

TERROR TALES



Volume Nine

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Number Two

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

All stories in magazines bearing this seal are written especially for this publisher and have never before been printed in any form!

TWO LONG NOVELS OF DEMONIC MENACE AND CHILLING HORROR

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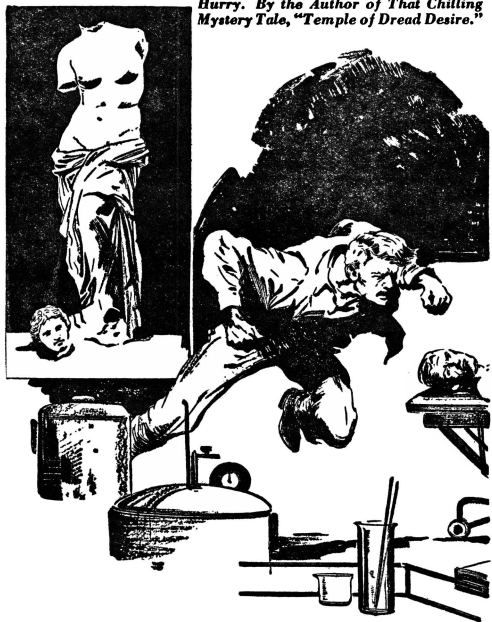
I feel the eyes of my bride upon me—watchful, waiting, slumberous—like the eyes of a cat on a mouse. Soon, I think, she will . . . pounce!

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Bride of the Serpents

Here's a Long Novel of Eerie Terror That You Won't Forget in a Hurry. By the Author of That Chilling Mystery Tale, "Temple of Dread Desire."



Between the grim grey walls of that canyon of dread desire I fought blindly, as the quicksands of hell closed round my feet, to save the girl I loved from the lusting hands of the great sculptor—who held a commission from the Prince of Pain himself!

by J. O. Quinliven

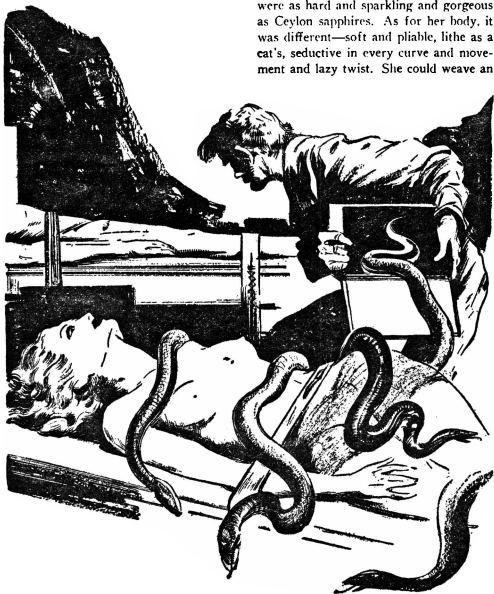
CHAPTER ONE

The House of Passion

I USED pretty big words when I told Mary Harmon that I could find her brother. He was a classmate and chum of mine, and she was worried to death. That's why I said, "Hell itself won't stop me till I find him." I did not

realize how aptly the promise was phrased.

I knew where to search. Ted was a great one for chasing any pretty girl that gave him the come-on signal. She was a beauty—that last girl I had seen him with at the roadhouse north of our town. She had black hair that reminded me of something hard and brittle like metallic rock—black basalt for instance. And her eyes were as hard and sparkling and gorgeous as Ceylon sapphires. As for her body, it was different—soft and pliable, lithe as a cat's, seductive in every curve and movement and lazy twist. She could weave an



evil, a terrible deathly spell over a man!

Some days after that night at the roadhouse Ted told his sister he was going to the desert on a surveying trip. And that was the last thing Mary heard from him.

I worked on the one clue—that girl with the feverish, sapphire eyes. This was three weeks after his disappearance, but I lost no time in investigating the identity of the girl. She was married and lived in a Spanish bungalow in a lonely olive grove twenty miles from the roadhouse. The proprietor of the joint told me I would better let well enough alone. He could not remember my friend Ted Harmon but he remembered the woman. He had seen her before. In fact she made up to some of his regular patrons. "They'd go off with her and never come back here again. I've wondered sometimes what happened to them."

He advised me to stay out of it. "You look like a straight young guy, only you got a reckless face, and you look mad. Let your pal get out of his own love tangles."

"What else do you know about her?" I persisted.

"Her husband's a professor or scientist, something like that. And there's another reason for you to watch your step. These Mex cooks that work in my kitchen, and my Mex orchestra, they cross themselves if you mention that man La Verne—her husband's name is Doc La Verne. They won't tell me what they know about him and the woman, and I wouldn't believe it anyway—they got so many superstitions. But one thing I'm saying, if you want to find your pal, don't bump into the Doc and tell him you're looking for a young guy who's hanging around his wife. It might irritate him."

I drove straight out to the olive grove and the lonely Spanish house. Few cars used this road now. There was only one gas station, I found out after many miles of thickly timbered foothills. A little fur-

ther on was a gloomy hacienda. a rambling Monterey adobe house darkened by cypresses.

A fat half-breed woman with muddy eyes answered my ring. Craftily I asked for Dr. La Verne instead of for his glamorous wife. But it was Mrs. La Verne who came down, and I introduced myself. "You may not remember I met you at the La Paloma roadhouse some weeks ago." Yes, she remembered me very well. She asked me to come in.

She was something to rave about, something beyond the natural beauty of any woman I know. She was dressed in negligée so flimsy that I could catch the glow of living skin in spots where the curves of her body tightened the sheer silk. I remembered how stark and unashamed her costume was that other night at the roadhouse. She had seemed nude above the waist then, except for a small wisp of fabric over the tips of her young breasts. That was in public, but tonight she was completely covered by the negligée, sheer though it was, and this struck me as a rather grim inconsistency.

THERE was a divan in a corner of the room and she asked me to sit there. She had the half-breed servant bring highballs. I took the drink and waited for the casual moment when I could bring up the subject, or rather the mystery of the vanished Ted Harmon. The lithe flaming woman watched my eyes which at that moment were drawn, magnetized by the beauty of her cream colored neck and one bare shoulder down which she had let her negligée slip. I glanced away guiltily from her look and stared for a moment at the room.

It was rather meagerly furnished in Mission oak and Hopi rugs except for some pieces of sculpture which stood out in magnificent relief against the simple background. One piece was like the upper half of the Venus de Milo, except that

the head was missing as well as the arms.

It is seldom that a piece of statuary will affect me, but this thing was uncannily life-like. With the wrought iron lamp shedding its light in just the right way, the statue, even though incomplete was like a glimpse of a girl's figure seen in a window when the shade is drawn only part way. Besides, the workmanship was so fine that the veins in the marble actually simulated human veins, human life!

But as I say, I was no Pygmalion who could fall in love with a statue. I turned to the hot and living vessel of life—the lovely woman sitting there on the divan.

I managed to say casually, "A friend of mine is very much in love with you. He was there at the roadhouse that night. Ted Harmon. How have you two been getting along?"

She tried to remember the name. "Oh yes, the boy you were with. He brought me home. A nice young boy. But I haven't seen him since."

This was a lie, but I could not very well say so. Nor could I ask if he had come into this house with her when he brought her home. But I must get it out of her some way. I decided to pretend I had come for another reason. I could pretend that I too was infatuated with her. It was an easy rôle. She had the servant bring us another drink and the colors in the room grew hotter and more vibrant. That bit of statuary over there looked so real that the horrid thought struck me that it was a cadaver!

I blurted out, losing my sense of diplomacy, "I haven't seen Ted Harmon either—since that night."

Her eyes looked at me, green and glowing like a Persian cat's. "Did you come here to ask about him—or to see me?"

"To see you," I said quickly.

"Then why don't you look at me?"

She was very proud of her beauty, lifting her throat so that I could catch the

play of color on the cream, the slow shadows reaching like fingers down her neck, playing over her naked shoulder. My eyes dropped but were trapped again by her slippered foot, the high delicate arch of her instep, traced with blue veins, the straight smooth line of her leg and the curve of the flesh—not muscle, but soft white flesh warming to coral at her knee, fading again to the matchless purity of her thigh. Her negligee had been masterfully arranged to reveal more and more of that bewitching beauty.

She read everything in my mind. "Your friend did not come in with me that night, if that's what you're driving at. You see my husband was home. But," she added with a gentle squirm as if in response to a sudden heat in the room, a sudden thrill of rampant life, "he's not here tonight. He's up in the mountains at his studio where he does most of his work. He's a sculptor you know."

I SHOT a quick glance at that broken statue. And again the life-like tenseness of the still muscles, the nuggets of alien garnet which tipped the breasts, mystified me. "I thought your husband was a scientist of some sort."

"Yes, a geologist, but sculpturing is his hobby. There is some of his work." She pointed to the woman's torso. "That other piece—" she nodded to the darkness where another statue stood, complete and perfect—"that is not his work. Perhaps you recognize it as just a copy of the Perseus holding the Gorgon's head."

The Gorgon's head! The Medusa with the beautiful face and the hair of snakes, the most horrifying beast of all antiquity, the very sight of which turned any beholder into stone! My mind heated with the highballs, frenzied with the increasing revelation of this living girl's body—jumped to a wild, almost insane answer to the mystery of that torso. A human being turned to stone—that was the an-

swer! But I must have been crazy. I knew it even then. I rejected the whim instantly. Besides this girl—the black-haired living one—had gotten up so as to stand between me and the statue at which I was staring wild-eyed.

She distracted my mind completely—as completely as though I were a dog drawn from the cooling trail of a fox by the scent of more luscious meat thrown in its path. The girl stood there with her negligee draped over one shoulder like a Grecian goddess. There is little doubt but that she had drugged that drink. The hour that ensued was the misty nirvana of a hashish eater—all the vibrations of the earth singing in harmony. In my arms I held the warm yielding substance of human life merged in perfect cadence with my own life so that I was twicfold enriched with all the ecstasies of existence.

It broke off like a dream with the girl's wild cry—a cry like a wounded bird's. I had heard footsteps in the house, but I paid no attention, thinking they were merely the ponderous slow steps of the fat servant. Besides they too struck a harmony in my ecstatic body, like the slow bone-tingling pound of a voodoo drum in the bodies of crazed dancers.

"He's here!" the girl screamed voicelessly, leaping up from the divan. "He's not in the mountains as he said. He came back to catch me at this! He'll kill you,—no, something worse! Into that door, quick! Down the hall!"

She shoved me through one of the Indian hangings and I found myself in a dark hall with a faint glow of starlight filtering through the Moroccan filigree of a window at the further end.

I might get out, but my crime was known. Even if I escaped, the husband of the girl knew that someone was in the house for he had seen my car out there in front of the verandah!

And since he knew, I had a strange foreboding that all escape was futile.

CHAPTER TWO

The Lair of the Serpents

THAT dreadful whim that had struck me—the connection of the life-like stone torso with the old legend of Medusa—gave me a madman's strength. I was able to wrench the rusty old ironwork from the crumbling mortar of a window-sill. At a dead run I reached my car, gunned it to its full power, with only one thought—to put as much distance as possible between myself and that house of horror. Yet even as I sped down the road I heard the faint throb of a high powered motor ahead of me. Was it possible that Dr. La Verne had forseen my escape and beaten me to it? I knew in my bones that I would never escape. Nothing could hide me from the vengeance of Dr. La Verne. If I went to the ends of the earth I should never feel free from his relentless pursuit—and my soul quivered at the knowledge.

I stopped at the little gas station to see if there might be some other road by which I could get back to town more quickly.

As the attendant unscrewed the radiator cap and got his water can, I asked casually, "You didn't see a car pass this way a little ahead of me?"

The attendant stood a moment staring. "Sure. It was Doc La Verne. He stopped here a second, looking back up the road till you came along."

He finished pouring the water but kept looking up at me trying to squint through the windshield.

"Who's Doc La Verne?" I asked innocently.

"Crazy guy lives up the road a ways. Has a wife who's a lulu. Raises hell when he's off in the gulches studying rocks. Then when he gets home he raises some hell of his own. Check your oil?"

"What kind of hell?"

"Oh bo! You asked me somethin'. And I don't know the answer. I only know one of the young birds who used to go up to see her, well I saw him over in Bolton in a wheel chair. They said he had a disease which turned his blood into kind of cement. Kind of ossified lookin' hands he had. And another fellow used to stop in here for gas. Well he come by one night and I thought he'd be picked up for drunk driving and I held him here. But he wasn't drunk. He was babbling about a girl's head with snakes onto it. Just ravin' mad, that's all. Guess your windshield's all right now, mister."

I turned and drove off. Of course I drove up towards the mountains—instead of down to the valley where that fiend was waiting for me.

I rode two hours finding only a few crossroads which petered out in mountain ranches or old borax mines. Then to my consternation I found that the meter read empty!

I thought back. Was it possible that La Verne had had time to puncture my gas tank while I was in the house? Of course! He could have done it before he came in to surprise his wife in her peccadillos.

I WAITED for a car to come along.

Several had passed me, for the road was not entirely deserted even at that late hour. There would be others. I did not wait long. A rancher in a rattletap snorting car, chugged on down the road from the direction in which I had been heading. Had he come from the opposite direction I might have been careful. If my pursuer had learned from the filling station boy that I had taken this road, he could follow, chasing me on up into this wilderness!

The rancher stopped.

"Can't spare more'n a gallon," the leather-faced little fellow said. "Know how to siphon it out?"

"If I had a long tube of some sort."
"Here's one."

It must have taken nerve for such a little runt to knock me out as I bent over his gas tank. But he had his orders. The Doctor, hearing that I had gone up the mountain road must have telephoned ahead to a henchman—this "rancher". He directed him no doubt to ride along the road till he met a man who needed gas.

I woke up in a thick walled adobe hut. The room was empty, with one grimly ironed window, a massive redwood door locked and bolted, a smoky lamp. The full glare of the lamp fell upon the floor where I saw a crudely carved chunk of rock, as if a petrified log had been dragged in from the mass of boulders outside the barred window. But as my dazed eyes cleared, squinting, I saw that the carving was not the haphazard work of erosion but the fine delineation of a master sculptor. My eyes shot up to the dimmer light above the fan of the lamp. The hair stiffened on my scalp. Above the misshapen and twisted legs the torso assumed more perfect shape, knotted with agonized muscles so that the figure seemed like one of the Laocoön Group, writhing in the clutch of serpents. But the upper half was not a marble statue. It was not stone, but flesh!

I could see the hard sheen of greyish granite in the legs, the flat dead white of limestone, the chipped spot at the knee caps and ankles which revealed the layer of rock beneath. But above the waist the skin seemed looser and more rounded. There was a tinge as if iron in the limestone had turned it red. Still higher, the figure was like life, and the face, congealed in a grimace of torture, was a face not of stone but of flesh and bone and human skin! Half of that hideous thing was petrified rock, the upper half a corpse!

As I gazed sick with horror, I heard a

low, heart-tearing moan echo in the room.

My forehead turned icy cold and wet. The moan came from this very room! I could have sworn to that, laid down my life in testimony of it. But there was no one in the room—except myself cringing against the wall like a trapped animal,—and that huddled corpse on the floor.

And from that corpse which was my sole companion and cell-mate, the moan came—like a faint and terrible cry from the depths of hell!

FOR a long time that seemed to stretch into an endless purgatory I watched those lips. But they did not move. They were as stiff, the muscles as drawn and knotted as if the poor wretch had lock-jaw. I know now that the disease was due to the mesoblastic cells depositing bone substance about themselves and growing enormously until the membranes and cartilages of the whole body were turned to stone.

Again that bestial grunt of affirmation. My brain whirled. I understood the principle of petrification well enough to realize just what had happened to this wretched human body. In ordinary petrification of wood, shells, a body of whatever the host of the infiltrating minerals may be, the original structure is perfectly retained. The scientist who worked in this hellish laboratory must also have developed a technique which left the heart and lungs of the victim unimpaired. And also—what was most horrible of all—the brain!

In a sudden panic I banged my shoulders against the door, the iron bars of the window, the thick wall. I was for a brief moment a madman in a cell. But I found out quickly enough that these iron bars were not like the filigree in the window of La Verne's home. Here was a real fortress, cement, reinforced no doubt with steel. I looked up, frustrated, crazed, at the beamed ceiling. I might break through up there and crash the tiled roof.

I swung myself up on the carved beams, but the tiles were not the only obstruction up above. The ceiling like the walls was built of solid cement, making a box. And I was boxed in, while my fellow prisoner, this hideous corpse-like thing, kept muttering the one word, "Forever!"

It was the sound of wheels crunching in a pebble wash that brought me to my senses. I dashed to the window.

I saw first the motionless and bizarre group of pointed rocks—stiff human shapes on the bank of the coulee. And I heard a moaning which might have been the wind, although I felt that it was the moaning of the souls of La Verne's victims, condemned to stand there like pinnacles of granite and quartz through eternity. Then I saw a big roadster and a giant wolf of a man stepping out, etched blackly against the glow of the horizon. Dr. La Verne had arrived!

And I saw that he was not alone. A lithe, feline form got out with him. In my imagination and memory I could feel the heat of that body, the softness, the rhythmic tremor of all her eager and urgent flesh. It was La Verne's wife!

She walked gracefully, although I could detect a shuddering stoop to her slim shoulders, and then as La Verne swung his flash, I saw something winking at her wrists. She was manacled!

Just what had happened I could not guess, unless the enraged cuckold of a husband had taken this deed of his wife as the last straw. This time the wife was to be punished as well as her companion. And I could guess, remembering that broken female statue in her home, just what her punishment was to be!

AGAIN, left alone with this hideous thing which was a stark example of what I myself was to become, I felt another surge of panic coming on. But this time I fought against it. I took the lamp

and systematically examined every square of rock in the floor. While I searched I heard the thing in the corner grunting wildly. "Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" He could see me very plainly as I pounded at each crack, picking at it with my nails, scraping the powdered silt from every scratch. I know now why he was warning me to leave that floor alone!

I found a crack in which I could barely hook my nails. This did no good, but by pounding all about the crack with my boots I detected a different sound to the thump, a resonance. I pounded with my heels, chipping off just enough of the cement to make a hole for a grip. I pulled upward. A large slab of granite opened, and I saw a black passageway, but it was scarcely large enough for a man to poke his head through.

I stared frustrated, but then reached down, thinking the hole might widen further down. I heard the frantic bleat of that half-corpse as I made this gesture. And instantly I knew what that futile cry meant. I felt a sharp sting on my wrist as I groped in the darkness of the hole, then, snatching my hand upward I saw two tiny gashes where something had pierced it.

Instantly my mind flamed with the hideous fear that I had been stuck with a hypo needle, or rather two needles so that the wound would simulate the bite of a snake. It was more than simulation I discovered a moment later. For as I stared enraged at that gaping black crevice in the floor, I saw a flat-headed snake crawling out. It came slowly, hissing, lifting its head so that it watched me out of its pale eyes, licking the air with its quivering black fork of a tongue.

I picked up the cement slab which had been a sort of trap door to the nest of this monster and brought it down crashing. It smashed the serpent's head to a flat bloody mass, but the body whipped and wiggled and convulsed so that I stag-

gered back to keep my legs out of the tangle. Although I knew the thing was dead, its body was possessed of more fury than in life.

But this was a puny fear compared to what was coming. Another serpent oozed out of the hole, its waving magic movement freezing me into a tense moment of staring. Then I reached for what was left of the slab. It had smashed to bits, such was the frantic violence of my stroke, but with these bits I pelted this new monster that had crawled into my cell. I kept it off, cutting it in spots so that the beautiful movement turned into something lame and bedraggled and jerky. I was so obsessed with keeping this wounded thing in a corner that I did not notice two more serpents crawling slowly out of the hole!

I had opened up a veritable nest of them. No wonder that bleating yelping cry had tried to warn me from attempting to escape through the floor. I could not cover the hole up, for the slab which had fitted with the perfection of a spider's trapdoor was crashed to pieces. The hole gaped and vomited its writhing mass. I could do nothing. Nothing, that is to say, except to reach for the lamp, when the largest of the serpents coiled in the middle of the room facing me, rearing, its neck puffing, its head swaying backward ready to hurl itself full length upon me. I could understand what is meant by a bird freezing to immobility while a snake crawls to its nest. I froze,—not in my shaking limbs, but in my mind. I did not think what I was doing. I don't believe any man on earth could have thought at that moment. I acted on a muscular impulse alone, hurling the lamp straight at that rising swaying head.

The last I remember before that light crashed and sputtered out was the picture of the "statue" against the wall. It was the Laocöon masterpiece in actual life before my eyes—a statue contorted in

horror, covered with writhling serpents.

It might have been a looking glass at which I gazed in that horrified instant. For I was that man—if not in actual reflection, at least I would be his perfect counterpart before the light of another day!

CHAPTER THREE

Scream From the Night

I COULD not measure that darkness either in time or intensity. It was infinite in blackness and in length. The pain of that bite spread from my numbed arm, boiling my blood until it coursed like vitriol through all the veins of my body. My heart pumped madly, but I did not writhe or struggle against the pain. Perhaps I could not, or perhaps it was that intuition of a terror-stricken animal that made me cower and congeal. I lay still, knowing that if I moved a foot or a hand I might touch another one of those venomous things crawling all about me.

Unmeasured time must have passed, for the drowsiness crept into my mind. I fought desperately against the coma that smothered me. I remember I awoke at fitful intervals seeing now the light of day pouring through the iron bars, now darkness. It might have been two days, three, that I lay there. One clue I had to the long passage of time was my hunger. It was the raging hunger of a drunkard for more liquor, the thirst of a marooned sailor who has swigged salt water!

My fiendish captor must have known this for he had food sent to me. When I awoke and stared into the glow of daylight at that barred window I saw food on the sill. It was in tin cups which could be thrust through the bars. My nostrils sucked at the yearned-for smell. I struggled to my hands and knees, but before going to that sill I looked over the floor that I must cross. The serpents had all

crawled away, perhaps to their nest under the floor, perhaps through that window and out into the open.

I got up, feeling thick-jointed and dizzy, and lurched to the sill. I grabbed the first morsel my hands lit on, then I remembered! Here was the first dose of powders this devil physician was serving me! Or perhaps the venom of that serpent was the first!

I glanced over to that ossified thing in the corner, expecting his warning half dumb yelp. But the warning was not necessary. Nor could it be given. For the miserable wretch was dead. I could tell it by his face, turgid and misshapen, bloated beyond the lineaments of a human being. I understood what had happened when I saw the two tiny wounds on his cheek. One of the snakes had bitten him. And the bite being near the brain had finished this miserable soul. Perhaps it was a mercy.

I stuck to my resolve not to taste the food. Instead I took all the food and water that was left on the sill and emptied the cups into the hole in the floor.

Through my bars I had caught sight of this food carrier unlocking the door to another hut. I noticed that he had a bunch of keys. Apparently he was a half-breed Indian,—La Verne's caretaker, cook and jailer all in one.

Each time he served me my doses I pretended that the hellish stuff was working. I crawled to the sill. Then I dragged myself across the floor as if my feet were already paralyzed. Finally I just lay there moaning like the weird call of the wind in that cemetery of needle rocks outside.

The wind I noticed had a new sound to it—the chug of a wheezy old motor, the rattle of a tinny car, then the crunch of wheels on gravel.

I crept to the window. Subconsciously perhaps, I had an inkling that a search had been started for me, and for Ted Harmon who had disappeared so many

days ago. Perhaps Ted's sister had gone to that roadhouse—I had mentioned it to her—and she might have learned there just what I had learned. What if Mary Harmon had been trapped while searching along that same fatal route which I had followed!

As I peered over the sill towards the car I saw the gnarled little rancher get out, and from the other side of the car stepped a slim young girl! Mary Harmon had been tricked, there was no doubt about that. And if she had any intuition of the trap she was in, her frantic anxiety to find her brother had smothered it.

As she started up the sand wash with that detestable little runt, I had to make the most maddening decision that ever faced a man: Either to yell out a warning to her that she was walking into a demoniac web, or to hold my tongue and carry out my long and patient plot.

I DO NOT know how I did it. Every cell in my body burned with the frenzy to howl and shake those bars and hurl myself against the thick door. But I held back just long enough to think. What if I did warn the girl? She was trapped anyway. If she tried to run she would be caught before she got a furlong away. For there was no doubt but that La Verne and perhaps others were watching the whole scene. By the grace of Heaven I held my tongue. And it was only a short while later that the halfbreed brought me another dose of the bedeviled drugs in food.

His knob-jointed brown hand poked through the bars. And it stayed there.

My own hand thrust out, clutching the man's throat. I gripped it till his eyes popped, and he must have thought that hand was already stiffened with the petrification of rock.

"Give me the keys," I whispered calmly. "Or shall I tighten these granite fingers around your throat?"

I got the keys, unlocked the door to my cell then slipped around to the outside of that barred window. The halfbreed jailor was slumped against the wall like a rag doll tossed there and forgotten. Although I had choked him into a purple-faced stupor I did not know how soon he would come to. I yanked him to his feet. His eyes rolled wild and dazed as I ripped off his coat and tied the sleeves around his head. I bound his hands with his belt, then dragged him into the cell and locked him in.

Crouching between a rain barrel and an adobe wall I took a quick survey of the surrounding shacks. High granite cliffs hemmed in the little gulch, overhanging five rambling adobe houses. In the dusk which was falling fast the needle rocks loomed all about the gulch bottom—a graveyard of stark, bone-grey monuments. The wind wailing through these gaunt forms chilled me to the marrow. The whole gully seemed to be filled with moaning voices.

I knew that every step I took was fraught with danger. La Verne might be peering out of any window for all I knew, like a spider in the middle of a web. I kept under cover. I had no clue as to which shack I should search first. As I was creeping behind a cactus fence, shuddering at the weird sounds which the evening wind had evoked, one sound louder than the others curdled my blood. It was a woman's scream, wild, maniacal, and so harsh that I thought for a moment it came from the mouth of one of those granite images! But vaguely I felt something familiar about that tortured and terrified utterance. I remembered the scream of La Verne's wife at the climax of our love scene back in the olive grove of the foothills. I knew then what must be happening. La Verne had started to mete out his punishment on his adulterous mate.

The scream came from the first long

hovel near the cliffs. I was certain of the direction, for the sound came in increasing throat-tearing outbursts. For a short while at least, I hoped desperately, Mary Harmon would be unmolested.

I prowled up to the back door of the house intending to deal with La Verne first of all. After that I could hunt for Mary and then for poor Ted—if he were still alive.

Because of the mad screeching I got into the house without my footsteps giving any warning. Just within the door I found myself facing a hanging of heavy cloth. Parting it cautiously a bare inch, I saw that the low-roof hovel had but the one long room, dim, foul with the smell of chemicals, and misted with their smoke. I had the feeling that I had stepped into an operating room, but this gave way to the more abhorrent air of a charnel house.

ONE white body lay stretched on a table, hideously stiff. Another body, more livid, lay on a slab adjacent to the first. This body was not stiff: It writhed. And from its gleaming swelling throat came those deafening shrieks.

It was the unclothed and ravishingly beautiful body of La Verne's wife!

As I stood there congealed except for the slugging of my heart, my eyes dilated so that I could see another form in the shadows: a stoop-shouldered runt, fumbling with some bottles and vials on a sideboard. He did not have to turn for me to recognize him on the instant. He now was the "rancher" who had trapped me, the one who had trapped Mary Harmon and brought her to this gulch but a short while before. The instant that I saw him I thought of Mary. Where could she be now? What had he done with her? He had turned her over to his master, La Verne, no doubt about that,—but where then was La Verne?

I saw things clearly now. I saw that the runt was filling a hypo needle. I saw

the woman clutching at her breasts with her manacled hands, and kicking her legs in an attempt to free them from the rope that bound her ankles to the table. And one thing else I saw:

That man on the adjacent table was Ted Harmon!

He lay there stark and stiff, asleep or dead, I could not tell which. His face was chalky, the chalkiness not of bloodless flesh but some sort of powdery inorganic stuff like marl!

My first impulse was to rush to the side of the poor wretch who was my best friend. But I knew I must deal with that little runt first. Not only that, but I must make sure where La Verne was before I showed my hand. Although this long laboratory comprised the whole shack, a door in back led to a lean-to room. It would be awkward if La Verne were sitting there complacently watching this drama. And it was not unlikely.

The woman on the table stopped her screeching all of a sudden. She had seen that hypo in the runt's thick-jointed hands. I saw her eyes bulge, her forehead wrinkle and shine with blobs of sweat. She panted wildly, her lips gibbering, "Not that! He won't do that to me! He won't let you do it! Not to my body! He wants my body always—as it is—not hardened to something hideous!" She panted harder, arching her torso so that her back lifted from the table, all her muscles undulating, jerking in her desperate intakes of breath.

The ugly, brown runt chuckled at his work. "A nice little party! That's what we're going to have. The Prof's got it all fixed. He thinks up good parties, the Prof does! You and your boy friend on the table, lying next to you. A nice party with the Prof sitting by and watching."

A spasm of horror gripped me as I realized what these words meant. First of all they convinced me that La Verne must be close at hand, and that I must lie

low a moment longer. And they meant something more. La Verne had planned a sardonic punishment for his beautiful wife. She was to lie here with one of her lovers—a last adulterous liaison—while her wronged husband worked his miracle of transformation upon them both!

I imagined some unspeakable scene practiced by Voodists and the worshippers of Damballa, in which some of the orgiastic participants were corpses. That is to say, corpses that have not yet passed wholly into the realm of death, but that still possess a certain uncanny power of movement as of living bodies. Was it possible that La Verne had concocted a revenge learned from the jungle worshippers whose rituals were older than history! Was it possible that his wife was to end her career of faithfulness by one last *accomplissement*, lying in the arms of a dead lover?

"He'll enjoy the party, the Prof will. And so will I!" the runt was laughing dryly. "You lied about me once, because I told on you. You said 'I'd made a pass at you',—thinking the Prof would get jealous and fix me—like he's fixed all your boy friends. But he wouldn't believe you. He knew I wouldn't dare make a pass at his wife. And he was right. He took my word instead of yours. Only I'm paying you back for your lies. I'll stay and watch too. There'll be three of us watching, me and the Prof and the new guest I brought him tonight. Nice little guest—your friend's kid sister!"

I heard a moan from the table which, although it had all the anguish of a tortured soul, gave me a new hope. It had come from Ted Harmon's rigid throat and it told me at least that he was still alive.

"The Prof told me it's got to be a viper this time," the runt went on, sliding a small wire covered box from the shelf. "Got to have some snake venom first so's the chemicals will work faster. 'A viper

for Cleopatra'. That's what he calls you—a Cleopatra. 'Let it crawl down between her breasts' he says, right there where she always shuddered when I touched her. If she didn't want my fingers on her', he says, 'let her see what a viper feels like crawling over her flesh instead of my fingers!'"

The woman's hands snapped helplessly to her breasts but were stopped by the clink of manacles before she could reach or cover them. I saw just that one gesture before I jumped.

The runt turned just as I leaped across the floor. In that split second he had sensed what was coming, and with the wire covered box held up above his head he spun around.

My fist dropped him easily and the box fell from his stiffened hands. It fell crashing on the table. And as it broke open. La Verne's wife gave one scream of terror, then her head sank back, her nude-cream-colored body relaxed, her face rolled sideways in a dead faint.

I dashed instantly to the side of my stricken friend on the next table to the woman's. I threw my arms about him but my own gesture startled me, made me jerk back with a sickening qualm. My arms hugged something stiff and hard. Every muscle in Ted Harmon's shoulders and chest was taut as though with lock-jaw. I had once taken a dog in my arms that was afflicted with trysmus so that his flesh was tightened to a hardness that could scarcely be distinguished from his bones. That was what I felt when I put my arms about my friend!

"Bob!" he was moaning. "Get her first—don't mind me!"

"But those damned snakes!" I cried. "That box is smashed open. They're crawling!" I left his side and stamped on one of the frightful little things near my foot. I crushed another and still another as Ted kept moaning.

"No, Bob! For God's sake—my sister

—save her first! You *must* save her first!”

I had never known such resignation and such infinite love as Ted Harmon bore for that young sister of his. What did even these vipers matter in this moment which was so precious! It was a terrible decision to make—to leave poor Ted there with those snakes wriggling on the floor and on that table next to him. There was nothing in the world that mattered to him now—except to find Mary. I gave one glance at the table where the box had crashed and then I saw what had been lurking far back in my brain, what I had actually *expected* to see sooner or later:

A small viper, indescribably perfect in its movement was on that woman—crawling down, as the runt had said, between her two smooth breasts—a picture of Cleopatra painted by many artists. And in her hair—

I could not look. The vipers had squirmed into her hair and were wriggling in it so that I saw in real life the picture of the dread Gorgon of ancient times—Medusa with the hair of snakes, that turned all beholders to stone!

CHAPTER FOUR

Satan Drives A Bargain

WHEN I rushed out into the night I had no remote idea where to find La Verne or his captive. The gulch had turned dark except for the lurid afterglow of sunset. This light filled the air coming not so much from the sky as from the walls of quartz which threw back the uncanny light. It gave an effect of red foul air breathed out of the earth itself, a light that was as ghastly and unnatural and vaguely brilliant as phosphorescence. All about me were the forms of human beings enslaved in granite or sandstone, perpetually rigid and perpetually silent except for that baffling sound that seemed to come from their throats—too human for

the wind, too inhuman for reality or life.

I saw lights suddenly go on in one of the further cabins. Ghost-like they glittered in the murky dark.

La Verne must be there—with Mary Harmon. What was he planning—what awful fate was he preparing for this innocent girl?

As I went cautiously, step by step, towards that lighted window I heard La Verne's voice—and then the voice of Mary Harmon, usually gentle but now high pitched with excitement.

“Where is he? I don't care about anything else. Where's my brother?” She kept repeating the question, on the verge of hysterics. “Why did you ask me in here to talk about it? I want my Ted!”

“All right, all right, young lady,” La Verne's voice came smoothly. “But take it easy. You're scared to death because you heard that woman screaming a while ago. Well, she's just a patient, a young woman with fits. She's quiet now. So what are you afraid of? Just calm yourself.”

“Calm yourself, when you won't tell me what's happened to my brother!”

“All right, he's here, as I said. What about it? He came into my home and despoiled it. I have the unwritten law on my side.”

The girl gasped. “Where is he? Where in God's name is he?” Mary Harmon cried frantically. “You've killed him! He's dead!”

“Oh, no, not by any means. But what if he were? He would have been dead pretty soon, except that you came along. You've moved me to pity. You're a very lovely young girl. Don't redden your eyes. I'm going to give him back to you.”

I heard another gasp from her, partly incredulous, partly in thanks to a merciful Heaven. I was close enough now to hear every word. But the sand slithered suddenly about my feet and I stopped, fearful of being heard. I stood stock still, as a

wolf will freeze when it creeps up to a calf before the murderous leap.

"But I'm making a bargain," La Verne said softly, smoothly, "before I turn your brother back to you."

I stiffened. I knew what the bargain would be, and when she had fulfilled her part he would turn her brother over to her—a corpse, or rather a frightful semblance of a corpse which was half alive—the thing I had just seen! I lifted my tense head so I could just peer upwards at an angle into the room. I saw Mary's face and the sudden spasm of repugnance on it. It was a lovely youthful face, a stranger to evil, blandly innocent. But it flushed now and turned wiser with this flood of shame and disgust. One more word and I would leap over that sill! But I must not fail. When I leaped I must get his throat in my hands without a split second's miscalculation. I could not try it twice!

The girl answered hotly, "What do you mean—a bargain?"

"Probably not what you think," La Verne wheedled. "You can see that I am a sculptor. These are some of my works in this room. I want to make a likeness of you in Carrara. It's just a little favor in return for the immeasurable favor I'm doing you."

My eyes clung to her face. It had smoothed out, turning young and innocent again. Of course she would do this. She would have done much more, anything on earth, to save the brother she loved. Posing for this villain was pretty easy payment. She nodded quickly. "But bring him to me first."

"I'll send for him. But—meanwhile we will start the sitting. I don't think you'll want to stay here very long, so why lose time? Needless to say, I want you to pose in the nude. So you may as well disrobe right now."

I saw the blood surge up the white column of her throat, into the lovely oval

of her face and then ebb away instantly leaving her pale and hard and resolute. Again she nodded and I saw her hand go up to her shoulder where her frock was fastened.

My fists clenched, then opened, clawing. I must reach that window sill without a sound, then leap over. Whatever I did I must hold back my burning rage in my throat. I held my breath and kept my feet planted immovable on the ground. Then I leaned to take my first cautious step.

But as I leaned, I found that the sand had ebbed up somehow above my ankles. I tried to lift one foot slowly so that the sand would not sift and betray me.

I could not lift it!

Just why, I could not imagine. Except that a strange pulling force of that ground under my feet gave me a sudden horror that I was in quicksand!

CHAPTER FIVE

Cauldron of the Doomed

I WAS not sure it was quicksand, because the pulling power seemed to be not only at my feet, but through my shins and knees. My brain was obsessed with something more horrible even than quicksand—those gravestone images anchored forever to the earth, looming all about me in the gulch below. Was I to join that stark silent company!

It might have been my exhaustion from hunger, the after-effects of that poisonous bite which I had managed somehow to live through. Or it might have been my brain, starved for blood and nutriment, dreaming nightmare dreams, obsessed with hideous hallucinations. At any rate I felt that numbness in my legs spread through my whole body. Was it possible that the snake bite had been a hypo and that the dread disease had taken hold in my blood and nerves despite my refusal of that food!

A wild demonic yelp rushed to my throat but I choked it off. Of all times a shout would be the most disastrous now. I struggled with a suppressed fury like an epileptic. I bent down, clawing at the sand. Sounds came to me from the window, whipping me to an insensate frenzy. For they were sounds that evoked the picture of a young girl stripping off her clothes—I heard the drop of a slipper, the snap of a garter, the slithering of some silken undergarment to the floor. Mary Harmon would be nude now, displaying the most secret and lovely charms of her young figure before the eyes of that foul rascal—and I could not move to help her!

I felt the suck of the sand about my ankles as I sank deeper. My feet seemed to reach for the minerals of the earth for which they had a mysterious affinity. I felt the magnet deep in the earth's core inviting me, pulling at me, taking me to itself! I—I myself—was possessed, inoculated perhaps, with something which would respond to the magnetism of those rocks in the accursed ground!

Exhausted, yet trying vainly to suppress my wild panting, I doubled at the knees, but then hearing Mary Harmon's voice again, I tensed every muscle, straightened myself as best I could. For the moment I forgot my own danger of discovery as I lifted my head and peered across that sill. La Verne was intent upon looking at that naked girl.

She was throwing off her last filmy shred, and without any false modesty. It was no time for that! Mary Harmon was no prude or Puritan. That slim youthful, pearl-tinted body was nothing to be ashamed of. Rather it was a lovely and glorious thing with delicate shoulders, high breasts that were round and firm and perfect, narrow hips, slim white legs—a naked girl in the first matchless flower of maturity. Even those vile eyes roving her from head to foot brought no tinge of shame to her cheeks. She was thinking

not of her nakedness, but of saving poor Ted!

The horror of that scene had distracted me from my own plight. I was knee deep in that hungry sand now. There was no chance of extricating myself without help. My own muscles were bound by an inner force as malignant as the sucking earth. I listened to La Verne and I watched that maddening scene move to its climax, forgetting that my head was in full view above the window sill. But La Verne did not look in my direction. His dark deep eyes gleamed as he drank in the ravishing beauty of that naked nereid who bravely stood up before him. He could see nothing else except those youthful feminine charms revealed like a gorgeous banquet to his gaze.

THE end came when I saw the complacent fiend step up behind the girl and take her in his arms. She broke away with a scream and ran to one of the windows. But he followed, his hands outstretching, his fingers clawing at her flesh like roots hungry for soft and luscious earth. His jowls and neck turgid and red, the blood puffing his eyes, his mouth gaping with one bestial pant of dammed-up breath, he lifted her and buried his face against her throat.

She could no longer scream, but she fought, with the insensate fear of a trapped bird. Although she freed herself again, her writhing and the very consciousness of her convulsing body whipped him into a fiercer onslaught. He was so crazed that he was deafened, at least for that one moment, to my shout. He caught her as she stooped to pick up a garment to wind about her waist. She had managed to cover herself with a frantic twist, but he tore the silk, ripping it away, with a vicious, triumphant sneer.

I do not know what I shouted when I made that last attempt to lunge for the window. I yelled like a beast tearing its

lungs in a reverberating roar. It was time to yell now, since that was all that I could do. It would at least distract that madman from his feast. It might even give the girl a slim chance to run.

La Verne heard me this time. He dropped his arms, releasing the struggling body which was now reddened on the hips and thighs and torso by his savage paws. They both turned to me at the same instant, but it was only Mary who rushed to me. La Verne just stood there gaping and flabbergasted.

The girl dashed to the window, leaped over the sill like a dryad and jumped into my arms. She was astonishingly light, her hot supple limbs melting easily, softly in my frantic clutch. She was panting desperately, her flesh like fire, still convulsed and writhing but squeezing hard against me, every muscle of her shuddering.

But I did not dare to hold her long. "It's quicksand!" I gasped. "Jump! Then keep going till you find solid ground!"

I knew well enough that the quivering sand was only in one spot, a sink-hole and a trap to guard that window. The girl jumped, helped by the swing of my arms, and her bare feet touched rimrock.

I COULD well imagine what La Verne was thinking. The girl was free of his clutches, but only momentarily. If he stood there gaping too long she would reach his car which was just beyond the corral. This possibility must have occurred to him, cutting every other thought from his mind. He went straight after her. He did not waste any time going around by the door. He came through the window after her. Needless to say, he knew of the quicksand below the sill, but he also knew its limits. He vaulted over the sill with a long leap that would have cleared the trap according to his estimate—except for one complication. I reached up as he hurdled over me, and tripped

him with the last of my waning strength.

I just managed to catch him by one foot. He fell headlong, his arms sinking down up to the shoulders in the sand-covered mire. He was a heavy man and he went deep. He flayed about like a hooked fish, then roared for help as I got a better grip on him. And he kept howling as I pulled myself closer to him and got my hands on his windmilling arms. Then he stopped dead still, grunting like a jiggered horse. He was not the type to solve problems by hysterical screaming. He must have guessed that his screams would be unanswered. He knew he was in a fix, that his time was come, and without doubt he had an honest terror of that sink-hole of quicksand which would suck a man into the earth to depths that would never be fathomed or known! But he kept his wits. He saw Mary Harmon, a gleaming nude spirit in the shadows, dragging a plank. It calmed him, for there was hope—hope that is to say, if I did not murder him on the spot.

"We're both sinking!" he screamed at me. "There's no bottom to this. Let her save us both, and I'll save her brother from the curse I put on him!"

"To hell with your promises!" I shot back. Although I was waist deep in the sucking ground I had only the one thought—to kill this devil so Mary Harmon could escape. I saw her dragging the plank almost to the edge of the quivering sand. "Stay back!" I shouted. "You aren't free yet!"

She would not listen. She kept tugging at that heavy plank, falling, getting up and dragging with all her strength. And every moment I was sinking deeper, pulling La Verne down with me.

"Leave that plank," I cried, "and go get Ted. He's in that shack!" I pointed down the gulch to the laboratory. "Get him and the two of you get out of here!"

"A lot of good it will do you!" La Verne choked as my fingers reached his

neck. He was calm enough to think, and to use guile. "There's no doctor in the world can save her brother if you kill me!" Inch by inch we were going down but he kept raving. "I've got the powders and oils that will make him well—antidotes I've worked on for years—"

I loosened my grip for one tiny moment. While the girl was trying to slide the end of the plank out towards us, the ooze crept up to our chests. We had only a moment more for bargaining before the earth took us forever from the world of breath and speech. The bargain must be made on the instant.

"Where are your formulas—your antidotes?"

"In a safe—" he began, but then my fingers tightened. If the formulas were in a safe, then they could be found. And there would be chemists to decipher them. Ted Harmon would get all the treatment that science and this devil's research had to offer. With a final surge I dragged myself over my victim's shoulders and pressed his head downward.

It was like pressing a lump of dough, squashing it in the softer batter.

But when he was buried, I found that I myself was too far under to reach for that plank. And to my despair I saw the girl walking out on it in an attempt to help me. I screamed to her to stop but she came out and leaned, reaching her white naked arms towards me. If I tried to grab for them I knew that we would both be trapped.

It was at that moment that the headlights of a car flashed dazzlingly on the girl's white body.

THE suddenness of this glare had a strange effect. I felt as if I had awakened with a burst of morning sunlight in my eyes, coming abruptly out of a night of hideous nightmares. With the sharp light on Mary's unclothed body and on the forms of those stone images all around

her, I saw the vivid contrast between flesh and stone. The juxtaposition of the two—the stone bodies and the living one—convinced me all at once of what I knew later to be the truth: Those graveyard images were not flesh. They never had been flesh. They were the work of the desert wind and sand through the ages. Many had been finished off by human artifice into something more than the grotesque erosion shapes, but they too were indubitably stone and nothing else. La Verne had worked there, not as a chemist but as a sculptor. The strange hobby had been a partial outlet for his demented and criminal passion for the beauty of the human form. But his works of sculpture were not petrified bodies; they were beyond any doubt granite or sandstone, marl or marble.

The Medusa legend, the turning of a human being to stone, was only a figment fired up in the brains of his half-hypnotized victims.

But I was hypnotized no longer. The coming of that car which I believed meant rescue, and its flood of light thrown upon Mary's naked form, broke the spell of horror. Everything cleared within my brain. I even understood, in that moment of inspiration, what had happened to Ted Harmon and to that petrified corpse I had seen in my cell. It was merely some chemical secret La Verne possessed,—a calcification of all the parts of the body by the use of lime salts and other unknown chemicals.

Curiously my mental awakening came at the very moment the quicksand reached and pulled with a gigantic and fearful suction at my arms and shoulders. Thus, it is said, a drowning man will have a vast flood of vivid thoughts in his last moment of life. I knew at this crisis what a mouse must feel like when a gopher snake starts its slow swallowing, taking its victim bit by bit—the hind legs, the stomach, the front legs, and the rest!

My last thought as the earth took me into itself was that Mary Harmon was saved. I saw her waving to the men in the car. She knew that they were a rescue party—two deputies who had helped her in her hunt for Ted, and then trailed her somehow to this gulch.

I caught one flashing glimpse of her—a frail young nymph running stark nude, her rose-tinged body transparent and spiritual in the harsh light, a picture evoked out of the dim past when men worshipped the virgin goddess of the moon and the hunt and the forest!

As the lips of the ground closed in that last great suck about my neck, my chin, I wondered if the rescue had come too late! I wondered if Ted Harmon would be saved from his hideous malady, and I wondered if La Verne's statues, after all my conviction, were really rock or flesh!

I still wonder, months after I was

dragged half dead from that pit. Despite the word of every chemist and geologist who has examined his carven statues, I believe La Verne's power was not of science but of hell. I have changed my mind. The legend of the Gorgon's head turning men to stone is true. I have seen it! And what happened to La Verne's wife, who disappeared that night, is proof enough for me:

A statue has just been found by a prospector not far from La Verne's desert laboratory. It is not a crude image like something buried in layers of geologic history and unearthed from the stone age. It is a perfectly formed woman, unclothed, matchless and seductive in form. And the hair is smoothly etched in basalt, with carnelian tipped breasts and eyes of pure sapphire.

I remember that figure well.

No man on earth could forget it!

THE END