her upstairs. You get out of this house as fast as you can!" And as he stood there open mouthed but with wondering fear in his heart, Maria and Lisa started to carry the old woman up the stairs.

HE CONTINUED to stand there in the darkness even after the flickering light of the candle had disappeared from sight. What was the meaning of all that had happened? The gate that would let one in but not out. That strange Thing he had seen or imagined in the shrubbery. The two old women's fear when they had seen him and their wild talk of blood. And Serafina, who was she?

He struck a match and looked around the entrance hall in which he stood. There was the stairway before him and to his right the yawning darkness of a large room. Holding the lit match high, he walked into it. There was an old brass candlestick on a wooden chest near the door and he lit the candle it held, then looked around him. He was in a musty smelling, dark-paneled room.

The furniture was mostly antique and in a bad state of repair. A huge, heavy wooden crucifix of Spanish design hung from a rusty nail on one of the walls, but the thing that most piqued the artist in

him was the fact that there were four large pictures in the room . . . and all four had been turned so that they faced the walls, so that only their backs were visible.

He heard a step behind him and turning, saw Maria. "Haven't you gone yet?" she snarled.

"No," retorted Paul. "And I don't intend to!"

Her eyes blazed at him, then a veil seemed to cover them. "All right then, stay!" She said softly. "It's on your own head!"

"Where's Lisa?" asked Paul. Jerking her head upstairs without answering, Maria started to leave.

"Wait a minute," said Paul. "There are a lot of things I want to know. This Serafina Mrs. Field mentioned, who is she?"

"Serafina?" repeated Maria, her eyes widening suddenly. "No one! She's . . . she's no one!" She continued to look at him for a moment and then, a look of terror on her face, she scuttled away and back up the stairs.

Paul gazed after her, muffling a curse of exasperation. His nerves were frayed to the snapping point. The old house was so full of dark mysteries that it choked him. No wonder Lisa had been afraid to come back to it. Fears, doubts, and questions were swarming in his brain. There was a frown on his face as almost mechanically he walked over to the nearest picture to turn it over and see its face, see who had painted it. Then he gasped.

There was a brass plate on the bottom of the frame's back and there, written in antique letters was the name, "Serafina de Campo"! De Campo was Mrs. Field's maiden name! She had said that she and Serafina had missed Lisa, yet Maria had said that Serafina was "No one"! This picture with its face to the

wall must be a portrait of Serafina . . . yet judging from the condition of its canvas backing, it was centuries old!

Almost timidly he reached up and turned the picture over, then he started and almost dropped the candle he held. The front of the canvas had been blacked out. It was a sombre expanse of painted darkness set in a gilt frame, yet somewhere in that darkness there lurked a formless shape that he had seen before, an inchoate, black mass, half perceived and half imagined. That picture of Serafina De Campo was a portrait of the Thing that had sucked the blood from his throat out in the shrubbery!

PAUL ripped out a savage curse. What was the matter with him? Was he going mad? Trying to build up fragments of unreal and fantastic fears into a terrifying whole? He looked at the painting more closely. Yes, the center part of it was darker than the rest. In a sense it did resemble that shape he had seen or imagined but that was because the Thing had had no particular shape. Then he snapped his fingers. Of course! There had been a portrait painted on the canvas, but someone had painted it out.

It was the covering black pigment which had suggested the dark shape he had seen in the shrubbery. Now an eager light came into his eyes. De Campo was a Spanish name. The canvas was very old. Might not the black paint cover a forgotten old Spanish master? A Sanchez Coello, a Velasquez, an El Greco?

The artist in him forgot everything else. He ran out of the room, the house, and opening the rear of his car, fumbled through the equipment he had brought along in the hopes that he might be able to do a little painting himself. He took out a bottle of turpentine, a wad of cheese cloth, a palette knife, and rushed back into the house. Working slowly with the

knife and the moistened cloth, he started to clean the top covering layer of paint from the picture.

It came off easily as if it had been only a thin coat, and in the small area in which he worked, a shape started to appear, a patch of white. He stepped back and looked at the canvas and he saw that he was uncovering a hand, a beautifully drawn hand with long tapering fingers. A strange excitement gripped him. It might very well be that he was discovering an old master.

He widened the arcs of the turpentine moistened cloth, exposing a wrist and the tips of the fingers, then suddenly he stopped, staring. Something was wrong. Those finger nails! He looked closer at them, a sudden shudder racking him. They were long, cruel, pointed like talons. Why should any artist paint hands like that? It was as if they were the hands of a corpse! The nails like those of someone who was dead, growing uncared for, after the body had been placed in its grave!

He sensed, rather than heard the footsteps coming down the stairs. Almost mechanically he put down the wad of cloth and the palette knife. As an afterthought, he turned the picture back as he had found it, with its face to the wall, then Lisa came into the room. Her face was still pale, her eyes veiled as if she were shielding her thoughts from him. A sudden pang of pity stabbed Paul, yet he sensed a certain constraint between them. It was as if she had learned secrets which she would never disclose to him.

"How is your mother?" he asked. Lisa shrugged her shoulders listlessly.

"She's still unconscious," she answered. "If she's not better in the morning, we'll call the doctor." Then, "Look, Paul. I've been speaking to Maria. You'd better not stay here tonight. Take

the car and drive back to town. If anything should happen to you. . . ."

"What could possibly happen to me?" he asked impatiently, forgetting everything but the fact that he did not want to leave her. "I'm going to stay here with you."

"Please, Paul. . ." she began, but in three long strides he had crossed the room and taken her in his arms, stopping her mouth with his. At first she struggled weakly, trying to push him away, but he only held her closer to him, crushing her young breasts against his chest, trying to fight the blood-chilling terrors of that eerie house with the warmth of his love for her. Then Lisa relaxed and swayed in toward him, pressing her body against his, answering his kisses with her own. He could feel her trembling and he did not know whether it was with love or fear. Then she drew away from him and sighed a long, quivering sigh.

"All right," she whispered. "If you won't go, I'll show you where you can sleep." And taking his hand she led him from the room and up the stairs.

THE corridor on the floor above was just as dank smelling as the rest of the house. By the candle light he could see the leprous patches of paint that peeled away from the walls. Lisa stopped in front of the first of the many doors that lined the corridor and opened it. Inside was a large bed chamber, sparsely furnished. There was a high bed in the center of one wall with an old fashioned canopy over it.

"You can sleep here," said Lisa. He took her hand and tried to draw her over the threshold into the room but she hung back, her eyes wide, her firm young bosom heaving.

"No!" she whispered. "Not now. Perhaps I'll come in and say goodnight to

"Oh God!"
she choked.
"Paul!"



you . . . later." With a sudden movement she pressed her lithe body against his once more. Her arms went around his neck and she clung to him so closely that he could feel her every subtle curve crying out for love; then she had torn herself away and was gone into the darkness of the corridor.

It seemed as if the dank sheets of the ancient bed would never get warm enough to permit Paul to fall asleep, yet even while his body shook spasmodically from their chill contact, his eyes grew heavy. The last act of his consciousness was to wonder whether he had locked the door of the room. To try and remember whether he had bolted it against the terrors that might stalk the midnight corridor outside or whether he had left it open so that Lisa could come to him, then he slipped down into darkness.

The blackness swirled slowly around him ebbing and flowing with a definite rhythm, and a strange excitement gripped him. Even with his eyes closed he could sense that something was moving in the blackness, a darker darkness that was somehow perceptible. It was something that repelled and frightened him, yet it held a fascination that was stronger than fear. His flesh crawling in a curious mixture of excitement and terror, he waited as it drew nearer and nearer to him, then suddenly he stiffened. He did not know when the dream had ended and his real awareness had begun, but he did know that now he was awake . . . and that still he felt that there was something in the room with him. Something that was drawing closer and closer to the bed in which he lay!

There was a strange, heady perfume in his nostrils. An unaccountable fever made his blood hammer in his temples.

"**I**S THAT you, darling?" he whispered. He could see nothing in the

darkness but his hand went out, fumbling, and seemed to brush something soft and warm. For a moment, he felt the rounded curves of a feminine form, thinly covered, then it was gone. He sat up and a cloud of fragrant hair brushed over his face. There was something maddening in those shy, fluttering touches.

He wanted to seize her, press her to him, feel those soft, trembling contours crushed against his straining chest, but he could not seem to grasp her. She seemed to be close beside him and then gone, leaving only a trail of perfume, a sensation of breath-taking warmth. He rose from the bed, his hands grasping.

"My darling! Come to me!" he whispered, then a soft throbbing body brushed against his and avid lips were pressed against his mouth. There was something savage, fiendish in the way they clung to him, drawing his soul up out of his breast. His hands tried to draw the trembling figure closer to him, but it seemed always to slip away. Then a searching finger of moonlight came in through the dusty pane of the window, lighting the darkness of the room with a watery radiance, and with a faint sound, the figure drew away from him.

He could see the rickety chair across the room, the cracked mirror on the wall . . . but he could not see the woman whose lips had just been pressed to his! She was still in the room, he could sense her presence but. . . then he saw it! A shapeless mass in the half darkness and silhouetted against it, the only portion of her that was clearly visible, a slender white hand with long, pointed nails!

He stood there transfixed, staring, as the beam of moonlight flickered and disappeared. He continued to stand there as he heard the door of the room open and close and the realization came over him that she was gone. She. . . or It?

For it had not been Lisa whose lips had burned against his, but that black, formless shape from the shrubbery! That Thing which he could feel but not see. It had come to him here in his room at midnight, but now one of Its long, slender hands was visible. And then he knew!

That picture down in the dank, wood-paneled room! The picture of Serafina De Campo. That painted over portrait of a woman dead for centuries. He had rubbed the covering paint free from one hand. If he cleaned the rest of the portrait, removed the rest of the dark, obscuring pigment. . . .

HE WAS moving toward the door of the room, his brain queerly detached from his body. His blood was searing his veins. A choking, burning sensation was shaking every fiber of his being. That full shapely body that had sought him out twice. A body separated from him by a tenuous black curtain which, only partially perceived, had whipped his whole being into a burning frenzy!

The corridor was a channel of night, the stairs a stepped and flowing darkness, then he stood at the entrance to the room where the picture hung which somehow linked the present and the past together. He stumbled across the room until his hands brushed against the low chest under the picture. He found a match box and lit the candle he had left there earlier that evening. Its yellow light was a small warm pool of radiance in the all enveloping darkness.

Then, his eyes wide, fixed on that white slender hand which was alone visible on the dark canvas, he moistened the wad of cloth with the turpentine and started to work.

Under the careful strokes of his hand, the scraping of his palette knife, a slender wrist appeared, then the elbow and

the bare upper arm of the woman who had sat for her portrait before his father or his father's father was born. He worked upward, bringing out the column of a neck on the old canvas, its flesh warm and living. A chin appeared, full red lips, a short straight nose, and then he was gazing into her dark fathomless eyes.

From then on, everything became dreamlike. Hair lying in a loose, dark cloud around bare, lovely shoulders. Down lower the arrogant, exquisite swell of flawless breasts, painted so beautifully that his hands trembled as he cleansed them of the covering pigment. A torso that twisted sinuously, the waist muscles seeming to ripple in their flexion. Then a thin wisp of silk that covered the full curving hips, the sleek roundness of milky thighs tapering into long slim legs. The damp cloth dropped from his nerveless fingers.

His work was finished. There lay Serafina de Campo as she had when she posed for the long dead artist centuries ago, her almost nude body lying languorously on a couch with a robe of curious Moorish workmanship as a background for the pearly whiteness of her flesh.

Paul's knees were starting to buckle under him; he himself did not know whether it was from weakness or from a desire to kneel before that vision of feminine perfection. Then a faint rustling sound came to his ears and even before he turned around, terror and a mad exultation struggling in his breast, he knew what stood at the dark entrance to the room.

Slowly he turned, his heart pounding madly, choking his throat. . . and there she was. The bright robe of Moorish pattern that the artist had painted as thrown casually over the back of the

(Continued on page 115)

BEHIND HELL'S VEIL

{Continued from page 53}

couch, was wrapped around her lovely body, but there was the same half smile on her red lips, the same veiled and secret invitation in her long lashed, dark eyes. Paul staggered back and fell against the wall where the heavy wooden crucifix hung. She stood there a moment longer, her eyes fixed on his, then she came slowly toward him.

She did not seem to walk but to glide with a smooth, sinuous motion. He had brought her into the light, stripped away the covering layers of dark pigment that had shrouded her from men's eyes, and she was coming to thank him for it.

There was more than gratitude in her eyes, though, for they burned with a light that was not of this earth.

She was close to him now, so close that he could smell the fragrance of her body, that subtle maddening odor that had come to his nostrils twice before that night. Then, raising her arms slowly, she let the brightly colored robe slip from her body and stood before him as she did in the painting, nude except for the thin wisp of silk that circled her middle.

PAUL'S bearth was a sobbing pant in his throat as his eyes took in the softly curved beauty of that body. He did not know whether she was real or a figment of a fevered imagination; whether she had come from some secret place in the ancient house or from the nethermost pits of hell. He did not care. He only knew, only cared about one thing. He took one hesitating step forward and then she was in his arms.

Moist lips pressed to his like the avid mouth of a succubus. A warm, soft body tight against his in an embrace whose closeness was maddening. The unbearable softness of a firm bosom crushed against his chest. The trembling of rounded limbs which awoke a response in him such as he had never known. He tore his lips from hers only to murmur her name, "Serafina! Serafina!"

They were standing beside an old sofa that was covered in faded brocade and he slowly sank down beside her upon it. Her eyes were glittering wildly. Choked, half inarticulate sounds came from her parted red lips. She took his head in her hands and closed both his eyes with burning kisses, drawing her eager lips across his cheeks, his mouth, to his pulsing throat.

"Yes, my loved one, yes!" she murmured. "Only first . . . you would not

begrudge it to me, would you? Just a few drops!"

The pricking stab in his throat was no sharper than the pangs of love that he felt. The warmth of her lips where the blood oozed from the tiny punctures was as much a caress as the pressure of her body trembling against his. Her hair was a fragrant cloud about his face. He was sinking back slowly into a warm, sensual dream while he waited for her to lift her head, raise her blood-wet lips to his, press her. . . .

THE scream stabbed through the night like a knife blade. With a snarl, the woman who crouched above him lifted her head. Slowly Paul opened his eyes and there, standing in the doorway of the room, a candle in her hands and her thinly covered body rigid with horror, stood Lisa!

Her dilated eyes were glancing from the almost nude figure that crouched beside Paul to the one painted on the canvas, looking again and again from one to the other as if she could not believe what she saw.

"Oh God!" she choked. "Paul!"

He tried to struggle to his feet but in a flash a warm figure pressed itself to him again, bare arms went around his neck.

"Be still, my dear one," whispered the husky voice of the woman from Hell. "You are mine. Your blood is on my lips. Do you prefer her love to mine?" He looked deep into her burning eyes, felt the tenseness in her graceful length.

"No," he answered faintly. "I am yours."

Her dark eyes blazed with triumph. The red lips parted in a slow smile.

"Yes, mine! And you shall have your reward!" Slowly she started to bend down again to press her lips to his. He was tense, waiting, then even as his eyes started to close with ecstasy, he saw Lisa

leap forward. Her face was set, her lips bloodless. She ran to the foot of the picture where Paul's palette knife lay beside the turpentine and the cloth that he had used to clean the canvas. Even as she picked up the paint smeared knife and raised it high, the woman who crouched over Paul leaped to her feet with a scream.

"No!" she shrieked. "No!"

"Yes!" gritted Lisa. "Back to hell with you!" And she slashed down and across the ancient canvas in two savage cuts!

Again Serafina screamed, this time as if she were in mortal agony. She staggered back and brought up against the wall under the heavy wooden crucifix with stunning force . . . and with a rasping sound as the nail pulled out of the rotting plaster, the ponderous cross fell forward and on top of her, crushing her to the floor!

The knife dropped from Lisa's hand. With a moan, Paul leaped from the couch and tried to run toward the prostrate woman, but his heel caught and he started to fall forward. But even as he fell, even as he tried to throw out his hands to save himself, he knew it was useless. He knew that Serafina was finally dead. Knew that if he lifted the ancient heavy crucifix from her prostrate body, he would find the whiteness of her skin marked with two intersecting lines like the lines of the knife slashes on her painting! Then he felt a jarring blow on his head and he knew no more.

PAUL stared around the bedroom, at the discolored walls and the cracked mirror and then up at the two faces that bent over him. Lisa smiled at him and nodded to the elderly, grey haired man.

"This is Dr. Kelvin, darling," she said. "He came in this morning to see

how mother was and found he had another patient."

"You lost a lot of blood, Mr. Borden, but I think it was mostly that knock on the head that put you out," said the doctor pleasantly.

"Blood?" Paul's hand went up and felt the bandage around his throat. "Then it wasn't a dream? It really happened?"

Dr. Kelvin's face clouded. "If you mean Serafina," he answered, "it happened, all right. She's dead, but I think the curse on the de Campo line died with

her." He saw the question in Paul's eyes. "Oh, the curse was real enough too. It



The door opened and an old, dried-up woman stood there.

was hemophilia."

"Hemophilia?" There was a note of fear in Lisa's eyes. "But that's a disease, a blood disease which is passed on through the female side of a line. Then I . . ."

"No," said Dr. Kelvin. "You won't pass it on to your children because you're not a carrier, you're not a de Campo."

"Not a de Campo?"

"No. Mrs. Field is not your mother." He sighed and sat down on one of the room's rickety chairs. "I'll start from the beginning.

"I knew your father for a long time, Lisa. Knew him when he got married for the first time. Your mother died when you were born and he was terribly broken-up by it. I was moving my practise up to the country here and I made him come out and stay with me for a while. While he was out here he met Miss de Campo, the woman whom you thought of as your mother, but who is really your step-mother. Well, he fell in love with her and married her.

"You were only about two years old then and wouldn't remember. He came to live in this house here and I didn't see very much of him for a while. He had two children after that with his new wife, a boy and a girl, your half brother and sister. The girl was Serafina, named after an early ancestor."

"The one whose picture is downstairs?" asked Paul.

Dr. Kelvin nodded. "Yes. She was the one who came from Spain to America and it was with her that the curse on the de Campo family really started. I found out about it when I got a frantic call from your father, Lisa. The boy, he was about two years old then, had cut himself and we couldn't stop his bleeding. It was then that I discovered that he had hemophilia. He was a 'bleeder'. His mother had passed on to him that rare

and fatal disease which will not permit the blood to coagulate. He bled to death from the small cut he had gotten." He shook his head.

"This second death of a loved one was too much for your father. He committed suicide right after that, slashing his wrists with a razor. If the shock of his son's death was enough to cause your father to take his own life, can you imagine what its effect was on his wife? Her loss was as great as his and besides she had a burden of guilt on her soul."

"It must have been enough to drive her mad," said Lisa.

"In a sense, it did," said Dr. Kelvin. "I was made executor of your father's will and I took you away from the unwholesome atmosphere of this house and sent you to boarding schools. I did not see your stepmother for years; not until just recently, as a matter of fact, but I think I can reconstruct what form her mania took."

SHE still had her daughter Serafina, named after the ancestor who had come to this country from Spain, but she could never let that daughter marry, for she too was a carrier of the dread disease which the women of the de Campo line were cursed with. Evidently the poor crazed woman could not bring herself to destroy that picture of her ancestor which is downstairs, but she painted it out, as if to blot out the awful curse it seemed to symbolize. Serafina, your half sister, must have come to identify herself with that painting. She led a strange life.

"She wasn't allowed to meet or even see a man because of her mother's fear that she would marry and pass on the disease in her blood to her children. She was never allowed off the grounds here. Even the gate was fixed so that tradesmen could drive in to make deliveries,

but had to be let out by either Maria or your stepmother, who would see that Serafina did not slip out. She was always dressed in a long black, hooded gown so that even if one of the tradesmen did see her by chance, he wouldn't realize how attractive she was."

"A black cape and hood!" exclaimed Paul. "That was why I couldn't seem to see her out there in the shrubbery and again when she came here to my room. And that strange cry must have been Maria calling her back to the house. But there must have been something more . . ." His hand went up to the bandages that covered the two small wounds on his throat. "Both times that I saw her . . ."

Dr. Kelvin nodded. "There was something more. Serafina might have been a normal child to start with, but living here under unnatural conditions did something to her. She knew she was cut off from men, from the rest of the world for some reason. From things her mother and Maria said she must have guessed that it had something to do with blood. Her warped mind must have decided that if she could drink fresh blood, a healthy *man's* blood, she might become normal, be free to mingle with the rest of mankind."

"Poor creature!" whispered Lisa. "Poor Serafina!"

"Yes," said Paul. "That would explain everything. The black paint that covered the portrait of her ancestress, with whom she subconsciously allied herself, was symbolized by the black robe she always wore. When I removed the paint from the hand of the painting, she felt that she could leave her hand exposed. She must have come downstairs and seen me working at the complete restoration of the painting."

"That Moorish robe in the painting was probably the last touch," said the

doctor. "It was a family heirloom. It had been hanging in her room. She must have gone upstairs to put it on when she saw it appear on the canvas. When she came down wearing it, she was convinced that there was some definite bond between her and the picture. So convinced that even if that heavy cross had not fallen on her, I am certain that she would have died anyway of a stroke or heart attack when Lisa slashed the canvas."

"And now," said Lisa musingly "There is only one member of the de Campo line left, the woman I thought was my mother."

"The woman who still thinks of you as her daughter," said Dr. Kelvin. "That is why she fainted when you said you

were going to marry Paul. She had visions of the de Campo line with its curse of hemophilia going on and on. I can assure her that you are free of that, but I can't alleviate the loneliness she is going to suffer now that her real daughter is dead. Only you two can do that."

"We two?" repeated Paul wonderingly.

Dr. Kelvin nodded. "She is too old now to realize that Lisa is not her child. If you two had children, she would think of them as her grandchildren . . . and I think she would like that." He smiled as he saw Paul's arm go around Lisa's slim body, then he rose to his feet and went out, leaving them together.

body stiffen. The handle of the dagger was sticking out of his belly. Unable to check the momentum of his arm he had *knifed himself!*

For a moment that seemed like a century, I crouched on the floor, watching the blood spurt from the wound with each beat of his heart. He was dying and he knew it. His eyes were glazed, and his lips had lost every vestige of color. He motioned to me, indicated that I was to lift him up. I did so, as gently as possible, braced him against the wall.

"Paper," he whispered. "Paper and pencil. In . . . in . . . the desk . . . drawing-room."

I found a pad and a pencil, brought them to him. His hand shook as he wrote a note in Arabic. "You . . . you will give this to . . . to Ali," he said. "Unless you do . . . he will kill you." The pencil slid from his inert fingers. I could hear his teeth click as he gritted them. A faint, painful smile touched his lips.

"You . . . you must wonder about . . . about the accident," he murmured, his voice scarcely a shadow of sound.

"You . . . you did not strike Lynn. It was an illusion created by placing a concave lens over your . . . your windshield. It . . . it brought her figure nearer . . . like . . . like binoculars."

I placed my lips close to his ear. "Did Walter Ridge put you up to this?"

He shook his head. "No. I did it for . . . for Lynn in exchange . . . in exchange for certain favors. Tell her . . . tell her . . ." His chin dropped to his chest. A shudder ran through his body. He was dead.

I HEARD a gasp and a muted cry behind me. Enid was standing in the drawing-room archway, gaping at the corpse of Dr. Vecchio. I hurried to her, held her in my arms. She was trembling.

"It's all over, darling," I whispered. "Death has lifted his curse."

She buried her face against my chest, sobbed like a child. I knew, then, that all the horror and all the mental torture was not in vain if it had brought Enid back to me once again. For Dr. Vecchio it was the end. For us, the beginning.