


TERROR TALES



VOLUME TEN MARCH-APRIL, 1939 NUMBER THREE

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A SPINE-CHILLING FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL

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Published bi-monthly by Popular Publications, Inc., 2256 Grove Street, Chicago, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-second Street, New York City. Harry Steeger, President and Secretary; Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter, May 27, 1936, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1939, by Popular Publications, Inc. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. \$.90. For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd St., New York, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped self-addressed envelope for their return if found unavailable. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them.

BRIDE OF THE SERPENT

*Vivid Mystery-
Terror Novel*

by FRANCIS JAMES



Was it old man Mogridge, sinister, self-appointed patriarch of those pitiful American nomads, whose eerie influence lured their young girls away—crawling like tortured snakes, to a tryst with a nameless monster of the deep? . . . Bill Coleman found the answer; but before he did, he saw his wife's fair body fed upon by nauseous creatures from the slime of a watery hell!

CHAPTER ONE

Madness Comes to Helen

THE sound that woke Virginia Holmes was the soft scrape of wood against wood, as if a door or a window of the home-made little trailer were being opened stealthily.

At first it didn't occur to her to be

afraid. The thought trailed over her drowsy mind that most likely it was her mother coming to see if she were all right—she had felt a little ill the night before. Or old Susanna Mogridge, stealing on tip-toe to discover if she needed another dose of the old-fashioned herb medicine to reduce her fever.

Her heavy eyelids closed and slumber

poured contentment around her. Her slim body snuggled in sensuous luxury against the warmth of her silk nightgown, the one extravagance of her poverty-stricken life. The caressing of the satiny fabric around her shoulders and young breast brought strange dream-fancies, as though a gallant knight caressing her tenderly.

A few moments passed while she lay in that unique state of half-sleeping, half-waking. And then she roused again, abruptly stirred into startled consciousness—sharply apprehensive.

The scraping sound had come again—sinister, insinuating. Across the narrow confines of the little trailer, wall and door, were half-lighted blurs, save where the window stood outlined as a misty rectangle against the light of the moon. And Virginia gasped!

The sash of the window was crawling upward. Invisible hands seemed to be moving it. The inch-wide crack grew to a half-foot band, the band widened to the full height of the window—and in the middle of the opening a light appeared, like a supernatural blue eye against the background of night. Virginia stared at it, her breath coming rapidly, her bosom starting to rise and fall.

Swiftly the eye grew in size, swelled to incredible brilliance. It was like a spinning star so vivid that she could hardly endure looking at it, yet so weirdly compelling that she could not withdraw her gaze. Virginia lay motionless now, sweat soaking her till her nightrobe clung like a second skin against her body. She pressed her hands to her breast, clutching her bosom till she felt the hurt of piercing fingernails. Her hands slid down over her thighs, while her whole body vibrated with a fierce, evil desire.

OVER by the window the light spun faster, a gyrating ball that dripped blobs of phosphorescent blue. Then sud-

denly it split into two—a *pair* of eyes. Across the sill came pouring a violet shadow, long and rounded, its body thick as a man's coiling downward. Moonlight glinted on scales like triangular sequins, iridescent with river slime.

With a heavy thud it dropped to the floor and disappeared in the shadows. Virginia's sweat-moist hands clutched at the sheets. A thin scream burst in her lungs to be strangled again in her throat. Had she really seen that hideous vision, or had it been only a hallucination of her fevered mind?

A moment passed while she sat frozen there, not moving—not breathing. Then out of darkness came a slithering noise, the rasp of a body dragging across boards. At the side of the bunk something came pushing up into sight—a blue snout, blunt and scaled, with baleful slate-colored eyes. A forked red tongue made play of thread-like fire against the gloom.

Inch by inch the head rose on columnar neck—swaying gently from side to side. Panting, Virginia cringed back from it till head and shoulders were crushed against the headboard, perspiration plastering her hair against her breasts.

The twin orbs gloated lustfully over her nakedness. And then up onto the bed itself came pouring that grisley shape! Palsied with terror, Virginia lay for an instant utterly motionless, while she felt the chill of its scales on her body, felt its noisome weight flowing over her.

Hoarsely she screamed then, teeth bared, eyes bursting out of their sockets. She clawed against the creature with hooked fingers, futilely. Then in sheer horror, she fainted. Exactly what took place during that interval of oblivion, she never knew. . . . But at last she realized that the thing was gone. Her breath came, expelled from her lungs in an eerie cry.

Another instant she lay supine, saliva trickling from parted lips, then slowly

she sat erect. Her motions as oily and furtive as those of the nameless thing that had been there, she swung her legs over the side of the bed—slid to her feet and stole across to the window.

Beyond there, the half hundred trailers and cars of the "Migs" stood blocked out in jet against moonlight, a shantytown village of toy houses, and at the side of her own, the tent in which her father and mother were sleeping. No one seemed awake. Nothing stirred.

From head to foot Virginia was trembling. Cold fingers shaking, she fumbled at the neck of her nightgown. The robe trickled down to lie in a ring at her ankles, revealing her young body, a naiad of pearly loveliness incarnated from moonlight. For an instant, she stood there in the misty light with arms upraised as if in supplication to dark powers, unseen—inescapable. Then without a sound she climbed through the window and dropped on the ground. Tawny hair streaming, she ran soundless and wraith-like where moonlight painted her in silver and shadow.

WHERE she was going, what she was going to do, she didn't know. But somewhere in the night there must be surcease from the agony in her breast—satisfaction from the strange longings that surged through her. Dazedly she wondered if this was what had happened to Jean Farnum and Sally Roberts, and the half dozen other girls who had disappeared from the camp—if they too had seen that blue light that retreated before her—drawing her, mysteriously calling her.

She turned at length, skirting the flank of the knoll till she came to a winding trail that led down to the river. She halted at the edge of a pool, peering down into the surface where her dim beauty was mirrored. It was close to morning. Low on the horizon the stars were paling

through a gossamer mist. A breeze stirred the cat-tails with thin rustlings.

Virginia took a step toward the water, then paused. Was it the chill of the hour before dawn, setting her shivering like this? Or was it. . . . Now her trembling changed little by little to a sinuous writhing. From shoulders to hips her form vibrated in rhythmic waves, commencement of a *dance du ventre*, like a snake's muscle play.

Suddenly she experienced a longing to lie flat on the ground. She yielded; felt the cold moist earth pressing against her fevered flesh. For an instant she lay stretched at full length, turning from side to side in voluptuous pleasure. Then the twisting motion of her flanks was sending her gliding down the gentle slope toward the water.

Now she was close to the water. Her outstretched fingers touched it. She moaned softly. Inch by inch she urged herself forward, a beautiful white figure against the black earth. The water closed around her. It caressed her shoulders, her back, her entire body. Slowly she swam with her hair like seaweed streaming behind her.

Only the dome of the night with its far-away eyes was there to see Virginia as she swam to her dreadful rendezvous—and the big green frogs honking out of their mud holes. Then in the center of the ripple rings there broke a gruesome shape with glistening coils. Its upflung head peered over the water. It swam forward propelled by giant leisurely gyrations.

Virginia's cry rang once, a filament of wild ecstasy suspended between dawn-touched sky and darkening waste. Then from beneath something closed around her legs. Scaly arms clutched her, one about the hips, the five-taloned claw of the other driven deep into her breast. For an instant they swam twined into one, the pink-white body of the girl, the

cerulean coils of the monster, so hideously fashioned in the mold of a giant snake. Her hair was a sodden tangle against the chest of the thing, her bosom crushed to its slimy neck.

With a flip of its powerful tail it drove them toward the depths. A circle of ripples widened over the surface. A moccasin flicked its tongue as it slithered through the reeds and slipped into the water—diving swiftly and deep as though it feared to be late at the party to be held by the pair who had preceded him below. . . .

MY wife Helen and I were having breakfast that morning on a board table set up in the open outside our trailer when we learned that another girl was gone—that lovely little Virginia Holmes had been added to the ever-lengthening list in the grisley roster of horrors that for weeks had been terrorizing the trailer shantytown camp of us “Migs.”

All around us as we sat there could be seen the ill-clad figures of the hundred or more women and men, our companions, moving dispiritedly about their morning tasks. There was the clatter of cooking utensils, the rasp of querulous voices, and the fretful whimpering of children.

It was a depressing enough scene, God knew—the spectacle of once hard-working and self-respecting people turned into homeless drifters. But I remember, even before I had heard about Virgie, the feeling of uneasiness that had appressed me for days, foreboding of something immeasurably worse hovering over us. More than half a dozen young girls had dropped out of sight, stark naked, by night. What could have happened to them? Where could they have gone? Could the mysterious horror that had claimed them threaten Helen as well?

We were half way through breakfast when feet sounded beside us. It was Ben

Goodrich, our closest friend among the Migs, and his daughter Pearl. They dropped down on the crates, boxes that served us for chairs—and they gave us the news about little Virginia.

“Seems she jest got up out o’ bed an’ went—like the others.”

Goodrich was a tall, broad-shouldered man with deeply tanned face and steady blue eyes—a face deep-graven, emaciated from suffering. Once he had owned his fine farming section in Oklahoma, driven his own car and sent his daughter to college. . . . Husky-voiced, he went on: “They didn’t find anything about what could have made her clear out, or where she went—only her nightdress was there on the floor. Silk, it was, too.” Goodrich spat; he laughed gratingly. “A silk nightdress—on a shantytown gal!”

His work-calloused hands tightened nervously. He was looking at Pearl. His daughter was a brunette, a tall, voluptuously formed girl with sleeky molded hips and firm breasts. It seemed to me that there was a queer look on her sullenly handsome face. She flushed, turned aside from her father’s gaze. Helen, my wife, sat staring at her. There was a strange startled gleam in her eyes, too—an odd excitement.

I didn’t say anything. I felt again that apprehension which had impressed itself on me these last days as I had studied my wife. Realized that there was something about her that wasn’t quite natural.

My eyes drifted uneasily from the two girls and out over the camp of the “Migs.” Wherever you go in the West you will encounter them—the rattletrap cars, home-made trailers, hooded wagons; each vehicle stacked high with household goods, crowded with people. These companies of almost penniless drifters—these American gypsies—are a symptom of the times, casualties in the bloodless yet far-reaching revolution that is sweeping the country. A few years before they had

been workers and home owners. Changing economic conditions had hit them, broken them, uprooted them—sent them rolling like human tumbleweeds, propelled by the winds of Fate.

Farmers from the dust bowl infernos of Kansas and Dakota, share croppers and tenants from Georgia, mill workers out of the green hills of New Hampshire—a hundred and one others in the nomad rabble of the dispossessed, the bankrupt, the beaten, they had taken to the roads in such ramshackle conveyances as they could secure, following the harvests, seeking any work that could be found. Out through the cottonfields, pea-fields, vineyards and orchards of New Mexico, Arizona, Oregon, California and other states, a roving herd without homes or addresses, they find work when they can—and for the rest of the time drift into cities or roadside slums, starving while they wait for the next harvest, jailed for vagrancy, hated and cursed by authorities.

SUCH creatures we were—my lovely wife and I were. Railroaded like plague-carriers from state to state, we and our comrades had finally halted here on the outskirts of the southern town of Bayou View. Just how Ephraim Mogridge, our eccentric leader, had managed it for us, we still only half understood. There was a barren knoll half covered with scrub pine, around whose base the river curved to lose itself amid swamps. The owner of the property had accepted the meagre scrapings gleaned from our purses in payment of rental. And ten hours a day all our able-bodied men were to work at draining a bog where this Jod Farris intended to set out a rice field. In return, he was to furnish us food. . . . And then this had begun—the creeping terror of the vanishing girls.

“If this keeps on,” Goodrich was muttering, “There ain’t none of us that will dare to sleep nights. . . . Coleman, do

you realize that them girls didn’t yell for help when they was taken away, or somebody would have heard ’em? They must have *wanted* to go!”

Goodrich was looking at Rosalie and Pearl as he spoke. Rosalie was an orphaned cousin of Helen’s whom we had brought along with us. She helped with the work. She was flaxen-haired, buxom, over-developed for her fifteen years. She and Pearl stood withdrawn a little way, whispering. I wondered about what, to bring that guilty, unnatural excitement into their eyes.

“Them stories that we hear goin’ around—where do they come from, who starts ’em?” Goodrich was stirring his coffee abstractedly, his eyes tenanted by eerie shadows. “How them girls been seen walkin’ stark naked down by the river. Crawl’in’ on their hands an’ knees. Layin’ down, squirmin’ along on their bellies like they was—snakes. . . .”

I’d heard all those things before. Wild stories to be dismissed as figments of unbalanced minds. But something was here. Seven girls—no, eight—had disappeared. I looked at Helen, at my darling wife, and I felt tendrils of something uncanny and damnable distilling out of the breeze and the morning sunshine. That horror that had snatched those other girls—could reach out for her.

As we sat there talking, I saw that Rosalie had crept around behind a clump of scrub pine to crouch there listening. That was natural enough. But what she was doing wasn’t natural. She had unbuttoned the front of her waist, pulling the folds wide to bare herself. With her pointed fingernails she was gouging her chest and neck as though impelled by some masochistic obsession. Her lips were feverishly parted; eyes rapt in distance with a glassy sheen.

That sight shot a stab of startled horror through me. What could have got

into her? The suggestion of what Goodrich had been talking about? To cover my feeling, I muttered to him:

"Nonsense! You're an intelligent man. You must know that no girl would do that. Those are just some of Mogridge's wild yarns. The girls probably got sick of the monotony here, and ran away. . ."

My voice trailed off into silence. Goodrich wasn't listening. I saw his eyes directed over my shoulder at Helen. I turned to follow his gaze. And at what I saw there, something cold gripped the pit of my stomach.

Over Helen's face had suddenly stolen the strangest look—a flush of eagerness, of guilty excitement. She murmured an excuse and swiftly rose to her feet, turning her back. As she did so—could it be true or did I imagine it?—her two hands rose to cup over her bosom. Fingers tensely curved poised there as though they were about to tear open the cloth. *To bare her body as Rosalie had just done—as, so ran the stories, the vanished girls had tortured themselves as they wandered nude by the river at dead of night. . .?*

CHAPTER TWO

"As No Man Could Love. . ."

I SAT staring after my wife, speechless. Helen—to have done that! Then I heard Goodrich muttering as he rose to his feet:

"I want you should come and take a look at what they found in Holmes' trailer—as long as you think all this is so crazy."

Helen and Pearl had disappeared inside the trailer. I got up and followed him.

We found quite a knot of figures standing around Mark Holmes' unpainted box-on-wheels as we approached. Goodrich's powerful stooped shoulders opened a way through them and then we were climbing

the steps to the doorway. Just inside the threshold a puddle of shimmering silk lay on the boards—Virginia's swank nightgown. The people were all looking at it as though it were cursed.

Goodrich stepped over it and pointed toward the floor. "Get that, Coleman?" he muttered.

Across the rough boarding a bill-poster's past-brush had left a broad greasy trail—or so it looked. A nauseating smell rose to permeate the interior of the car—fedor as of something dredged from the morass of primeval sin.

Goodrich's stubby finger shafted up toward the bed. The stuff was there, too! Alongside the rounded hollow left by Virginia's body the sheet was stencilled with a pattern of triangular black marks—*where something covered with scales and wet with river ooze had crawled to lie down beside her. . .*

Fingers of horror slid on my scalp. So the dark whisperings of the past weeks had a ghastly reality! And the unspeakable creature that had been here could come to Helen!

Hoarse voices became audible behind me and I turned to look through the door around which the crowd of shanty-towners was visible. I looked into sullen deep-graven faces of men, into gaunt eyes of women and I felt again the weird conviction that the sufferings of these people had done more than break and embitter them—had killed their very souls and replaced them with a lewd and unholy fanaticism. They gazed at Virginia's nightgown, at the prints on the bed and the low murmur that welled around the ring held an undertone that seemed ghastly, exulting.

There came a stir in the background. Between the scattering forms a new figure came striding up to the trailer.

More than six feet in height, with huge shoulders and a snowy beard rolling down to his waist, Ephraim Mogridge pre-

sented a figure that might have been that of a patriarch reincarnated out of ancient days. He had a head massive as though hewn out of granite, with bald dome towering above roden pink eyes.

Mogridge was such a personage as in epochs of social chaos is sometimes churned up from the ruck of suffering and despair to attain an inexplicable influence over his fellow-men—as did the mad Russian, Rasputin. Half saint, half satyr, he had spent most of his life as an itinerant preacher in the backwoods districts of the south and west. He had thrown in his lot with us and little by little had assumed the position of leader—a crazed Moses piloting his tatterdemalion flock through valleys of torment in search of a promised land. A dangerous leader he was, as the cooler-headed among us uneasily realized. We knew his lewd interest in the young women of the camp. We had dark suspicions regarding the things that took place at his secret allegedly religious meetings. So far, we had been able to do nothing. . . .

ALL this passed through my mind in an instant. Then Mogridge's shoulders came pressing in through the doorway and his giant form crowded the interior of the car.

He stared at the nightgown, at the serpentine outline of prints on the bed. He didn't speak. Beneath his white beard his red lips curved in a smile of delight!

I felt my loathing anger rise! and then I was aware that his gaze had ceased its lustful slow roving over the bed to focus on the lovely pale face of my wife. For Helen had followed us here from my home. She stood there, her eyes locked on his, lips parted. Slowly her hands rose, as though in obedience to some hypnotic suggestion, to hover across the front of her dress. She tensed there, while I could almost feel the effort of will that it cost her to keep from tearing open the

cloth and exposing her nude body to the bearded man.

Terror stabbing me, I snatched at her hands—pulled them away to hold them tightly gripped between mine. It was the second time she had done this! "Helen, what are you doing?" I muttered. "What can you be thinking of?"

She shivered, moaned strangely. Soft oval face stricken and bloodless, she pressed to my side. She whispered—with an urgency that I found terrifying:

"Bill! That man! What makes him—oh, don't let him look at me!"

I patted her shoulder, pressed her hands reassuringly. "Wait here. I'll settle him!" I rasped. Fists balling, I spun around toward the door.

But no one was there upon whom to vent my rage. Mogridge had disappeared. And outside, the throng was starting to scatter as Jod Farris' voice could be heard grating that the men were already an hour late on his job. . . .

On impulse I whispered to Goodrich: "Look out for Helen. I've got something to do."

He nodded as I turned away. I believed that I could trust him. What I had seen had been a fleeting vision of the girl Rosalie, slipping away from the camp toward an unfrequented path which led down to the water's edge. Why was she hurrying there?

None of the others seemed to have noticed either her or me as I pushed through the thinning crowd. Quickly I ran down the path. In a moment I was out of sight of the camp. I caught a brief glimpse of Rosalie some distance ahead of me and then a rise of ground shut her away.

I dropped down into a hollow, climbed the slippery clay face of a hill and came out on the crest of the bluff. At my feet a few hundred yards away I could see Rosalie on the bank of a little cove that made up into the land.

I halted to stand motionless, all my faculties at pitch. Was something moving out in the water? A little way off shore an oily disturbance was seething. What sort of creature, deep under the surface, was causing it, I couldn't tell. But some *thing* was there!

Down on the beach, Rosalie was swiftly undressing! Her white body blossomed into sight as she stripped off one scanty garment after another. And now she was running. Utterly nude, she was racing toward the head of the cove where that something that I still couldn't see came swimming—swimming toward her!

I didn't wait any longer to watch. I scrambled down into the bed of a gully that grooved the flank of the bluff and down it I ran as I had never run in my life. For perhaps half a minute the high banks of the ravine shut Rosalie from my sight. Then I vaulted over the last line of boulders and came out on the beach—to stand transfixed, my blood freezing in mortal terror.

Rosalie wasn't there!

NO living thing was in sight. But out in the water a trail of white bubbles fountained up to the surface. And rising with them like smoke came a cry in Rosalie's voice, a shrilling of horrible joy! She had gone in there—and now she had gone to her rendezvous with that monster! For down at my feet the mud was grooved with twin furrows scraped by her breasts as she had crawled to the water—wriggled snake-like on her belly, like nothing human.

I felt that uncanny tingling of fear along my spine, making my hair bristle like that on the back of a dog in terror of something unknown. Then my eyes pulled themselves away from the marks to rest on the thing at my feet. That naked body wasn't Rosalie, as for an instant I had imagined—Rosalie hadn't red hair. She must be Valerie Morse, one of

the girls who had vanished ten days before.

I knew that she must be Valerie. . . . But it wasn't Valerie's face that I saw, only a crimson ruin where teeth sharp and rounded had torn it in ribbons. Val had a beautiful form, entrancing curves browned with sun-tan, adorable body—now pitted all over with scarlet gouges where things had been *feeding* on her. . . . And the climax of weird awfulness . . . along her thighs and down her tapering legs were glittering sequins where scales had started to grow!

Stricken I stood there, my tongue glued to the roof of my mouth. Great God, that such things could be! Those incredible reports that had come to my ears—I had seen the horrors enacted before my eyes! That something that had been in Virginia's room was no figment of nightmare. It was alive, it was real! Rosie had jumped into the water to go to it. And when it had come for her it had brought Valerie back.

And then I heard a murmur behind me. "Bill—she's dead! I saw her! Valerie's dead!"

It was Helen's voice—my lovely wife stood there. Silently she had followed me—she had seen everything. She stood there, lips parted, bosom rising and falling. And on her face was stamped a look so ghastly, so inexplicable, that it seemed to stop my heart.

"Helen!" I murmured. "What is it? What are you thinking of?"

"She's dead," Helen whispered again. "But before she died—while she was dying—she loved. Something loved her as—oh, as no mortal man ever could love!"

I didn't speak—just stared at my wife while maggots of hideous surmise crawled on my brain. Merciful God, what did she mean? What unholy thing could have entered into the soul of my darling to evoke that hungering cry—*loved her as no man could love*. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Thing from Hell

THE rest of that day was a blur of ghastliness. Others came and among us we got Valerie's body back to the camp. Some one went to the village for help. The police arrived and their boats could be seen dotting the river as they searched with grappling hooks for Rosalie—for a trace of the monster.

When the blue-coats came from inspecting Val's body, their hard-bitten faces wore greyish hue and the look at the backs of their eyes was more eloquent than their blustering words. All along the authorities had scoffed at the wild stories that came from our camp. They tried to scoff now. . . .

"Some sex madman," the sergent announced. "Them marks on the body—"

"And the scales on her legs—did the maniac make them grow there?" I said.

That fat officer's eyes flickered. He ran a finger around the inside of his collar. "Oh, them!" he muttered. "The broad had some disease. She must have had a disease—"

The uniforms got themselves out of there as fast as they could. They didn't care—nobody cared—what happened to us. And in the air of our camp was something that dried up their throats.

Back in our trailer, Helen muttered that she didn't feel well and fled to lock herself in the little cubby hole at the rear which was our bedroom. She stayed behind that locked door all day, wouldn't even open it when I prepared dinner—and supper—and called to her. I knew why she wouldn't come out.

Remorse of utter helplessness swept me as I sat in the doorway gazing over the camp scene. This poverty was the end to which my career of failure had brought the girl whom I loved more than my life!

A graduate of an agricultural college, I had sunk the whole of a small inheritance from my mother in my Kansas farm, where I planned to make a fortune in the ultra-modern scheme of tray-agriculture.

Then had come the years of drought. My wells all dried, I had watched my tanks of waving green seared to brown and black under day after day of pitiless sun; watched my wife's dear face growing thinner and whiter under lines of despair. Followed the final crushing blow—the black tornados that had scoured the face of the earth naked of all that lived and buried it under shifting sands.

On all sides of us our neighbors were taking to the roads, and we went along with them. A man must try to live. . . .

THE long day dragged past and a short time after dark Goodrich and Pearl came again.

"So Helen is sick," the farmer said darkly. "No wonder, after what she saw. But this isn't supernatural, Bill, no matter what you thought happened this morning." He gripped my arm tensely. "We've all got to know that such things can't exist. We've got to keep our heads!"

It wasn't supernatural! I, an educated man, knew even better than Goodrich that such things couldn't be. But the thing that had clutched Rosalie had been a water monster! And the scales growing on Valerie! And Helen, my own darling wife. . . .

Goodrich turned to beckon toward the open door of the trailer. It seemed that he had brought callers with him.

I was unaffectedly glad to see the first man who came stooping his tall shoulders under the low door frame. Grey, aristocratic, distinguished, Dr. Herman Masters was the sole individual of the neighborhood to have shown any human interest in our misfortunes. He was director of a big private sanatorium that

stood on a wooded hilltop a mile down the river. He had visited the camp a number of times to see how we were getting along. He had gone to bat for us with the town authorities when they had threatened to have us ejected as undesirable characters.

With him Masters had brought—Mogridge! I experienced a start of angry revulsion. The man's unclean presence radiated evil. His pink eyes darted around the walls, probed the corners like orbs of a snake questing its prey. I thought that I knew for whom he was looking—for my wife! . . .

I stood waiting guardedly while our callers took such seats as I had to provide. Darkness had shut down, humid and stifling. My eyes kept straying through the windows down toward the river, silent and noxious in the mystic light. Were these men really going to bring me the answer to all this ghastliness? Would they explain my terrors away—or was that monster lurking somewhere out there, waiting for Helen?

I was thankful now that she was safely locked in her little room! Suddenly then there came the creak of an opening door and my wife stood there, one slim hand pressed to her throat. My heart throbbed as I murmured her name and half rose from my seat. I didn't want her out here with Mogridge! I knew a fresh pang when she wouldn't meet my gaze, when I realized that she still didn't dare face me.

And then to my surprise she came swiftly to sink down at my side. Her fingers closed tensely around mine.

"Bill, darling," she murmured. "Oh, Bill, hold me tight—never let me go!"

I looked at her. As if she needed to beg that of me! As if I would ever leave her alone! What fear beyond my mere masculine power to guess could have wrung from her that almost desperate cry: never let me go?

And then I heard Masters' voice. "I asked Mr. Mogridge to come with me," he was saying. "I wanted him to tell you what he has just told me. I don't know where he got hold of it—from the old settlers, perhaps, the Indian breeds. A quite horrible story, utterly mad, but amazingly suggestive of the things that have been going on. The legend—like all legends—is to be disbelieved unless you find yourself forced to take stock in it." Mogridge smiled with a slightly satirical lisp through his too-red feminine lips. "The doctor asked me to tell you—you can do as you like. . . ."

THIS place—Mogridge said—had once been a sacred spot of the Seminole medicine men, dedicated to dark and gruesome rites. And this particular tale of diabolical weirdness was that in the waters around here lived a monster, a creature half man and half serpent. By night it came up out of the water to visit young girls. Over them, as they slept, it cast an evil charm of unholy desire. If they yielded to its wooing and went down to the river, they became like it—half snake and half human. They grew scales on parts of their bodies; they could live under water. They adopted numerous serpentine characteristics. . . .

Later, those who had mated with it came back to the land at night to lure men with their irresistible fascination. They were creatures who combined the sex-call of sirens with the wiles of the serpent—such temptation as no male could withstand. . . .

Mogridge paused, his eyes riveted on Goodrich's daughter. Pearl's red lips hung loose in a sensuous smile. Her cupped hands clutched her bosom where her breasts tugged at the thin silk of her waist.

"The—the girls lure men down to the water?" she whispered. Her tongue licked her hot lips.

The white-bearded man nodded gravely. "They are said to entice down there their husbands and sweethearts—those nearest and dearest to them. The monster crushes them to death in its coils. It will tolerate no human rivals!" Mogridge started to continue, then hesitated. "Perhaps I have said enough."

It was Helen's exclamation that brought me starting around. She swayed toward Mogridge. Excitement was in her face, the same lust that burned in Pearl's. God, that I should ever have seen that look on the face of my darling—that ghastly longing at thought of sin!

"No, don't stop, Mr. Mogridge—there is something I want to ask you!" she breathed. "Those girls who left their homes . . . how could a serpent charm them? Women, all women, fear snakes—"

I stared at her, wondering, still more inexplicably frightened. Was she trying to reason herself out of some dreadful obsession, trying to find a matter of fact explanation for those horrible feelings? Or was she feeding the lustful fires that she felt burning within her, gloating over lewd details?

"The snake is the immemorial symbol of temptation and fall from purity—yes." Mogridge replied with the pedantic air of a professor instructing a class.

"But temptation, the forbidden thing, has always exercised a perverse attraction upon women—from the apple in the Garden of Eden to the bride of today who takes impish delight in disobeying her husband. The serpent symbolizes the narrow line between goodness and evil, between safety and ruin, along with all women who love to flirt. This monster—if there is such a thing—comes to them in sleep when their inhibitions are relaxed. They are in condition to obey the impulse that every woman cherishes in her secret heart. For women desire love—wild, impetuous maddening love that sweeps them off their feet. And life and death are almost one."

I stared at the man, revolted—inexplicably frightened. Yearning for danger, fascination of toying with sin—dim potent instincts, inheritance of primeval desires only thinly veiled in the soul of every true wife? A suggestion hideous, impossible! Yet there branded on the face of my darling was stark proof of what he had said, horror that I couldn't explain away.

THERE was little more said after that. Masters must have sensed the mistake he had made in bringing Mogridge to see us, for soon after he took him

away, leaving only Goodrich and Pearl with Helen and me. For a time we four sat there in silence, each thinking our own thoughts. Unnatural quiet had descended over the camp—moonlight painting magic witchery over the river, the strident fiddling of tiny night creatures.

"The moonlight—do you remember how it used to look when we were home?" Helen whispered. Subtly her strangeness had slipped away, leaving her her dear normal self. Her little cold hand nestled inside my big palm, her face a lovely soft shadow, eyes moist, lips trembling. "Out of our bedroom window—the cottonwood trees along the brook, and we could smell the roses down in the garden. Oh, Bill—if we were only at home!"

Home! I pressed her answering fingers, groaned as I drew her closer. If we were only there, alone together, away from—this!

"There isn't anything to it!" I muttered suddenly to Goodrich. "Snake-women and monsters! Charms and spells! We're not living in days of witchcraft. There is some rational explanation—some way to stop this—"

My words died on my lips. I saw Goodrich stiffen—saw his head snap around. On the steps of the trailer had sounded a curious scraping, like heavy body without legs dragging itself across boards.

"Merciful God!" Goodrich gasped.

Slowly the half open door was swinging wide. I saw a pair of paws gripping the sides. Dragon-like fingers covered with scales. A crooked arm—or a leg—I couldn't tell—

Then the whole of the hideous body stood revealed. A carcass round as a boa-constrictor's and thick as a man's, all over dazzling blue—flat head with scaly snout and dots of black nostrils. Tongue that whipped flickering scarlet threads, baleful glassy eyes that flamed with inhuman

lust as they gazed at my wife! That—something—was here!

Helen screamed. She flung herself into my arms, clinging there while her small fisted hands pounded my back and I felt her body surge in the racking tremors that swept it.

A teakettle filled with hot water stood on the stove. I snatched it up and hurled it into the face of the thing. I followed the missile with an iron lid which I clawed off the stove and sent hurtling through the door.

I tore Helen's arms from my neck and jumped for it, my hand clutching a poker. Goodrich's elbow rammed me one side and he tore past me and out through the door—coat flying, arms and legs swinging. There had been a swishing crunch on the boards as the thing whirled and fled. I had a glimpse of it making off over the ground between the tents, hissing, sending stones clattering.

It was out of sight behind the trailers and cars in an instant with Goodrich behind it. I was half way down the steps when Helen's arms flew around me from behind.

"Bill—dear husband—don't go! Don't leave me!" she whispered.

From out beyond I heard Goodrich's shout. "You stay there and look out for the girls. It's no damn snake, it's a man. I'll get him. I'll rip his heart out—"

Excitement needling me, I kept on down the steps. Helen came flying behind me. She threw her arms around me again, twisted me in her clasp so that I couldn't move.

"Bill—if you ever loved me—if I was ever your wife—don't leave me now!" she gasped. "If you go now, you'll never—"

That stopped me cold. "*If you let me go now, you'll never . . .*" Dear God, what did she mean? I didn't ask her, I didn't dare to hear what her answer might be. Without a word I turned and

drew her back into the trailer. I swept her into my arms and held her close. "If you let me go now, you'll never see me again. . . ." Was that what she had been going to say? . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Terror Under the Moon

TIME passed. Goodrich didn't return. Pearl, I suddenly realized, wasn't there either. During the excitement she had slipped away without my noticing her.

Helen was really sick now. Tenderly I undressed her and put her in bed. I drew a chair up beside her and sat holding her hand, watching her anxiously. God, how I loved her! Stark terror had afflicted her at sight of the monster. Yet with it had been mingled the longing that she couldn't withstand, that had wrung that tortured cry from her—if you go you'll never see me again! Would my love be strong enough to hold her against the pull of that hideous power? Or in spite of it would she go to it as Rosalie and Val had gone?

Born on the breeze came strains of voices in ribald song. I knew that Morigridge was holding another of his so-called religious meetings, when he would whip the Migs into frenzy with his fanatical harrangues. Steps rasped outside the trailer and through the shadows there stole his wife Susanna—a stooped, witch-like creature who ministered to such cases of illness as arose in the camp with doses of herbs and Indian brews. She had been in to treat Helen several times. I disliked her—feared her influence over my wife as something malign. Hair flying, lips crazily mumbling, the crone scuffed past and vanished into the dark.

Then suddenly the hush was shattered by clatter of hurrying feet. Goodrich came stumbling up the steps to stand white-faced, breathing hard. Helen had drifted

off into natural sleep. Without waking her I slipped my hand out of hers and went out into the other room.

"I didn't get him!" Goodrich gasped. "He ran too fast. Sometimes down on his belly, sometimes up in the air like a man. I just saw him dive into the water. God, I wasn't going in there after him!"

He broke off to dart his gaze around the trailer. "Where's Pearl?" he exclaimed. He took a frightened step toward me. "Coleman—where is my girl?"

"She went out while we were chasing the thing," I muttered. "Got away without my seeing her—probably through the window. I thought she must have gone home—"

Goodrich stared at me; he licked dry lips. "Home?" he echoed woodenly. "No. I just stopped there. She wasn't—" He gripped my arm, I felt his uncontrollable shaking. "Coleman—for God's sake! She's gone to the river! You've got to help me! We've got to find her, before—"

I cast a fearful glance toward Helen's room. "My wife—I can't leave her—"

"You've got to!" The man's voice came hoarse through agony-twisted lips. "Great God, man, my daughter! My baby girl! She's all I've got in the world. If that devil gets her. . . . It won't come here now, when it's after Pearl—"

Looking back on it now, I can't think what blind recklessness it could have been that induced me to leave the side of my sleeping wife and go with him. Perhaps my judgment was clouded by the spectacle of the man's terror. Perhaps I trusted that the monster, busy elsewhere, wouldn't come here. Perhaps. . . . May God forgive me. . . .

IN THE coolness of approaching dawn a thin mist had distilled up from the marshes. A ballet of phantoms trailed soundless feet over the scrub pines.

Moonlight shafted between their drifting lines, limning silver pools against the ebony of the river.

We didn't know where to go, which way to turn. Without plan or system we searched the gulleys that ran down to the river; splashed through bogs and eerie fens where spurtings of marsh gas stung in our nostrils and moccasins hissed as they plunged into the shallows—straining our eyes, calling Pearl's name. The night's horror mocked us in the wind that rustled the water weeds.

I don't know how long we hunted—and didn't find her. At last Goodrich halted to stand with face quivering, tears streaming. "He's got her, I'll never see her again," he sobbed. "My little girl—down there in the water with him. . . ." He shook my arm. "Coleman—he won't hurt her, will he? Not if she does—what he wants her to. He won't—God, if Valerie had done what he told her! Or maybe she did—"

The man's hysterical crack-up was the most heart-rending thing I had ever seen. But there wasn't anything I could do. And I had to get back to Helen. I had never intended to be away from her half of this time. Anything could have happened—

"Come on, Goodrich—hurry!" I muttered. I started running. And then the fog opened and we met a ghost wandering in the gloom. He was Jod Farris, owner of this very property.

Farris was a misshapen little man, almost a dwarf, with a plough-shaped hump disfiguring his shoulders. He had ratty jet eyes and a dark narrow face sinister in its gravings of furtive cunning.

"Oh, so it's you is it?" he cackled. His hand darted out to fasten its grip on my arm. He leered at me, tobacco juice trickling down from his lip-corners. "I was up to your house just now. Your wife wasn't there. She must have gone out—on a date—"

"What! Helen wasn't there!" The gasp burst from me. I elbowed Farris one side and started running. Merciful God, then my terror was true!

It was four or five minutes later when Goodrich and I lashed into the clearing—to find the whole place astir. Some one had lighted a bon fire. The ruddy glare threw shadowings on pale drawn faces and haggard eyes.

"Two more girls gone!" A man lurched up to me, voice strident with terror. "My darter—we didn't hear her go—jest found her nightgown on the floor. It had been in bed with her first—"

From behind another unpainted house-on-wheels jangled a woman's shriek. "Nancy! My baby, my little girl!" She burst into the firelight, hair plastered over her contorted face, eyes bulged like skinned grapes. She lifted bare wrinkled arms to flourish her fists at the circle of men.

"Why don't you do something, you cowards?" she screamed. "Why don't you go down to the river and get back your girls—"

Her voice died into silence. She stood with jaw sagging—we all stood there staring.

Past the outskirts of the camp where firelight waved lurid banners, two white figures sped running. I saw them in eerie split-second photography—hands clawing their breasts, faces transfigured with a look only half human. And—I couldn't be wrong—from loins to ankles their limbs were matted with glistening scales!

The next instant they had vanished like phantoms. For a moment no one moved, nobody breathed. Then a sound like a great collective moan wailed around the camp. Into it broke Goodrich's anguished cry:

"Coleman, come on! They'll take us to Pearl!"

I turned and ran at his side. Not because I thought that we should find his

girl—but because of the stark horror that whispered to me that one of those naked fleeing forms had been Helen!

WE DASHED through the camp and out onto the darkening hillside beyond. Somewhere soon I lost Goodrich. I made no effort to contact him for at that moment I caught sight of one of those elusive figures again—or so I thought, then. She stood poised on the crest of a bluff some distance above me, staring down at the water.

Could she really be Helen? That perfect form with pearly white shoulders and points of ivory breasts up-tilted against the stars. . . . The golden hair that streamed over her bosom . . . dear God, was that being of unearthly loveliness my wife? I strained my eyes and still my aching heart couldn't be sure. While I stood staring she turned and started swiftly down the hill toward the river. Had she seen something down there—that was calling her?

I knew that I didn't have time to climb the hill and overtake her from that side. Sprinting, I started cutting a detour around the foot of the bluff, a course that would bring me out between her and the water. I had to get there first—between her and whatever in God's name she was seeking down there. If she was Helen—if I could only be sure! Or if she were not my wife—if I were wasting my time here while elsewhere my darling was. . . .

At my left the oily tongue of the water came into view with starlight dancing like imps' eyes against its slick. Out beyond, where night and morning flowed together in misty blur, something seemed to be moving. I heard faint splashings, saw ripples widening in silver curls.

Then I caught another glimpse of the girl high up above me. The wind brushed her hair and sent it streaming backward, baring her face like a cameo. Less than ever did she seem human then—a spirit

of the night and whispering winds, mad-deningly beautiful, hauntingly unreal. And suddenly then she started to run down the hill speeding toward the head of the little cove toward which the swimming creature was heading.

Around the head of a deep indentation of water I tore, splashing through shallows, dragging my feet out of bog holes. Terror clutched my heart in its icy hand. For I knew now that she was my darling. I had a vision of Valerie. . . . God, if I couldn't get there in time—if I couldn't stop her!

The sucking vacuum of quicksand pulled me ankle-deep and then half to my knees. Sweat poured from me while I floundered breathlessly. And up there on the hillside I could hear the swift light pattering of her feet—growing louder.

THE next instant she ran out of bushes and into plain sight. She ran a few steps and then paused to stand questioning, eager. My wife stood there, so near that I could have gone to her in a few seconds—had I not been anchored in ooze as though in a trap. And out beyond, boring the water with giant rollings, came the monster that I had seen in the door of my trailer—serpentine body and glistening scales, with water cascading down from its ugly shovel-shaped head. It was almost here, and I would never get out of this bog—would have to stand here and watch, while—

Helen started forward again—going to meet him as Valerie and Rosalie had gone! A strangled cry tore from me. "No! Helen, don't you go there! Helen, come here to me!" I gave a superhuman lunge. Thanks to God, it took my legs free.

At sound of my feet she looked around—lovely face bloodless, bewildered. A sobbing moan welled from her lips. She reached for my hand. And then she clung to me whimpering like a frightened child.

"Bill! Oh, dear husband!" she whispered. "I—"

I slid my arm around her. "It's all right, darling, I'm here," I comforted her. "What happened—what made you come here?"

"Yes—what happened?" she echoed dazedly. She drew a hand over her eyes. "I—"

I shook her gently. "Tell me," I prompted. "Why did you do such a thing?"

She shivered, gazed up at me, lips pitifully trembling. "I am trying," she murmured. "Oh, I am trying to tell you. It was a dream—something so awful—so wonderful—"

I half turned her, started to draw her away. "Never mind now, sweetheart," I muttered. "Come. We're going home—"

But she resisted. Perversely she twisted herself in my arms to look back at the river—as though in there something was calling her with a summons more compelling than mine! Her trembling was becoming more violent. Then to my terror I realized that the rhythmic quivering had centered itself in her hips.

"Helen, for God's sake!" I muttered. I tried to pull her away and then stood stricken anew at the sight I saw.

Through the mouth of one of the gulleys that ran down to the river came two figures. The girl was one of those who had disappeared some days before—now altered into a snake-creature with grossly congested breasts and scaly flanks. The youth whom she pulled by the hand at her side was Everett Luscomb. They had been engaged to be married when they got hold of a couple of bucks for the license.

As she drew him along toward the water, the girl fawned on him. She twined her naked body around him till she seemed a lithe serpent winding him into her coils.

It was a strangely horrible sight—one

that afflicted my wife with a terror even sharper than my own revolted amazement. She screamed and dropped in a faint. I whirled to catch her.

From down there where I couldn't see came soft rustlings—the girl's murmuring and then a man's voice exploding in a shriek of agony. Stones clattered under a thrashing form. Something heavy and lumbering pulled its feet from the ooze with a sound like smacking of mucid lips. Then Luscomb's death-rattles could be heard and over them a voice that crooned gleeful blood-joy.

Then a short distance off shore came a quick whirl of water. For an instant I saw again the scaly blue back, obsidian jet eyes that seemed to discharge venom. Should I have thrown myself in there and tried to kill the thing then—risked Luscomb's fate to battle it in its own element? I wouldn't know. . . .

For an instant, appalled by that macabre gruesome vision, I couldn't move, couldn't even open my mouth to cry out for help. And by that time the moment had passed. The thing swirled mockingly and was gone.

Then, with the limp form of my wife hanging over my arm, I was clawing my way back up the face of the bluff. I accepted it now—against all sanity I had to believe in the monster who sent back the girls he had made his to lure their men into his clutches. It had got Rosalie, Pearl—all those others. And Helen, on whose face had been stamped the look of awful *longing* that had been on theirs—who had come here to meet him. . . .

CHAPTER FIVE

Love Calls Me to Death

DAWN was just hanging its pink and saffron across the sky when I got Helen home. I didn't try to talk with her, she wasn't in any condition. I put her to bed in the back room, went out and locked the door.

That day no one made any pretense of going to work in Jod Farris' field. Women and men gathered tight-lipped in the shade of the trailers. Masters hurried down from the sanatorium, to spend some time with the police and then tell me that he had tried to induce the city authorities to advance us funds with which to go away. They had refused. Down in the town, everyone blamed the Migs themselves for what was taking place—feared that their own wives and daughters would start going next. There was talk of vigilantes, Ku Klux, tarrings and featherings, if we didn't depart.

If we didn't go—there wasn't one of us who wouldn't have fled if there had been any way. But none of us had money even to buy gas for our cars. And our sole source of food was the pittance doled out to us by Jod Farris. We were stranded here to wait for death's coming!

I got up from the steps where I had been sitting to go back into Helen's room. She was sleeping naturally now, one white arm curved around the golden ringlets that flowed over the pillow, satin bosom rising and falling. I bent to kiss her eyes and her hair. How beyond all thought and measure was she precious to me! I had saved her last night. But another one was on the way when that power wielded from an obscene half world would twine its damnable coils into her brain—and she would obey.

Before that night came I had to find the human brain that was directing this awfulness. I had to do something!

I had been thinking about Mogridge. I knew he was a dangerous lecher who preyed upon women—and he had told us that legend. Some time before, curiosity had prompted me to go to one of his meetings, held in a grove a half mile from camp.

People in depths of despair yield fertile soil for seed of false prophets. And as I looked into the lustful hot faces of men

and women sweating in orgiastic dance, I had wondered whether, in their reckless snatching for escape and forgetfulness, these people were capable of yet darker deeds.

I left the trailer to go and find him and demand a show-down. But he wasn't in his shanty; no one knew where he had gone. He had fled from the camp. His repellent-looking wife was missing too.

I put in hours seeking him. With night pressing on, my terror was rising. As a last despairing attempt, I went down to the village to intercede with the authorities. The police wanted to lock me up as the one responsible for the outrages!

Late in the afternoon, a mass meeting was held of all the Migs. Goodrich, grim, haggard, white-lipped, presided.

A babel of panicky discussion took place. "There ain't only one thing to do." A lanky Oklahomian summed up the general feeling. "Get up a posse of vigilantes and guard every house in the camp. Man or devil, we'll ketch him tonight an' tie him against a tree with a fire—"

HELEN and I went to bed early. Through our windows we could see silent forms taking up their watch posts throughout the camp. But that gave me no assurance. I knew they couldn't prevail against this power from hell. Helen cuddled her warm softness close, her arms slid around my neck. "Bill, dear husband, never leave me—never let me go!" she murmured. The fragrance of her hair was like wine in my brain.

Let her go? . . . I wound my arms around her so tightly that our two bodies were one, her heart beats answering mine through the walls of our chests. I told myself that she was safe there, that she couldn't even stir without my feeling it, before I went to sleep. And may God forgive me for that—self-pardon I never can find—when with this ghastliness meshing around my darling, I closed my

eyes for an instant—just one instant.

I slept. . . . And then suddenly I seemed to hear something. In that unique state of half waking I lay an instant. I murmured drowsily: "Helen, what was that—somebody screaming?" Then abruptly I sat up in bed—leaped to the floor and stood there tingling while everything inside me seemed to drop into a bottomless void.

Moonlight streaming in through the window limned a misty rectangle over the bed. But my wife wasn't there. The cozy nest where she had snuggled beside me was empty. In the middle of the rug lay a circle of foam—her white nightgown. And in the air hung that stench of the bogs by the riverside.

I stood there palsied and shaking—licked parched lips while I tried to curse. But no sound came out. I was like a man stricken with death who could not die.

The hours that came then were a blur of ghastliness. Bereft, I roamed the camp and the hillsides, halting those whom I met to push my face into theirs and mutter my question—had they seen my wife?

No one had seen her. . . . But somewhere she was, under the mocking white eye of the moon. Unless already she had gone down to the water, slipped in there, her body that I loved to consecrate with my kisses intertwined with that of the monster as they dove deep—deep.

A sob broke from my lips. In that hour I knew remorse of the damned. If I hadn't slept—if I had been true to my trust. . . . I stumbled on, searching still, back toward the water. But I saw no one save suddenly Mogridge, his white beard a flag against the dark as he stood motionless on the shore. He seemed to be holding communion with invisible things out beyond. He was gone when I stormed up to the spot.

And then suddenly I felt an out-thrust hand halting me—looked around to see the face of his wife Susanna outlined

hatchet-sharp at my side. "You! What are you doing here?" I exclaimed.

The old woman laughed crookedly through snags of blackened teeth. Her eyes glinted with something that wasn't mockery, wasn't hate—that was a horrible mingling of both.

"If you want to find your wife, follow him—follow Mogridge!" she hissed.

"Mogridge!" I echoed. "So it is he—but why are you telling me? Why are you betraying your husband? What kind of a trick—" I snatched at her arm to demand an explanation, but she twitched herself out of my grasp and scuttled away.

I let her go and turned to run toward the spot where I had last seen the man. I didn't catch up with him though, and in a few moments I had lost all sense of direction, to find myself wandering in a maze of black-water creeks. Noxious odors wafted up from the ooze flats.

Suddenly an exclamation broke from my lips. That white form that had glimmered for an instant against the rust-colored scum of the bog and then disappeared—had been Helen! And hurrying her along by an arm had strode, not Mogridge—but Dr. Masters!

A couple of minutes it might have taken me to arrive at the bend around which they had disappeared. I thrashed around the turn—to come to a halt and stand staring, incredulous.

OF HELEN there wasn't a sign. Only Masters was there. He was floundering on all fours on the ground. Blood trickled from gashes in his throat.

He saw me, came crawling toward me. "Thank God—Coleman!" he husked. He turned up his face, ashen and gibbering. His hands clawed at my knees. By my trouser legs and then by my coat he clutched me, striving to draw himself up to his feet. He gagged breathlessly:

"I was down around here, watching for a sight of it—and I found your wife. Alone. I was trying to get her home—

I'd lost my way. Then it came, just a minute ago—something came out of the water. I tried to fight with it. It—Coleman—that thing was stronger than hell—”

Overcome with horror, I backed away. Masters groaned and dropped to the ground—fainted or dead, I didn't know.

Then it was that for the first time I caught sight of the marks of the soft ground at the edge of the water. Only my wife's dear feet could have left those dainty prints! They went meandering off down the shore of the creek toward the darkness beyond.

I started running, following them. My heart was pounding so that I couldn't breathe. Helen was here—alive!

I plunged around the next corner. She wasn't in sight yet. But at this spot she had slipped and fallen down. And where her thigh had rested against the ground, the clay was stenciled with pattern of triangular scales!

Merciful God! Helen was here—but *how* was she here? Changed already into what unspeakable *thing*?

And then from somewhere close by I heard an eerie shrilling like a valkyre wailing her loneliness—Helen's voice calling to me. “Bill! Bill, dear lover, where are you? Bill, come to me—come here and kiss me—” The call quavered unearthly and died away.

For a moment I stood there transfixed while miasma of horror crawled under my skin.

I ran a step forward—and there she was. Stark nude in the moonlight, arms outstretched, beautiful white body trembling. “Helen!” I cried. “Darling, thank God—”

I sprang toward her—and then something hideous took place. With a twist of her hips she evaded my grasp. She ran a step toward the water and paused, looking back. The smile on her face was a wanton's loose-lipped invitation!

God, that lewdness on the face of my darling! And then, despite the surge of my horror, I felt a flame of desire blaze up in me—hunger then transcended all reason. I muttered her name, leaped to seize her—but swift as a moonbeam she slipped out of my reach.

I mumbled crazily and jumped for her again. She trickled out of my fingers and her laughter came back taunting, provoking. I knew what she was doing to me. I had a vision of Everett Luscomb's face.

With a hoarse cry I flung myself after her, hands clutching. She sprang for the water, launched herself in there swimming. I dove in too, a scant stride behind, snatched frantically at her hair which streamed out behind. She dove swiftly, slim legs cutting the darkness, and was gone.

For an instant I peered into the green shadows where she had disappeared. A black light burst in my brain stopping everything there like a run-down clock. Helen gone! Slipped through my clumsy hands to go there to him—

Suddenly, close in front, I saw the water in oily upheaval as though churned from the depths. I yelled hoarsely, whirled toward the shore—and then from underneath felt arms gripping my knees, a heavy weight pinning me and dragging me down. Wildly I kicked—uselessly. With a dizzying speed I was yanked under the surface.

I couldn't see the thing that had grabbed me—but as Masters had said, it was stronger than hell. In frenzy I thrashed and lunged and I might as well have tried to battle the old man of the sea. Pitilessly it drew me deeper into the black caves. My lungs were bursting with the effort to hold in the air. Suddenly it escaped with a whistling rush. Then the pressure of water closed in on me, crushing my chest like jaws of a giant nut-cracker.

Hooks of fire raked my vitals. Black

spots danced in my eyes. I strangled for breath—knew I was dying. And from the shadows down underneath me something laughed.

CHAPTER SIX

The Laughing of Fiends

WHAT jerked me from my dream of death back to consciousness of life more dreadful than any death was a scream that rose to flog the silence with whip-strokes of agony. The soul from which that desperate wailing had been torn was suffering torments not of the world of mortal men!

I opened my eyes, looked around—and for an instant experienced the weird conviction that the monster had worked his necromancy upon me and that I too had become a denizen of the depths. For water was above me, below me, it surrounded me on all sides. The translucent wall was illuminated by green radiance through which nude figures could be seen moving—from which those tortured sobbings had come.

And then I realized that the reason that I was breathing naturally and not drowning was that attached to my head was a diving helmet supplied with air from a small metal tank strapped to my shoulders. And all the figures that I saw gliding around there were similarly equipped.

Suddenly the disturbance of water cleared away and I could see ahead to what seemed a rocky wall. Against it stood the form of a girl, chained there by ankles and wrists. She was utterly nude! Her slim figure strained there, hands clenched at her sides, head thrown back—a gesture of unspeakable agony. I couldn't see her face, but those tresses of raven black hair that lay plastered over her breasts. . . . Pearl Goodrich had black hair!

Pearl screamed again—and then the

hideous cause became evident. Around her crowded male figures, clad only in trunks, with diving outfits over shoulders and heads. In a gloved hand each grasped one of the blood-sucking voracious eels that infested the river. They held the fish close to Pearl's body. The grey heads slashed like rattlesnakes, teeth tearing away segments of living flesh! Rivulets of blood, murky grey under water, streamed from Pearl's body. And as her ghastly hackings came transmitted through the mouthpiece at the front of her helmet.

I cursed through set teeth. I threw myself forward to swim over there—and then for the first time became aware that I was anchored to the bottom by things knotted around my ankles.

NOW the green light shifted to illumine other forms gliding across the wall. They were the girls who had disappeared from the camp—looking now ever more like mermaids with their scaly flanks, swollen breasts, and streaming hair. A male figure with fat pink arms and rolls of tallow bloating his belly paddled toward one of them. "Come, dearie—come," he called. She swerved toward him and his arms closed around her.

Others were doing the same. They dragged the girls behind clumps of tall seaweed. With claws fitted over the ends of their fingers they held them while their shrieks rang.

I experienced a horror that was physically sickening. Here were things new in the annals of human depravity! And Helen—

The light swerved and then I caught sight of her, filling a niche beside Pearl that had been empty a few moments before. Chained there by legs and arms, prisoner of some foul god of the deeps! Around her was closing another ring of the men with the flesh-eating eels. The slimy heads nuzzled her and she leaped as though bitten by living fire.

In frenzy I beat my arms, thrashed at my ropes. God couldn't let them do that to my darling—

Abruptly my strugglings ceased. For into sight came lazily swimming the blue monster! He balanced himself in the water. And the voice that sounded through the cleverly constructed mouth-diaphragm was that of—Dr. Masters! . . .

"I am sorry that had to happen to you, Coleman—I had really begun to like you," his suave accents addressed me. "But this is business—and I'm a little out of the ordinary about my sex angles, too. You see that I worship pain. And I wanted your wife. I've always wanted her—to love in agony."

I stared at him voiceless in stunned understanding. So it had been Masters all the time, a sadist!

"This thing runs into big money—close to fifty thousand a year," he was going on. "It's worth taking plenty of trouble. No one would imagine the number of men there are—most of them rich men—who want the kind of excitement that is hard to get, and are willing to pay big for the chance to let themselves go. There are places of pain in all the big cities, of course. But all that had become rather trite. I've got something new here in this big tank at my sanatorium."

"SO YOU make your money by exploiting human depravity," I muttered. "And the girls for this hellishness you stole from the Migs, those poor broken people—"

"Before you folks showed up I had been getting them from cities, orphan asylums—it was dangerous and getting more so," he replied. "I fixed it up with Farris to make a deal to keep you here. He supplied all your food, so it was easy for him to get the drug into the coffee of anyone we picked out. A few doses of the aphrodesiac, and then when I went to the girl's room with my whirling mirror it took

only a moment to hypnotize her. I'd give her a shot with a needle and then she would follow me down to the water."

"And tonight, when I saw you with my wife, wounded—" I said.

"I needed an alibi, just in case of possible suspicion. I made those scratches myself—they weren't as serious as they looked. I knew that the Mogridges were around and would see me apparently knocked out. Farris was in the other monstrous suit off shore. We kept two of them hidden in a canoe in the bushes. He took you and your wife away. We always carried one of the tank-helmets with us and slipped it over the girl's head when we got her below. We would put her into the canoe as soon as we got her out of sight of land and then bring her here. Of course the fish scales were stuck onto their legs with cement—"

"And you had Luscomb killed—"

"I thought that he was getting suspicious of me. And the more crazily bizarre I made it all, the more likely they were to blame Mogridge or some of the Indian breeds and forget about me—"

"Mogridge's wife told me that he was behind it—" I broke in.

"Susanna hated him as only a spurned woman can hate because he neglected her to run around after girls. She probably didn't really think he was guilty—she just wanted revenge and hoped there might be enough evidence against him to get him in wrong. . . . But we had our troubles here, too. Some of the girls wouldn't react—went stale on us the way Valerie did. So we had to get rid of them. We lost three or four that way—just money and time wasted."

I stared at Masters' distorted visage through the two windows of glass. "God, what kind of a thing are you?" I muttered.

He didn't answer. Little by little the motion of the water had drifted him closer to me as he talked. I shot out my hands

in a desperate grab for him. I had to kill him! Up there the men were pressing closer around Helen.

God, I had to kill Masters somehow—somehow escape and get to her! But he laughed mockingly and swerved out of my reach. “Don’t get any wild idea that you’re going to play hero, Coleman,” he jeered. “You saw Luscomb—”

THE torturers had turned from Pearl to concentrate upon Helen. The grey shapes darted like whip lashes, snapping more voraciously as their blood-hunger rose.

Helen didn’t scream—it wouldn’t be accurate to describe the sound that came from her as merely a scream. It was an explosion of things bursting, breaking, going haywire inside her. Her body sprang upward and outward against the chains as though the sheer force of her agony would tear them out by the roots.

The sight of that seared my eyes and cramped the breath in my lungs. My arms beat like flails—puny flappings that did nothing to move me from the big stone that weighted me down below.

And then, suddenly, I remembered. My hands groped in the sodden folds of my trousers pocket for the long-bladed woodsman’s knife that Masters had neglected to look for. My numbed fingers shook as I clawed open the blade.

Bending my body into a bow I dove straight down till I could grasp the ropes at my feet. I slashed—and felt the sting of pain as my sweepings pierced the flesh of my legs as well as the cords.

I mouthed a curse of exulting as I felt my ankles kick free. In a long level dive I shot through the water.

The ring of figures around Helen was too absorbed in its hellishness to mark my approach from behind. Like a tiger shark I launched myself to strike at the nearest form. I saw the man’s back spurt a wisp of grey smoke, heard his death-

croak—and then they were on me.

For a moment it was a bedlam of yells and plunging forms. I drove my blade into the hearts of two others, knew grim relish as I saw their bodies droop and go flopping down to the bottom—chilled to a sudden dismay as I felt arms gripping my legs from underneath and dragging me down.

I dove then to strike at them savagely—got one through the back and half-severed the arm of his mate. I twisted around to return to the pack, and gasped at a blow that galvanized me to the heels. Others had picked up stones from the bottom and were beating them on my helmet. If they could break through my glass window, I would drown in a minute!

Stark terror gripped me now as I battled for life. It was a scene that might have been filmed in an ocean-cave of the damned—the darting nude shapes, their grotesquely formed helmets lending them the weirdness of creatures half-human; their blows slowed down by the water till they seemed feather-puffs delivered in eerie slow-motion.

In frenzy I fought them—in a contest that could have but one ending. They were too many for me. Stabbing pains dizzied me, my breath came in thin pantings. With the insensate cruelty of a dog-pack they were beating my life out. A final blow took me on the base of the skull and slowly I sank to the bottom, collapsed there on hands and knees.

In anguish I moaned Helen’s name, dug my fingers into the gravel—trying to crawl to her. My neglect had brought her to this. God couldn’t let me fail now!

But I would never have got up from that spot had I not caught one last glimpse of my wife. Suddenly freed from her chains, she dived off the platform. Behind her shot the blue shadow of Masters, the monster. Swiftly he overtook her. He clutched her in taloned hands and dragged her behind a clump of water

weeds. I saw my darling wound in his scales, heard her shrilling half in agony, half in awful . . . delight!

Some strength that wasn't my own—that must have been sent me from the hell of the living dead—flowed then into my tortured carcass so that I dragged myself up to my feet. My lips met in my teeth till I tasted the saltiness of my own blood.

Wabbling, seesawing, spewing curses, I stumbled around the corner and saw them before me. Saw . . .

For a space of time then I wasn't human. I've only a dim memory of myself shooting in there like a living projectile, driving my knife into Masters's back, slashing and rending—of seeing his body surge in convulsions, hearing his strangled yells as water poured into his suit.

He was dead. . . . And after that, none of the others bothered me. They had no stomach to face my knife after they looked at him.

SSOMEHOW, I wouldn't know how, I got Helen into my arms, groped over the floor of the tank till I found a flight of steps leading up to the surface. Felt my way in pitch darkness through the now deserted building on the outskirts of the grounds where the secret entrance to the pool was concealed—located a door and came at last out under the stars. Hours later, some of the natives found us wandering along a deserted

road and took us to town and to a hospital.

I was released shortly, but Helen stayed on. The skin grafters performed wonders on her body—if there could only have been another miracle to make whole her mind! After months the doctors told me that it might help if I took her somewhere far inland where she wouldn't ever see running water. . . .

Our story of the night in Masters' torture pool got into the papers and at last to the governor and the legislature. They voted us a thousand dollars for the public service we had done in bringing Masters' clients to the prison sentences that they drew—and to compensate us for our sufferings.

We took a trip and finally went back to our farm. Experts from Washington had found a way to anchor the drifting soil so that it would live again.

That was three years ago. Things are well with us now. If there isn't another drought, I'll be in the money soon.

Things are well, I say. . . . Save for the horror that water has for Helen and me. When she steps dripping, out of the bath tub and comes to wind her arms around my neck and press her rosy nakedness against me—when I feel the lascivious rolling of her hips and see that look in her eyes—I know that she is hearing again the summons of voices inhuman—whose call in her ears will ever be louder than my words of love.

THE END