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Number Four

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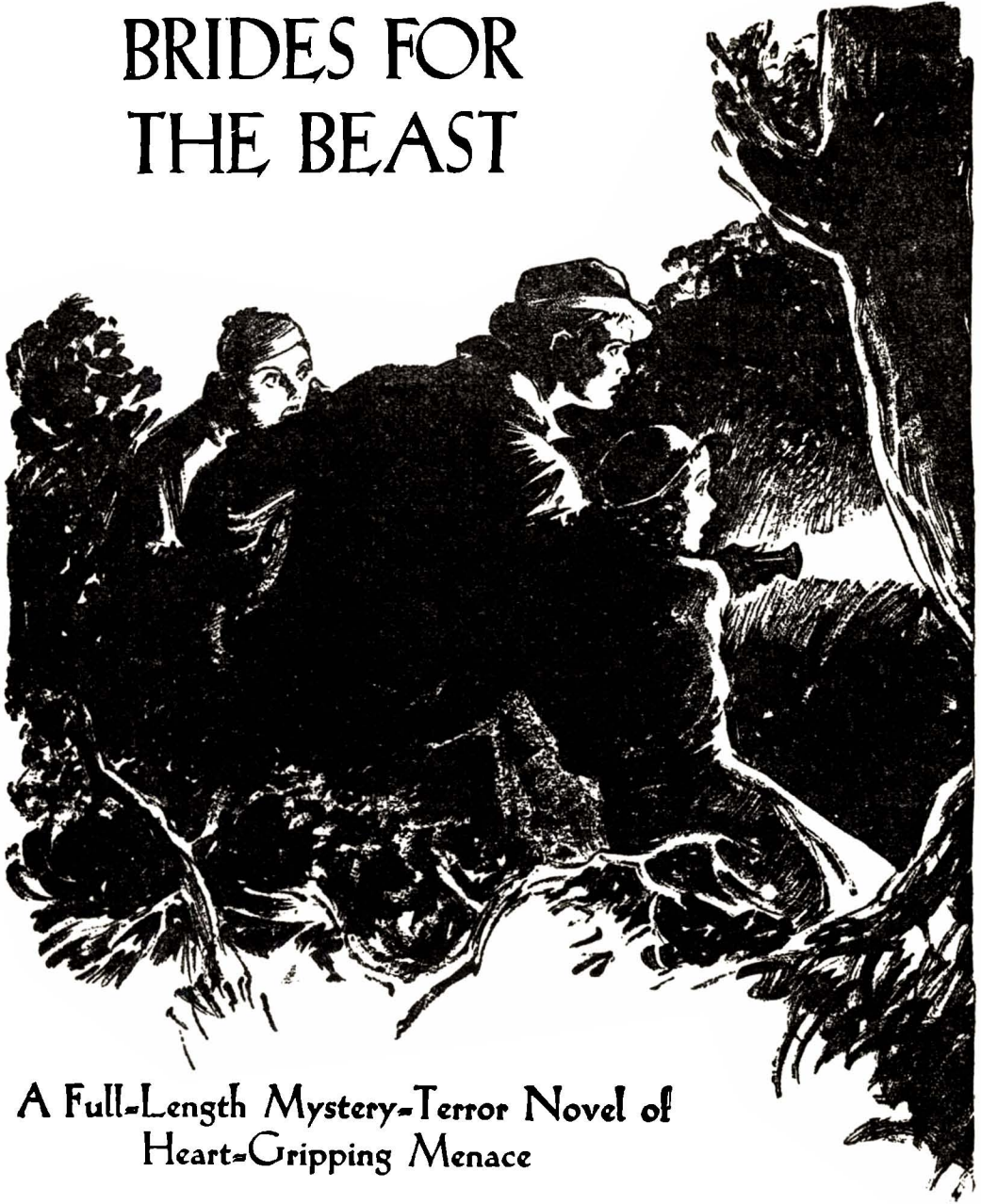
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BRIDES FOR THE BEAST



A Full-Length Mystery-Terror Novel of Heart-Gripping Menace

BACK and forth, back and forth, from end to end of its large outdoor cage the great gorilla paced. Its reddish eyes glared murderously as it whirled and spat out at the laughing crowd packed tight against the guard rail. Then it backed away—only to fling itself forward again and tug at the bars with all of its great strength.

The crowd thought it was great fun to bait the enraged creature, but Hartley Kincaid frowned in disapproval and

Minna Talbot clung to his arm nervously. She didn't like it; that display of savage ferocity frightened her.

"Come on, dear; let's go somewhere else," she urged as the monstrous animal howled its rage and shook the bars until they rattled. "If that thing should ever get loose—"

The words died on her lips, lost in a stifled gasp as she stared, terrified, up at the cage. One rattling bar was loose! It had snapped out of the framework that

By WAYNE ROGERS

(Author of "Substitute Corpses")

Roving the mountain wilderness was a mad thing that brought unspeakable terror to the hill people and a torturing doubt to the heart of Minna Talbot . . . For a lust-mad scientist whispered secrets concerning her lover's birth—secrets involving a grisly experiment with a great ape . . .



held it at the bottom, and the gorilla, quick to sense the opportunity, seized it in both sinewy paws. The great shoulders hunched, swelling muscles ridged out on the long arms—and the bar bent upward, twisted almost double!

The whole thing had happened in a few short seconds, and before the gaping spectators realized their danger the maddened creature was squeezing through the opening, free to get at them. With wild shrieks they bolted, stampeded in blind panic, knocking one another down in their desperate flight.

Minna clutched Kincaid's arm, but a wild-eyed man dived between them and another knocked her off balance. Then she was down, and the crowd was streaming past her, sweeping Hartley with them. Another moment and the pavement in front of the cage was deserted, except for Minna, trying to get to her feet—and the great ape that was lurching toward her!

She heard women screaming, heard men shouting to her to run, saw a uniformed zoo attendant gaping at her helplessly—but she could not move a muscle. She seemed turned to stone—stone that shook in terror as death loomed above her.

And then Hartley was there beside her, cool and collected, speaking calmly, almost persuasively—to the gorilla!

"No—no," he was saying quietly. "No—no."

The lumbering ape hesitated, crouched on its haunches, and looked puzzledly into those eyes that were fixed so steadily upon it. Gradually the snarl began to fade from its face.

"Good—good," Hartley said in the same quiet tone, and then made queer, animal noises deep in his throat.

Slowly and easily he walked toward the gorilla, speaking to it all the while. Then his open hand touched its shoulder, patted it; and the red eyes looked up into his with what almost seemed to be understanding! He reached down and touched

the open paw, patted it, lifted it—and started leading the ape back to the cage, where a quick-witted attendant was spreading out an inviting array of food.

For long minutes the tense, hair-trigger drama had held the watching crowd spellbound. Then, as the gorilla squeezed its way back into the cage, the breathless silence was broken by a roar of applause, and Hartley was bending over her, helping her to stand on weak, trembling legs.

The danger was past, and Minna could feel the crushing terror lifting like a great weight from her shoulders—but in its place came a weird reaction that sent a shiver through her. What she had just witnessed was unnatural—uncanny. It wasn't human for a man to exert such an influence over a savage beast. Something deep down within her shuddered away from it, and she recoiled unconsciously when his hands touched her.

Then the strange reaction was gone, forgotten, and she was in his arms. But the next day it came back to her and she shivered unreasonably as she read a statement by one of the zoo attendants in the morning paper.

"If I hadn't seen it myself, I wouldn't believe it," he was quoted as saying. "Mr. Kincaid has more influence with apes than any man I've ever known. He handled that gorilla as if he knew it—almost as if—well, as if he was one of its own kind and could think the way it did."

THAT near tragedy was now three months past, but it all came back to Minna with crystal clearness as she read and reread Hartley's letter. He was at his father's remote estate in the wildest part of the Adirondack foothills, but he was to have come back to town to spend the four-day holiday week-end with her at the seashore. His friend, Don Porter, and Don's fiancée, Alice Marvin, were to have completed the party—but now Hartley wasn't going to be back.

"Dad feels that he is on the verge of a great discovery, and you know I am an integral part of his experiments," he wrote, "so I really can't run out on him for almost a week right now. Instead, I want you three to drive up here and pick me up. Then we'll go to my lodge and spend a couple of days there."

Minna frowned. It wasn't that she did not like Hartley's mountain lodge; it was an adorable place, and she was almost as fond of it as he was. But the prospect of going to Professor Kincaid's home, even if only to pick up Hartley, was not inviting. It filled her with vague uneasiness.

Professor Kincaid was a strange, reticent man, and she was never comfortable in his presence. He was an anthropologist who was devoting himself to an exhaustive series of researches into simian life and development. So immersed was he in his subject that he had become eccentric; he seemed hardly human—scarcely more than an automaton.

He gave Minna the creeps—and the thought of Hartley forming part of his experiments, being studied and probed by this queer, impersonal old man, did not add to her peace of mind. She had only a vague idea of what those experiments were like, but what she conjured up in her mind gave her no desire to visit the place where they were conducted.

There was another reason why Minna dreaded going to Professor Kincaid's establishment—August Gebhardt, his assistant. Gebhardt was a German, a blond, bullet-headed Prussian, and he made no effort to conceal his desire for her, even though he knew she was engaged to Kincaid's son.

Minna had never liked him, and she liked him even less for the past few months. He had little liking for Hartley, she knew; but there was certainly no excuse for the unthinkable things he had hinted at.

Ever since that accident in the zoo he had been unbearable. Minna's little nose wrinkled with distaste and her eyes became frosty as she remembered how he had read the account in the paper and then looked up at her significantly.

"A most remarkable occurrence," he murmured. "It hardly seems human. I would not believe that a *man* could wield such an influence over a beast."

There were other things, too; not the words so much as the inflection, the crafty cocking of his head, the knowing nod—as if he knew a great deal that had better remain unspoken.

Gebhardt had made several attempts to declare his affection, but so far Minna had managed to avoid a direct avowal. But how much longer she would be able to do that was a question; it was much better to avoid the man and the chance of an unpleasant scene.

So, between the professor and his assistant, there was little to tempt her to the Kincaid place—not to mention the reputation of the establishment itself. There were queer stories whispered about that gloomy backwoods retreat; wild tales about the professor and his experiments.

Once, a few years ago, he had even broken into the columns of the metropolitan newspapers when the mangled body of a young girl was found near his place. His angry backwoods neighbors claimed that she had been slain by one of the apes the professor kept penned up in his laboratory, but he convinced the authorities that his animals could not possibly have escaped to commit the deed. Hartley had been with him at the time, and Minna noticed that he was strangely worried and unnerved when he came back to the city.

Not a very pleasant place to visit, but Minna shrugged; if it was all right with the others, she would not object. And it was all right with them.

"I sort of expected this," Don laughed when informed of the change in plans. "I

didn't think we'd be able to drag that Tarzan of yours down to the seashore. He's never happy unless he's up in the woods. Regular forest-dweller, that guy."

Oddly, that jesting remark struck Minna as strangely significant. Hartley did have little use for the seashore, for water sports of any sort. His mountain lodge was his idea of heaven, his ideal playground the woods.

Minna caught herself up short and gave herself a figurative shaking. What sort of ridiculous thinking was this? It was those preposterous insinuations August Gebhardt had insidiously planted in her mind. Do what she would, she could not get rid of them or throw off the feeling of uneasiness, of apprehension, they cast over her.

IT stayed with her as Don's car sped through the bright morning sunshine, and increased when early twilight brought the Adirondacks closing in around them. Today those tree-covered hillsides were depressing. They lowered above her ominously, closed in threateningly. It would be a relief when they reached Kincaid's and picked up Hartley. Minna wanted him beside her; wanted the reassuring touch of his hand, the sound of his voice—

"The only objection I have to this place is the ungodly trip you have to make to get here," Don interrupted her thoughts as he brought the car to a halt. "Seems I never can negotiate it without losing the way. God only knows where we are now. Looks as if this road's going to become a deer-run in a few minutes."

"There's a light ahead there to the right," Alice pointed out. "Maybe they can put us back on the right road."

The light came from what proved to be a general store in the center of a straggling village that appeared to consist of no more than a dozen scattered houses. As the car

braked to a stop in front of the building men came surging out on the wooden porch. A surprising number for a place of that size, Minna noticed at once. She counted twenty—and some of them carried shotguns.

"Wonder if you can tell me how to reach Professor Kincaid's place?" Don asked them all in general.

But only silence answered him—cold silence that was made unmistakably hostile by the surly gleam of their eyes.

"We seem to have lost our way—" Don began again, and then his voice faded away before that almost palpable hostility. There was something terribly wrong here; something—

"Ye want to go to the perffessor's, eh?" a bewhiskered old-timer finally said, while his neighbors eyed him uncertainly. "Friends of his, be ye?"

Don's admission brought from the crowd of hillmen a low growl that swelled into an angry rumble, but the old fellow paid no attention to it.

"Wall, ye just stick to this here road," he went on, "until ye come to the first turnin'. Take the right hand fork. Pretty bad road fer a spell, but it'll git ye where ye wanta go."

Don thanked him and threw the car into gear. For a moment Minna was sure that the men were going to step out in front of the machine and stop them with those shotguns. Then they were under way—but, as she looked back, she saw that the hillmen still stood watching them as the light of the store dimmed in the distance.

The road grew steadily rougher and bumpier, until the girls had to cling to the sides of the car to keep from being tossed around. The right hand fork proved to be even worse—almost impassable in spots.

"Don't believe anything on wheels ever went through here," Don groaned as he

clung to the wheel and ground forward in low gear. "What the—"

He jammed his foot on the brake as a lanky, dark-bearded figure suddenly loomed up in the beam of the headlights. The fellow's hand was raised in a command to stop, and his face was grim as he strode over to the side of the car.

"Don't know where ye think ye're goin'," he announced, "but I want ye to help me."

A shriek of agony ripped through the silence, and the old fellow's gnarled hand tightened on the side of the car.

"That's my darter, Nancy," he said huskily. "She's gonna have a baby—havin' a turrible time with it—an' the doctor from town ain't showed up yet. Less'n he gets here mighty quick it's gonna be too late—so I want ye to turn around an' drive back an' fetch him, mister."

It wasn't a request; it was a grim command. But Don wilted at the prospect of going back over that impossible road.

"I can't make any time," he argued. "You can walk faster than I can drive this car—"

But the lanky hillman had unlatched the door and was starting to crowd in under the wheel—when another burst of agony shrilled and quavered through the night. The sheer torment in that scream sent a cold chill down Minna's spine. She knew well enough what it meant.

"There's no use going for the doctor now," she said as she hopped out of the car. "There won't be time. I'm a nurse, and I'll see what I can do if you will take me to her."

Minna scarcely needed a guide; the girl's blood-chilling cries blazed a trail straight to the crude shack where she lay writhing in agony. As they came in the girl half raised on her bed and gazed at them with feverish eyes.

"It wasn't a monkey critter," she gasped. "It wasn't a monkey critter, I

tell ye—it was human!" And then another spasm of agony rocked her and twisted her words into distorted moans.

The poor thing was delirious, Minna thought; that was the only explanation for her raving about this "monkey critter". Again and again the insistence that something or someone was not a monkey, but human. Gradually Minna began to understand that the girl was talking about the father of her nearly born child—and the chilling tentacles of grisly horror began to wrap themselves around her.

Fortunately the doctor, a rugged little country practitioner, arrived before the child was born. He took charge, and Minna noticed that his eyes became bleak as he listened to that delirious raving. She tried hard to catch more of the girl's words and make sense of them, but the disjointed raving told her nothing more—until the newborn infant lay in the doctor's hands.

And then stark horror gripped her, enveloped her utterly!

Fascinated, she stared at the dead monstrosity, while her mind reeled away from what she saw. It was a huge child. Its arms and legs were long and gangling. There was a thin covering of dark hair all over its body; and its face—

Those flat, widespread features were unmistakably simian!

Minna heard a low curse escape from the doctor's lips as he swung around and tried to hide the thing from the girl on the bed. But he was too late. She had already seen—and now her brown eyes were two great, brimming pools of incredulous horror.

A low, choking moan bubbled up from her throat, gasped from her open mouth. Then came words, slow and deliberate, in a voice that was insistent yet pathetically pleading—as if she were arguing with herself, striving desperately to convince herself of something that must be so.

"But it *was* a human critter! O God, it was!" her low words throbbled through

the still room as her eyes closed wearily and she slumped to the bed to join in death the grotesque thing to which she had given birth.

CHAPTER TWO

Prey of the Beast

FOR long moments the silence held as they stood beside the bed and looked down at the dead girl. Minna forgot that she was part of it. Rather, it was as if she were a spectator, looking into a room where something unthinkably horrible has just occurred.

It wasn't the girl's death. Death alone would have been clean and final, a blessed relief. This was something else; something incredible and unholy; something that clung noisomely to the room even after the girl's spirit had fled. Its taint held them mute in the presence of horror they could not put into words.

Then the bearded parent shuffled over to the table on which the infant's body lay. Horror and disgust were mirrored in his working features, to give place to bitter rage.

"Human—hell!" he snarled. "It's a monkey—an' one of Kincaid's critters is its father!"

That broke the spell, and only then did Minna realize that other eyes had been regarding them. Eyes in the windows and at the door. Now the owners of those eyes shuffled in and gathered around the table, to stare down at the monstrosity in awe that quickly kindled into savage rage.

She recognized several faces among them. They were the same men she had seen back in the straggling little town. Now they were all armed with guns or clubs, and the hard stares they directed at the three strangers were filled with menace.

"Thank God my Betsy died afore she give birth to a *thing* like that!" one of them exclaimed, and Minna saw that it

was the old fellow who had directed them. "My pore gal was only dead—ripped to pieces—with her dead fingers still grip-pin' the black hairs she pulled out of the critter's dirty hide. But the lot of ye let the perfessor lie his way out of it—let him keep those murderin' apes here in the hills—an' this is what ye get fer it!"

His face twitched and his old eyes blazed as he swung around on the others.

"An' this ain't all!" he raved. "Wait till we find your gal, Jeff Muzzey. A gal in this country don't disappear for two days an' come back safe. The ape's got her—an' when ye find her ye'll wish to God ye never did!"

Jeff Muzzey, a red-haired giant, quailed under that withering prediction, and the color drained out of his ruddy face.

"Ef anything's happened to my daughter—" his tense voice came in a deep rumble, then stopped.

His blazing eyes turned to Minna, and decision flashed in them. Before she could move he leaped across the room and grabbed her by the wrist.

"We've stood enough o' Kincaid's murderin' critters," he said grimly. "I'm holdin' this gal until we find my Dorrie—an' if—if anything's happened to Dorrie—God help this one!"

That was the spark that set off the explosion, that opened the floodgates for pent-up passions. Don Porter sprang forward and tried to push the fellow away from Minna, but in the next moment he was down, helplessly battling half a dozen men who struggled to get at him. Minna felt rough hands grab at her and hold her, felt hard fingers pinch into her arms as she stared aghast at what had suddenly become a bloodthirsty mob, slaving for the blood of people they had never even seen until an hour ago.

Rough hands seized Alice and held her helpless. Angry fists flailed out at Don, and the bewhiskered old-timer whose tirade had started this frenzy shouted en-

couragement and heaped fuel on the blaze. Only one man in the room kept his head.

Above the din the doctor's voice rang out authoritatively.

"Let those people alone, you fools!" he commanded. "What did they do to you? If you feel so much like fighting, go up and tackle the professor's apes—not a couple of girls. Thought you were supposed to be out looking for Dorrie Muzzey! Well, you're not gonna find her in here—and while you're wasting time God only knows what's happening to her."

The lash of his voice snapped at them, penetrated their rage-befogged brains, and slowly common sense began to reassert itself. The hillmen fell back, abashed, but even as they released her, Minna saw that their glances were bitter.

"You came along here at a very unfortunate time," the doctor said as Don got to his feet. "After what's been going on in these hills these men can hardly be blamed for flying off the handle, but old Stevens shouldn't have sent you up this road. He did that out of pure cussedness. It will get you up to Kincaid's all right—in fact you're within half a mile of the place now—but the road's in very bad shape. Hasn't been used for years."

"And if we go back and around the other way?" Don groaned.

"Ten or twelve miles," the doctor admitted. "Guess you might as well go on this way, as long as you've come this far. Wait a minute. I'll get you a guide. Hey, Tully," he called to a young husky who was just going out of the cabin. "Suppose you ride up to the Kincaid place with these people. You can take them up and at the same time keep your eyes open for any sign of Dorrie along this back road."

SO when they drove on Tully Walters rode on the running board of the coupe beside Don, clinging to the side of the car as it pitched in and out of ruts, his eyes

never leaving the lighted road in front of them.

"Dorrie's my gal," he confided as they bumped along. "She ain't been home—ain't been seen—since yesterday morning. That ain't like Dorrie. If she was a-goin' anywhere she'd 'a' told me about it."

Minna listened to his anxious voice and studied the silhouette of his worried face etched against the background of the dark road. Her heart went out to him, and she shuddered at the memory of the dead girl back in the cabin they had just left. What a ghastly tragedy—to go through the excruciating agony of motherhood to bring such an abomination into the world!

Somewhere in this black wilderness was the creature that was responsible for that tragedy. Could it be that it was really a beast—an ape? A horrible monster that caught and violated young girls and left their mangled bodies as gruesome evidence of its bloodthirsty lust?

Minna remembered the red, hate-flaring eyes of that monster in the zoo; remembered the way it came lunging toward her—and suddenly the darkness that hemmed her in was filled with staring eyes, with hairy arms that were ready to reach out and grab her! She fought to control her panic, but instinctively she shied away from the open car window and pressed closer to Alice, until she could feel her friend's trembling arm, her ice-cold fingers. Fear huddled there in the car with them.

But the dying girl had insisted that the father of her child wasn't a beast—that it was human. What had she meant by that? Didn't she know for sure? Was it some sort of weird half-beast that was neither man nor ape? Some impossible creature that was able to change its form and pass as both man and beast?

That was inconceivable! But Minna shivered at the thought and wished with all her heart that she had not come on this trip. Intuition had warned her not to

come to this place. Perhaps this unnatural monster was the spawn of one of the professor's unholy experiments. Perhaps—

Suddenly Tully Walters' hand shot out and gripped Don's arm.

"Stop the car!" he whispered tensely. "Look! Over there at the side of the road. Did ye see that—"

The motor died as Don flicked the switch and stepped on the brake. The car stopped, settled with a faint metallic sigh—and the stillness settled down around them; stillness so absolute that Minna could hear the pounding of her heart and the panicky sough of Alice's quickly drawn breath.

The world became a circle of light in the midst of surrounding blackness—a ring of glaring radiance into which she stared until her burning eyes seemed to be standing out of her head. And then she saw it!

Full in the glare of the headlights was a snarling black face, a bullet head hunched between great shoulders, a huge hairy body. For a fraction of a second the ape crouched at the edge of the brush and glowered at them. Then it heaved itself forward—and a heavy rock smashed into the windshield, driving murderous splinters of glass all about the helpless occupants.

Minna ducked behind the protection of the dashboard as another rock crashed against the hood of the car. She saw Tully Walters spring from the running board. Then Don snapped off the lights and the narrow road was plunged into darkness.

Out of that darkness came the sounds of the fearsome creature's flight and of Walters' threshing pursuit, growing fainter in the distance. Behind the wrecked windshield the girls clutched each other and cowered in terror, until Don pulled a flashlight from a side pocket and climbed out of the car.

"I'm going after him," he announced quietly. "I can't let him face that thing alone. You'll be all right here—"

But Minna was already out of the car, dragging Alice with her.

"Don't be silly, Don," she said firmly. "We're going with you. That's much better than waiting here in the darkness."

Don did not argue. With his flashlight he searched the side of the road until he found the place where the ape had crouched, and then a faint path leading back into the brush. Slowly he led the way along this hardly discernible trail. The noise up ahead of them had dwindled and then stopped altogether. Again the wilderness was quiet, the heavy stillness broken only by the sounds of the night insects and the noise of their own progress.

It was better when there was a noise up ahead. At least then they knew where the creature was. Now it might be anywhere around them in the darkness, ready to pounce on them as they passed. Minna cringed and could fairly feel the huge black paws fastening on her hunched shoulders—

A yell burst through the stillness and her blood turned to ice. It was Tully Walters, right up ahead there somewhere, and his shout of surprise was strangling in his throat, turning to a howl of pain and terror!

Don started to run, but they did not have far to go. A few steps farther ahead and they could see the flickering light of a low fire. Don's warning hand pressed them back as they reached the edge of a little clearing—but he could not shut off the sight of the frightful thing that was going on out there in the firelight, nor close their ears to the bloody gurgle that was Tully Walters' death-cry.

The huge ape's bloody paws were tearing at the man's throat, mangling it horribly, while the warm blood spurted out and drenched its shaggy coat. Then, with a bestial snarl, it dropped the limp body

and stood glaring around the clearing.

Could it see in the darkness—see right through the thin brush behind which they were crouching? Minna felt as if the creature's eyes were looking right into her own; as if—

It was coming straight toward them! Bloody paws swinging at its sides, ugly head lowered, it lunged awkwardly across the clearing, until it was only yards away from their hiding place. Then, suddenly, it cocked its head and listened.

In her terror Minna had not heard the first call. Now she caught it as it was repeated—a distant halloo. Without another glance in their direction the ape whirled and loped off into the brush.

Not until the last faint sound of its flight was lost in the distance would Don let them step out into the blood-spattered clearing. It took but a glance at the gaping hole that had been Tully Walters' throat to tell them that here was nothing they could do for him.

But the sight that caught Minna's attention and brought an icy tingle of horror to her spine was on the other side of the clearing!

Beneath a crudely constructed bower lay the naked body of a young girl, chained by one ankle to a tree. She had been beaten, tortured, mutilated, until her flesh was a crimson horror—and yet she still lived!

Minna sprang forward and cradled the battered head in her arms as she saw the closed eyelids flicker. Blood frothed up on the girl's lips as she tried to speak; then the words came, thick and hardly intelligible—while the tortures of hell flamed in her glazing eyes.

"It was—it was the perfect—"

That was as far as she got. The welling blood gurgled in her throat and her head fell back limply. Dorrie Muzzey would never be able to tell who had committed these abominations on her tender body, but she had planted horrible suspicion in the

minds of the three who bent over her.

What had she meant to say? The professor? The professor's ape? The professor's assistant? Or—no, God Almighty, no; she couldn't have meant to say "the professor's son"!

Minna did not dare to meet the eyes of the others as she rose to her feet. She could not bear it if she should read in them the terrifying suspicion that had reared its nasty head like a venomous snake in her own mind. Instead she turned to the crudely built shelter.

It was nothing more than four poles with crosspieces lashed over their tops and freshly cut boughs spread over these. Evidently it had served as a shelter for the murderous beast—a couch from which it could watch the suffering of its helpless victim. In the bed of leaves heaped beneath it were crusts of bread, a gnawed bone—yes, and the stubs of cigarettes!

An ape that smoked cigarettes!

Minna looked closer — and her heart sank sickeningly. For a moment the world swayed giddily and she was sure she was going to faint. Then, from some inner spring of courage, came the strength to step forward and place her foot on the gleaming bit of metal that had caught her eye.

When she was sure the others would not notice, she stooped quickly and snatched up the silver-plated, monogrammed lighter she had given Hartley Kincaid as a present the past Christmas!

CHAPTER THREE

Festering Suspicion

THE rest of that terrible ride to the Kincaid home was a torture nightmare to Minna. The faces of that dead girl in the shack and the awful thing she had brought into the world, of Dorrie Muzzey and Tully Walters, would not be pushed out of her mind—and the lighter

in her handbag seemed to be burning its way right through the leather, straight into her suffering heart!

The fact that the lighter was there did not connect Hartley in any way with these fearful atrocities, she told herself again and again. But apes do not smoke cigarettes. A man had been there, reveling in that murder nest, and that man had had Hartley's lighter!

When the enraged hillfolk found those bodies there would be no restraining them. They would swarm up here and tear the Kincaid house down brick by brick, she told herself, and as she looked up at the gloomy brick and stone pile she knew that she would not blame them. She had never liked the place, and now it loomed up in the darkness ahead of her like the dwelling place of all evil.

More than twenty years ago Professor Kincaid had come to this out-of-the-way place so that he would be alone, so that he would be undisturbed in his work. He had been there ever since—and God only knew what sort of monsters the place had spawned in that time.

Minna shuddered as the car drew up beneath the porte-cochère, and her distaste was in no way alleviated when the door swung open and August Gebhardt strode out, smiling, to meet them. At the sound of the motor Professor Kincaid came from the brick building behind the main structure that was his laboratory, and Mandy Goss, his housekeeper, came from her kitchen, followed by her moronic looking grandson.

The Kincaid household was assembled—with the significant exception of Hartley!

Where was he? Something in the back of Minna's brain shouted the question accusingly, but as she glanced at the faces of the other she could find no answer in them.

Gebhardt was bowing and smiling oilyly

while he murmured stupid compliments. Professor Kincaid was making the welcoming ceremony as brief as possible; plainly he wanted to get it over with and return to his endless work. Mandy Goss, a husky old woman with a sharp, vitriolic face and glittering, mean-looking eyes, made no attempt to conceal her lack of enthusiasm; visitors meant more work, her biting glance said plainly enough. And Corby, her hulking young grandson, stared at them stupidly, as if he had never seen such surprising creatures before.

"Where—where is Hartley?" Minna dreaded to frame the question that was foremost in her mind, but somehow the words formed on her dry lips. "Isn't he here?"

"He was until an hour or so ago," Gebhardt supplied quickly. "Then he went out. I believe he said he was going to meet you."

His words seemed to sap her strength, to leave her weak and trembling. Hartley wasn't there. He hadn't been there for an hour or more. Then where was he when that ape creature murdered Tully Walters? Where was he? Where was he?

That question kept throbbing maddeningly through her brain until, fifteen minutes later, Hartley's car drove up beside the house.

"Hello," he greeted them with a grin. "How did you get here? I began to get worried about you, so I drove out to see whether you had had trouble on the road—but no sign of you anywhere. Don't see how I could have missed you."

Relief surged through Minna. Of course, that was the answer: he had driven down the main road looking for them while they were plowing along that terrible back road! That was where he was!

But as he took her in his arms and kissed her he seemed like a stranger—a stranger whom she feared! Instead of

responding eagerly to his caresses she wanted to draw away, to shrink from him—even though she scolded herself for her disloyalty.

"It's this old house," she told herself. "It makes us all suspect each other. Once we're away from here—"

But Professor Kincaid dashed her hopes for a speedy departure the moment he saw his son.

"So you're back, Hartley," he said quickly. "Then let's get back to work. I know—you want to be with your guests, but if you want to get away by tomorrow noon we'll have to put in several hours of work tonight. Mandy has prepared a bit of supper for them, and after that they will probably want to retire. So they won't miss you at all, and there will be plenty of time to see them in the morning."

Reluctantly Hartley went with him and left Minna to Gebhardt, which, it was very apparent, delighted the professor's assistant. As soon as the light supper was finished he maneuvered her into the library. Minna knew what was coming and tried to avoid it—but this time Gebhardt was not to be put off.

"Wait, Minna—please," he begged as she tried to excuse herself and go up to her room. "There is something I must tell you. I can not wait any longer. Don't you see? Don't you understand? I love you! I want you to marry me! To go away with me—"

His arms were around her, drawing her to him, bringing her face up to his lips; but Minna fought loose and broke away from him.

"You have no right to talk to me like that!" she panted. "You know I am engaged to Hartley! I love him, and I'm going to marry him—and you can only make things unpleasant for all of us by going on this way."

She was at the door and was about to open it and rush upstairs, but the ex-

pression on his livid face stopped her. Rage twisted his features, contorted them into a sneering snarl that was demoniac.

"So you fling my proposal back in my face," he grated between clenched teeth. "I am not good enough for you, I suppose. Not such an Adonis as young Kincaid. Well, let me warn you! Watch your step before you marry him or he may drag you down into hell with him!"

Minna knew that she ought not to listen, that she ought to ignore his jealous raving, but something seemed to keep her rooted there at the door, incapable of opening it. Against her will she looked into his blazing eyes and could almost feel their hypnotic attraction.

"What—what do you—mean?" she asked, in a voice that seemed to come from the back of her brain rather than from her lips.

"What do you know about Hartley?" Gebhardt flung at her. "How about his mother? Does he ever speak of her? Does he *know* anything about her? How do you know that the professor is his father? They resemble each other in no way. And do they act like father and son? How is it, do you suppose, that Hartley is so at home with the apes? How is it that he can handle gorillas as no other man has ever been able to do? How is it that he is so inordinately fond of the woods and so uncomfortable indoors?"

With the stunning force and regularity of a triphammer he hurled his questions at her, piling innuendo on innuendo, until Minna reeled away from the merciless barrage, aghast at the staggering implication of the things he was saying. But Gebhardt was not finished.

"I have tried to spare you this by hinting when I should have spoken frankly," he snapped at her. "Now I shall answer some of those questions for you. I have been with Professor Kincaid for more than five years, working with him intimately, and during that time I have dis-

covered no evidence that would indicate that he ever had a wife. His interest in Hartley is not that of a father in a son—it is that of a scientist in a rare specimen! Mrs. Goss has known the family a good many years, but her loyalty to the professor stops her from telling all that she knows. But suppose that what she insinuates is true—that Hartley is the son of an ape!"

Like a lash laying open the skin that unthinkable suggestion slapped into Minna's face—and like the quick blood rushing up to the wound came the ready promptings of her own mind.

That day at the zoo—the attendant's statement to the reporters—Hartley's passion for the woods—the so-necessary part he played in the professor's experiments. One by one they flashed before her, and with them the half-formed suspicions which Gebhardt's insinuations had prompted within her.

Hartley the son of an ape! Hartley—No, it couldn't be! That was madness—the vicious invention of a brain that was embittered and warped by jealousy. Gebhardt was lying—lying!

"I won't listen to any more such lies!" she blazed at him, while her bosom rose and fell with such stress that she could hardly speak. "Get out of here! Get out—before I tell the professor what you have dared to say!"

Gebhardt's sneer had become cold and fixed.

"The truth hurts, doesn't it?" he stabbed at her as he walked toward the door. "Especially when it is what you have known yourself but have not had the courage to admit."

As he stepped into the hallway he paused and listened. There was the rumble of voices outside. Then heavy feet clumped up the steps and across the veranda; fists banged on the door.

Minna heard those noises and a new fear coursed through her. That must be

the hillmen; they had found those mangled bodies in the clearing and now they had come for an accounting. They had come for revenge, to kill the beast that had murdered their kin.

Like an icy blast the memory of Hartley's lighter flashed through her. That killing monster was not a real ape. It smoked cigarettes and it carried a lighter—Hartley's lighter. Suppose that Hartley was the son of an ape!

Minna grasped the side of the door for support. Her face, she could see in a mirror, was ashen, and cold perspiration was bathing her body in a wet, clammy blanket. Weak-kneed, she staggered out into the hall. She had to see for herself—had to hear—

"I'm a deputy sheriff," she heard a heavy voice rumble. "I ain't got no warrant to search this place but if you know what's good for ye, you better not try to stop us."

"Come right in, gentlemen," Gebhardt invited. "I shall be more than glad to help you in any way I can."

Would he tell the deputy his suspicions about Hartley? That enraged mob would be only too quick to jump at conclusions; they would drag Hartley out to the nearest tree! Fear clutched at Minna's throat, threatened to choke her, while her head throbbed like a drum. She strained her ears. But Gebhardt said nothing that would arouse their suspicions. It seemed that they wanted to see the professor's apes, and as Gebhardt started to lead them to the laboratory she joined them.

The laboratory was a one-story brick building with heavily barred windows and a stoutly bolted door. At one side of the single large room Professor Kincaid and Hartley sat working at a large desk, and in a caged off section at the rear two big gorillas stared out at the visitors inquisitively.

"Our guests told me of their distressing experiences," the professor said, as

soon as the deputy had announced their mission. "Had we a telephone I would have notified you, but it seems you have discovered the bodies without my assistance. A most horrible tragedy, gentlemen, but I can not see how you can suspect that I am in any way responsible for it. These animals have not been out of this building since I brought them here."

"Where were they earlier tonight?" one of the possemen demanded.

"Right here in this room," Kincaid answered readily. "My son and I have been working with them all evening. They were never out of our sight. And even if we had not been here to watch them, you can see that there is no possibility that they could break out of their cage and force their way out of this building. I have no idea what this murderous monster may be, but I can guarantee that it is not one of my gorillas."

"I know a monkey when I see one," the deputy insisted stubbornly, "and that thing Bess Robley give birth to was a monkey. If one of these critters ain't its father—who was?"

Minna had scrutinized the caged gorillas keenly. There was no blood splashed on their bodies and their paws were clean. No, it couldn't have been these animals, she realized. Then the deputy's question caught her attention, and she looked up—to find August Gebhardt's eyes fixed on her significantly.

What was the man insinuating? *That Hartley had been that foul monster back in the clearing? That Hartley was the father of Bess Robley's monstrosity?*

Sickeningly, the dying girl's delirious raving came back to her:

"It wasn't a monkey critter! It was human!"

What had she meant? Could it be that a human being—or something that appeared to be a human being—had been the father of that ape-like infant? Could it be that

there was appalling truth behind August Gebhardt's nasty suggestions—that—dear God, that Hartley was really—?

The lights in the room grew dimmer, seemed to contract into themselves—and then Hartley's arm was around her shoulders, supporting her as he led her to the door.

"Brace up," he said softly. "You've had a trying day and your nerves are about gone. Bed is the place for you."

Alice was already asleep when Minna slipped quietly into bed beside her. She was tired herself, exhausted and physically ill from worry, but her jumpy nerves would not let her sleep. The room was filled with hideous apes and grinning monsters, and whenever she dozed off they seemed to gather around her, to hang over her, to press down upon her—

It was Alice's terrified scream that snapped her out of it and brought her back to full wakefulness!

The room was dark, but a late moon had risen and painted a dim patch of light in the window frame. Against that light she could see that something huge and black *was* bending over her! When she tried to move a muscular, hairy arm pressed down upon her—and she looked up into the snarling face of a gorilla!

Minna's throat muscles were paralyzed. She could not utter a sound—and then, amazingly, her own scream rang in her ears. Rang for a second, and then was choked off as a hard black paw closed over her mouth and stifled her.

Frantically she struggled for breath, but there was no breaking that grip—no chance to gulp even a single blessed draft of air into her tortured lungs. Her heart pounded madly; the cords in her neck strained and tightened into taut thongs, and the swelling veins at her temples threatened to burst through the skin—and then a wave of billowing darkness swept up around her and engulfed her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bloody Trail

WHEN Mina groped her way back to consciousness she was still there in her bed. The room was dark, the window an unobstructed panel of dim radiance, just as it had been when she dozed off to sleep. There was no crouching ape, no snarling face bending over her. Perhaps, after all, that horror had all been another nightmare conjured up by her harried brain.

Her hand stretched out slowly to touch Alice—and flew back as if her exploring fingers had come in contact with red-hot metal!

The bed was empty!

Minna pushed herself upright and peered into the darkness. Now she could see more clearly around the room. It was empty. No trace of Alice, except her clothes neatly arranged on a chair. She was gone—and Minna knew that that horrible ape had been no fantastic creature of her over-wrought imagination!

Shakily Minna climbed out of bed and slipped into her negligee and slippers. Perhaps Alice had gone downstairs—but there were her slippers beneath the bed, her negligee lying on the chair with her clothes. She was gone, and perhaps even now the monster might be returning to drag Minna off with him.

Trembling, she tiptoed to the door and looked out into the hall. It was dark and empty. Fear spurred her on as she ran through the darkness to Hartley's room and knocked on his door. No answer. Again she knocked, louder. Surely he must hear that, but there was only silence behind the panel.

Noiselessly she opened the door and looked inside. The room was empty, the bed undisturbed.

Don Porter's room was next to that.

"Just a minute," he answered sleepily

when she pounded on his door. "Heck of a time to wake a feller, but I'll be right out."

But the moment he saw her frightened face in the light of the lamp he had lit he knew that this was no jesting matter.

"Alice—she's gone!" Minna sobbed an answer to his quick demand to know what had happened. "That awful ape carried her off!"

Don took charge efficiently after that. As soon as he had heard her story he began a search of the other rooms on the sleeping floor. Professor Kincaid's was empty, the bed undisturbed, but August Gebhardt was asleep. He got dressed immediately and joined them.

There was no sign of Alice or anyone else in the main building, but there was a light burning in the laboratory. When the searchers got there they found the professor writing at his desk, surrounded by mounds of books.

"Alice gone!" he cried as soon as they had told him what had happened. "But how? What could have taken her—and how could it have gotten in and out of the house? I don't have to tell you that Obo and Dora were here in their cage all night, just as you see them now. But what sort of frightful creature can this be?"

The gorillas were asleep in their cage, and Minna had no doubt that they had been there all night, just as he claimed—and yet there was something furtive about the professor's manner. When she caught his eyes she was sure that she detected guilty knowledge in them. Perhaps not guilt so much as fear. That was it—fear. He was terribly afraid of something that he would not even mention.

But what? If he knew that his steps were innocent what had he to fear? Minna tried to be obtuse, tried to ignore the answer that was clamoring for recognition but it would not be denied.

Kincaid was terrified because he thought that Hartley, his son, might be the guilty

killer! There, she had admitted it to herself. And with the admission came damning questions. Where was Hartley now. How was it that his bed was undisturbed? Why wasn't he anywhere in the house or here in the laboratory? Where could he be at this time of night—if he was innocent?

Before she could put one of those questions into words the answer came through the laboratory door in the person of Hartley himself. But the sight of him sent icy fingers of horror clutching at Minna's heart. His clothing was dirty and torn, there were scratches on his face, and one hand was covered with blood!

"Hello! What's up?" he grinned, as he dabbed at his bleeding palm with a blood-soaked handkerchief.

"Where—were—you?" Toneless and dead the words forced themselves from Minna's lips.

"Looks as if I'd been in a war, don't I?" he laughed. "Well, don't be so alarmed; it's nothing serious. I climbed up to the summit of the hill in back of the house—the view from up there is great in the moonlight—and I took a spill on the way down. Almost broke my neck, but all I actually got out of it was a few scratches."

Minna watched his face and hope sickened and died within her. His story didn't ring true. She couldn't believe him, though she wanted to pin her faith to his every word more than she had ever wanted anything in her life!

They searched the house for Alice after that, but Minna knew with hopeless certainty that it was a useless formality. Alice would not be found in the building. No, she would not be found until the monster was finished with her and ready to discard her poor, mangled body.

At the rear of the building they routed Mandy Goss out of her bed to join the hunt, despite her acrid comments about letting a person get some sleep when there

was a lot of extra work heaped on her. Corby got into his clothes, too, and trailed around after them like a big, lumbering dog—or like a dumb calf, as Gebhardt called him as he callously cuffed the pop-eyed yokel out of his way.

The search was futile, as Minna knew it would be, and there was nothing left but to give it up for the night. Sleep seemed impossible for her any more that night, but when it did come it claimed her completely. When she opened her eyes it was broad daylight.

Alice's clothes, arranged with pathetic neatness on the chair at the bedside, stabbed at her heart the moment she saw them, and the full horror of the night before flashed back to her. With it came a reminder of the questions she had determined to put to Hartley.

The other doors on the upper hallway were open as she stepped out of her room; evidently the others were already awake and had gone downstairs. But there was a sound in Hartley's room, and she started toward the open door.

It wasn't Hartley, but Mandy straightening up the room. Minna turned away disappointedly—and then stopped and looked back. Mandy was standing before a closet door, rattling it and tugging at the knob, while her ugly face was screwed up into a scowl.

"—have mighty important secrets to keep from a body all of a sudden," Minna heard her mutter as she gave the door a final yank and then whirled away from it disdainfully.

Secrets in Hartley's closet? According to that it was not customary for him to leave it locked. Then why—now?

Hardly knowing why she did so, Minna slipped back into her own room and waited there until Mandy was finished with her work and went down the hall to the next room. Then, when the way was clear, she walked quietly to Hartley's door and stepped inside.

The closet door was still locked, but perhaps the key had dropped out onto the floor. It hadn't—but in the pocket of Hartley's bathrobe she found it.

The metal seemed to burn her fingers as she lifted it out, and she called herself a despicable sneak—but she must know why that closet door was locked.

"It's the least I can do for Alice," she told herself as she turned the key in the lock.

What she expected to find behind that locked door she had no idea—but what she saw there sent her staggering back across the room, her mouth agape and her eyes wide with horror!

Wadded up in the corner of the closet was a dark mass which she recognized instantly. A monkey skin, complete with an ugly, snarling head! A monkey skin that was still matted with gummy blood—Alice's blood!

"O God! O God!" she whispered over and over as she stared at that awful hide and as her numb mind tried to grasp what its being there meant.

Hartley the masquerader who had used that skin to commit unthinkable crimes! Hartley—part ape, part man—slipping back periodically into the animal kingdom and using this horrible disguise to satisfy his bestial appetites.

Somehow she locked that door and put the key back in his pocket. In a daze, not knowing where to turn, she went downstairs to breakfast. The very thought of food was abhorrent to her, but Gebhardt was at the table and quickly recognized her condition.

"What you need is a strong cup of coffee," he prescribed. "That will help you get yourself in hand." And then, when she had drained the cup Mandy brought for her, he leaned forward and asked, "Now—is there anything I can do for you? Anything you want to tell me—or ask me?"

There were many things—not that she

wanted to ask, but that she *had* to ask him.

"Yes," she said dully. "Tell me—is it possible that there could be such a creature—as you insinuated Hartley might be?"

"Entirely possible." His voice was gentle and sympathetic. "If you will come with me I'll prove it to you."

Unresisting, she let him lead her into the library, seat her in an easy chair. Then he took down two thick volumes from the crowded shelves. Scientific volumes from which he read passages aloud to her. Those volumes spoke of hellish things—of savage women who had mated with apes—of the hybrid offspring that had resulted. Some of those misfit creatures had lived for years, and one of the volumes stated that it was possible that others that had been lost in the jungle, turned completely beast.

"So you see it is entirely possible," Gebhardt finished his reading. "There is no reason, either, why a strong, superior type of human female mated with an ape should not produce an offspring in which the ape characteristics of the father would be entirely lost—outwardly, anyway. But, of course, there is no telling when such a creature would revert to type and become, for a period of time, all ape. And there is no guarantee that a woman marrying such a creature would not give birth to full-fledged apes—throwbacks to the paternal grandparent."

Minna's face was white, blank, but her tortured mind was writhing in agony. That was what the dying girl in the shack had meant! The father of her child had not been a monkey to her eyes. He had looked like a human being, but the result of their union was the terrible monstrosity Minna had seen born!

And the father of that child was—

From a drawer of his desk Gebhardt had drawn a faded diary which he held out before her.

"Do you recognize this handwriting?" he asked. "It is Professor Kincaid's. The items, you will notice, begin in 1910, the year Hartley was born."

And then he began to read—an account that seared into Minna's brain as if the letters of each word were printed there with vitriol. That account recorded the birth of a male child whose mother was a white woman—her mate a gorilla! For three years that shocking chronicle followed the infant's development, day by day—until Minna raised her trembling hands as if to shut the thing from her mind.

"I do not know definitely that this is a record of Hartley's birth and infancy," Gebhardt concluded, "but certainly you should know more about him before you marry him. If I were you—"

That was where Hartley interrupted them as he entered the study. His face was grave and worried as he turned to Minna.

"What could have happened to Alice is a complete mystery," he told her. "We have searched the grounds and the entire neighborhood and there isn't the slightest trace of her anywhere. It seems queer to give up the search—but there isn't anything more we can do. Nothing but wait until we see what happens. Dad is anxious to complete the experiment he's working on, so I suppose I might as well get it over with."

"I want to talk to you a few minutes before you go, Hartley," Minna summoned up courage to say, and she was thankful that Gebhardt tactfully left the room. "It seems odd, here in your home, that there is no picture or reminder of your mother. You have never told me anything about her, Hartley!"

He frowned and she saw that he was uncomfortable.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "I know very little about her. My mother is a subject on which Dad has never been willing to speak. So far as I have been

able to gather, she was a very beautiful woman and she died when I was very young. Dad was heartbroken and became pretty much a recluse. He moved out here in the wilderness to lose himself in his work and forget the pain in his heart.

"I believe there was a woman who took care of me for a while, but that evidently didn't work out, for my earliest recollections are of being raised in a private school. I must have been three or four then. After my early schooling was over I came here to live with father—and the apes. I've been with them so much since then that I know them a lot better than I've ever known any woman but you."

At the age of three was when that dairy of the ape-child ended! Minna shivered inwardly and tried not to let him see the horror that gripped her until the palms of her hands were wet with perspiration. She picked up a cigarette from the desk and held it to her lips expectantly, but Hartley seemed not to notice.

"The lady wants a light," she laughed. "Where's your lighter?"

Again he was uncomfortable. She noticed that he stalled and stammered embarrassedly.

"I seem to have mislaid it," he confessed at last. "Had it a day or so ago, but it isn't here now. I'm pretty sure I know where I left it."

Minna wanted to give it to him, to tell him that she knew well enough where he had left it; wanted to tell him that she knew all about that bloody disguise locked away upstairs in his closet—but she couldn't. She had to get out of that room, out of the house, out into the air where it was clean and fresh.

Unconsciously her footsteps led to the rear of the building, past the laboratory and on up the hill behind it. Not until she was halfway up the slope did she admit to herself why she was there. She was

going up to the top, to the spot where Hartley claimed he had been when Alice disappeared last night.

She wanted to see for herself if there was any sign of his having fallen. If he really had been up there on the summit—if there was a scar on the earth where he slipped and fell—then there might still be an explanation for the damning circumstances that were closing in tighter and tighter around him.

The slim hope beckoned to her, lured her on until she was panting from her eager exertions. The summit was just ahead there—an open space beneath a lordly pine—a few yards more.

And then her legs became leaden weights that clung to the ground as if molded there, while her bulging eyes stared up at that pine—at the bare stretch of ground beneath it. There was something white there—something ghastly white, and smeared with brownish red, that sprawled in the sunshine at the foot of the tree.

She knew what that white thing was.

It took an age to climb those last few yards, and with every relentless step the sight that met her eyes became more terrifying. Alice, stretched out there on the ground, stark and cold, her naked body stained and smeared with her own blood! Her face had been mercilessly beaten until it was hardly recognizable; her throat ripped to shreds by savage claws!

And there, beside her, lay the tattered remnants of the lacy nightgown the beast had torn from her body in his feverish lust!

Tears would not come as Minna stood looking down at that appalling sight. It seemed they were dried up within her—lost in the crumbling wreckage of her hopes, her plans, her whole world, as it came tumbling down in chaos around her.

CHAPTER FIVE

Foul Clutches

AS MINNA staggered blindly down that hill she wanted more than anything else to get away, as far away as possible, from that awful place and all it contained. The place was evil, wicked, damned by the unholy experiments Professor Kincaid had performed there in the profaned name of science. It terrified her, made her feel as if she were in a trap that was slowly but surely closing in around her.

Perhaps she would be the next victim to feel those savage paws tearing at her, to die abominably in the clutch of those hairy arms—and to lie, naked and mutilated in the light of the rising sun!

Panic routed her caution, sent her down the hill in headlong, mad flight, until she was no longer able to stop herself. Straight ahead of her was the laboratory, Kincaid's infernal workshop. She tried to steer away from it but couldn't. Careening and half falling, she rushed toward it, just as a figure stepped away from the side of the building and directly in her path.

It was August Gebhardt. He set himself and caught her, pulled her to her feet as she would have pitched to the ground.

"I found Alice!" she gasped when she regained her breath. "Up there on the hill—dead! Oh, God—it was horrible! Let me get away from here—please!"

"Another," Gebhardt clipped grimly, and his lips compressed into a hard, white line. "Now maybe you will believe me. I have been looking for you—to show you something that will open your eyes."

"No! No!" Minna protested as she tried to tear away from him, but his fingers were tightly closed around her wrist.

"It will take only a few minutes," he insisted, "and then you can go—knowing what it is you are running away from. Quiet now!"

Firmly he led her to the side of the laboratory building, to where a clump of bushes grew close to one of the windows. From the shelter of the bushes they could see into the room, and the window had been propped up a few inches so that they could hear.

Minna stopped trying to break away when she caught a glimpse of what was going on inside. Hartley was sitting in an easy chair in the middle of the big room, and the gorillas, Obo and Dora, out of their cage, were hovering around him, patting him, peering into his face and moving their lips as if they were trying to talk to him.

"Fine—excellent!" came from the other side of the laboratory, where Professor Kincaid was sitting at his desk, watching intently and jotting down notes on the paper before him. "Try that again, Hartley."

Hartley laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"A, B, C, tumble-down," he sang to them very slowly and deliberately; "cat's in the cupboard and can't see me. Now then. A—B—C—"

The gorillas watched every movement of his lips, and now their mouths were open and sounds were coming from them. Not the actual letters and words that he had spoken, but sounds at least resembling them. It was eery, listening to those huge apes on the verge of speech—and the garbled version of the simple nursery rhyme sent cold chills down Minna's spine.

"Good girl, Dora," Hartley congratulated one of the beasts, and then made queer animal sounds that brought what was unmistakably a gratified smile to the creature's ugly face.

Dora slipped her long arm around him and petted him while she leaned over his chair and tried to repeat the jingle for him.

"Excellent!" Kincaid exulted again. "There never has been anyone with such

influence over gorillas. You are able to bring them closer to the borderline between animal and human than has ever been accomplished!"

"Yes," Hartley grinned, "and when I spend a couple hours with them like this I feel as if I am pretty close to the borderline myself. You'll make a confounded ape of me—have me loping around on all fours—if you don't finish up this experiment mighty soon."

Minna could stand no more. Hysterical screams were crowding up into her throat, ready to burst forth at any moment. Suddenly she twisted her wrist free from Gebhardt's grip and darted out of the bushes, ran frantically toward the residence. She must find Don Porter; he would take her away before her straining nerves snapped entirely.

Don was in front of the house, pacing the ground nervously and watching the surrounding hills as if he expected to see Alice appear on the edge of the woods at any moment. He looked up with startled concern when he caught sight of Minna's wild eyes and terrified face. Then she was in his arms, sobbing out her story.

"I found Alice!" she gasped. "We can't do anything more for her, Don. She's dead. And we'll all be with her if we don't get away from this place. Please, Don, let me get in the car now and drive away—as far away as we can get. Please, Don!"

Porter was puzzled, but he saw the unmistakable signs of hysteria.

"All right, we'll go," he soothed her; "but how about Hartley?"

He was even more amazed by the mingled dread and agony that flamed in her wide eyes.

"He's—he's part of it, Don," she whispered. "I can't tell you any more now. Please get me away."

Doubtfully he led the way around the side of the house to the garage. The moment he swung back the rolling door he knew that something was wrong. The

air was heavy with gasoline fumes. One glance beneath his car told him the answer: nail holes had been punched into the bottom of the gasoline tank and every drop of fuel had run out onto the floor. Hartley's car, the only other in the garage, was in the same condition, drained and useless.

Minna saw those pools on the floor and understood what they meant before he could say a word. She should have known it would not be so easy to escape; the trap was too carefully prepared, and it was closing in on her relentlessly!

Fearfully she glanced out of the garage, toward the house, half expecting to see a huge, hairy monster bearing down on her. Instead she looked straight into the cold, malignant eyes of Mandy Goss, fixed on them with hostile intensity, and the effect was as chilling as if the beast itself had been watching them.

"Well, that means we don't leave—unless we walk," Don said grimly as he started away from the useless car, "and before we start doing that I'm going up that hill for Alice's body!"

Minna dreaded another sight of that pitiful corpse, but she did not dare to remain at the house alone. Hartley, Gebhardt, and professor or the prowling monster—any of them might find her there; and one terrified her as much as another. Going back up the hill she would at least have Don to protect her.

As they climbed she tried, haltingly, to explain the horrible fear that hung over her—to explain what Gebhardt had insinuated, and what she had seen with her own eyes. But she could see that Don looked at her queerly, sympathetically; that he considered her half out of her mind from fright.

She could not blame him for that. It did sound insane—a perfectly normal man becoming a monkey! But with her own lips she had heard Hartley say that often he felt close to the borderline that sepa-

rates mankind from the animal kingdom. That was when he was conscious of what he was doing. But what about those times when he actually slipped over the line and became a beast? Then he would not know what he was doing—would be no more responsible for his horrible deeds than the ape that had been his father!

They were halfway to the top of the hill when Minna froze in her tracks and turned a blanched face to Don. There it was again—Hartley's voice, farther down the slope, calling her name!

For a moment it paralyzed her, rang in her ears like the knell of doom. Then she grabbed Don's arm and urged him up the brushy trail with greater speed.

"Please don't answer, Don!" she begged, as she cast frightened glances behind her.

"Minna!" There it was again. Nearer now. He was coming after her, catching up with her.

Minna scrambled through the brush as long as she dared; until his voice seemed almost at their heels. Then she dragged Don down beside her into the shelter of a thick clump of bushes.

She could hear his footsteps now, hear him snapping twigs, scuffing stones out of his way. Nearer and nearer. Were his senses more acute than theirs, she wondered? Would animal instinct lead him straight to their hiding place?

Her heart pounded so loudly that she was sure he would hear it. Desperately she poised for a mad flight if he broke in upon them. Nearer—nearer. Now he must be only a few yards away! And then she knew that he had passed; his voice came back to her from above them, and the noise of his progress became fainter.

Not until it had died out altogether would she let Don start up again. Cautiously, watching on all sides of them, they climbed steadily without catching sight of him—and then they came to the

bare stretch from which they could get a clear view of the hilltop.

There, at the foot of the pine, Alice's nude body lay as Minna had left it, but now a man was bending over it.

"That's Gebhardt," Don identified him immediately. "What's he doing—"

Before he could finish his question his eyes popped wide and he stared open-mouthed up the slope. From the lowest limb of the pine a huge black body swung down and then dropped—to land on all fours on Gebhardt's back!

The German went down, flat on the ground, the wind knocked out of him, and the black furry was all over him, pounding and tearing at him with clawing paws. Before he could stagger to his feet the great arms closed around him and held him helpless, dragged him to his feet, seized him by the throat and shook him like a limp doll.

The thing took only seconds. Before Minna had stifled her first gasp of surprise Gebhardt screamed horribly—and the blood spurted from his torn throat while the huge ape snarled and voiced its triumph in weird animal noises.

Even after his head fell back limply, the ape tore and ripped at him, shredding his throat, mangling his face, beating and pounding at him with savage fury. That exhibition of bestial rage was appalling—nauseating. Minna felt weak and sick.

And then she saw that Don was racing up the hill, crazily intent on trying to save the professor's assistant!

With a shout he launched himself at the gorilla—but the huge monster dropped the crimson horror that had been Gebhardt and lunged straight at his new opponent. The black fist swung up from the ground and smashed into Don's face with sickening force. Somehow he managed to stand up under that blow, but he was tottering — staggering backward — his arms dropping helplessly at his sides. And the monster was lunging at him again!

Minna screamed shrilly, wildly, and for a fraction of a second the ape hesitated, peered down the slope to where she crouched. Then one hairy arm swung around in a black arc and caught Don a backhand blow on the side of the head that lifted him off his feet and sent him crashing into a clump of scrub oak.

Even before his body hit the ground the ape was loping down the slope, straight at Minna!

With a terrified shriek she whirled on legs that threatened to collapse beneath her at any moment. It was no use; she knew that she could never outrun the creature. It was coming toward her with great, ground-covering strides. And then—great God in heaven—it called her name!

Not distinctly, not clearly—but plainly enough so that she could not mistake it. Minna! The way those gorillas down in the laboratory might have pronounced it after Hartley!

Was this thing one of the professor's gorillas? But they could not have recognized her; would not have known her name, even if they could have spoken it! Then—then it must be Hartley—slipped across the line and become a savage beast—but still able to recognize her and call to her with the half-human utterance of the gorilla that he had become!

Minna's brain reeled under that fearful realization, and the delicate balance that separates rationality from insanity was upset, tumbled helter-skelter. She was no longer sane as she ran down that hill with strength that had never been hers before. There was room for only one thought in her mind; she must run—run—run.

Behind her she could hear the ape pounding along after her, and new energy enabled her to put on a fresh burst of speed. Had she been sane she would have fallen a dozen times in that mad flight;

she would have turned an ankle, would have crashed into a tree, would have slipped and cracked her head open on a stone. But now her subconsciousness protected her like a guardian angel. She must run—run—run. Somehow she must keep ahead of that frightful creature crashing along in her rear!

Now she was on the path leading directly to the buildings below. Ahead of her was the laboratory—and bedlam was raging in there. From the open door came a hoarse scream—a groan of agony. But she hardly heard—and there was no time to turn away; the creature was almost upon her.

Without a glance at the laboratory she ran past, reached the main building, dashed inside and flung the door shut behind her. The key had hardly turned in the lock before a heavy body thudded against the panels with such force that the door trembled.

Run—run—run! Minna sped up the stairs—just as a downstairs window crashed. Now where to? Her room—it was the only haven she knew. She could hear the creature starting up the stairs as she slammed the door behind her and locked it.

But that door would never hold against the ape's tremendous strength! There was only one hiding place in the room—the closet. And there wasn't a second to lose; the monster was pounding at the door. Minna pulled the key out of the closet door lock, slipped inside and locked it after her. Perhaps if she was very quiet—if she could muffle the sobbing gasps of her panting breath—

The outer door fell in with a crash—and the monster was at the closet, tugging at the door. A chair splintered against it, smashed a hole through one of the light panels. A hairy black paw came through the aperture, grabbed the frame of the door and pulled. The wood creaked, splin-

tered—and the door tumbled out in wreckage.

In the doorway loomed the hideous ape, blood splashed over its torso, dripping from its crimsoned arms. Minna tried not to look at it, tried to cover her face with her hands as she cowered back against the wall; but the monster grabbed her wrist and dragged her out into the room, held her tight against its bloodstained breast.

Close up against the creature she could see, now, that it was not actually an ape but a man masquerading in a gorilla's skin. The eyes that glared at her out of the snarling mask of a face were blue eyes—blue eyes like Hartley's!

Desperately Minna thrust her hands against the ugly mask and tried to push it away from her, beat at it with her fists, tore at it.

"Let me go! Let me go!!" she shrieked as she tried to wriggle out of the hairy arms that encircled her.

One arm released her; she was almost free—and then the black fist crashed down on her head like a club. A great ball of fire seemed to burst in her brain, and in its dazzling glare the world slipped out from under her.

CHAPTER SIX

Hate Feeds

THAT light was still blazing above her when her brain began to function again. It hurt her eyes, made them blink as she looked up into it—and then she discovered that she was staring up into a lighted lamp that hung from the roof of a cave. She was lying on the floor, a hard stone floor, and her aching wrists and ankles were tied so securely that she could not even move them.

There seemed to be some crude, home-made furniture in the place—benches and a table. Then she saw that she was not alone. Sitting tied to a bench on the other

side of the cave was Professor Kincaid, looking ghastly pale and obviously in great mental anguish, and the blood-spattered ape was standing beside him.

Minna groaned with the combined pain of her throbbing head and her burning wrists and ankles. The murderous creature caught the sound and wheeled to face her—and her eyes stared past him unbelievably. Then her heart leaped with wild relief and delirious exultation.

The fiend beneath that gorilla-skin disguise was not Martley—for Hartley was sitting there on the bench beside his father, tied up and helpless! There was a smear of blood on his forehead and his eyes were haggard as they met her gaze, but that did not matter. He was not the atrocious killer! He was not a bloodthirsty beast—a half-ape in human form!

But there was an ape there in the cave; not this disguised fiend but a real simian. She heard it snarl in rage, heard it pacing up and down fretfully, and then, as her eyes became more accustomed to the semi-darkness of the place, she saw that one end of the cave was barred off into a cage. Behind those bars a real gorilla, a monster even larger than the professor's apes, was swaying back and forth while its red eyes fairly glowed with fury.

"Jest take it easy, pet," Mandy Goss's harsh, cracked voice crooned to the beast. "Your time's a-comin' right soon now."

With a throaty chuckle she turned from the cage and came, grinning, into the light. Her shrewish face was diabolical in its gloating hatred as she strode from one to the other of her captives and glared down at them. Then she stopped in front of the professor and spat full in his face, while her evil features were suffused with unholy triumph.

"What—what is the meaning of this, Mandy?" Kincaid gasped, as he stared up into her frenzied face.

"So you don't know me, eh?" the hag grinned malevolently. "After all these

years I'm still jest Mandy Goss to you. You're a right smart man when it comes to monkey critters, Professor, but you don't know much about humans. You were so busy fussin' around with your beasts that you didn't have time to recognize the mother of Nonnie Blake. Yes, Nonnie Blake, the gal you hired to take care of that brat of yours when you came out to these parts! The gal you killed with your dirty experiments!" Her rage was mounting until now she was leaning over the professor and howling into his set face. "The gal you mated with a monkey and then threw out of your house when she was goin' to have a baby!"

Silence, heavy and pregnant with ghastly tragedy, hung over the cave after she had flung her horrible charge. Minna stared at the professor, while little trickles of horror wriggled through her. Could it be possible that he had done such a foul, inhuman thing? Was that the guilty knowledge she had thought she detected in his eyes?

His lips were working, she saw, but it was long moments before he managed to speak.

"Mandy," his low voice came at last, "if I had only known that was what you thought— The thing is preposterous. No beast was ever near Nonnie. I never allowed her in the laboratory—but I did come upon her in an illicit affair with a wandering gypsy. When I discovered that she was pregnant I told her she would have to go. If she told you anything else, she lied to protect herself."

"All right enough to call a deal gal a liar!" Mandy brushed aside his explanation scornfully. "She can't answer for herself. But I can—and her son can! For years I've been slavin' for you, hatin' the ground you walked on, hopin' that every mouthful of vittles I cooked for you would choke you—but I've been waitin' an' plannin' all the while. And now, my dear pro-

fessor, my time—my time an' Nonnie's time—has come at last!"

The infuriated woman's voice had risen until it was a harsh shriek, punctuated with the stamping of her feet and the waving of her gnarled hands. She had nursed her bitter hatred so long that her mind was deranged, and now that she was about to taste her revenge she could hardly contain herself.

"Now you'll pay!" she howled gleefully. "Pay the way I paid! My only regret is that you haven't a daughter of your own who can be treated the way my Nonnie was. But we'll make out the best we can. This gal who was goin' to be your daughter-in-law will do as well, I expect—an' after Tana's finished with her, he'll take care of you and your son."

"Tana!!" The professor squinted his weak eyes toward the cage and then nodded his head. "So that's what became of Tana; you had him here. I've been worried about him ever since he escaped from the laboratory years ago."

"Ever since I turned him loose an' led him here, you mean," Mandy gloated. "Gettin' Tana was jest the first step in my plan to settle the account with you. Diggin' up Tana's mate, after she died on you, an' skinnin' her was the second."

"Every time I heard of one of those grisly killings I was sure it was Tana's doing," the professor went on as if he had not heard her, "but I did not dare to mention my suspicion for fear the enraged natives would kill off my other animals and drive me out of the hills. I lived in constant dread of what the creature might do."

"You'll see what he does soon enough," Mandy chuckled as she started back toward the cage. "Corby, get that gal ready for Tana."

So the fiend in that bloody gorilla-skin disguise was Corby, the old woman's vacuous-faced grandson! That was what poor Bess Robely had meant in her delir-

ious raving; the father of her child wore an ape's skin but was a human being! And the infant had been no monkey but one of Nature's horrible blunders, a Mongolian idiot!

Minna tried frantically to wriggle away from the repulsive fiend, but he reached over and picked her up as if she had been a doll. Then he dragged her to the center of the cave and slashed the ropes around her wrists and ankles with a bloodstained knife. Before she could move her numb hands he grabbed her right wrist and snapped a handcuff around it. From the cuff a short length of heavy chain led to an iron ring that was bolted into the rock floor.

Hopelessly Minna tried to struggle with him, to fight him off, but he knocked her off her feet with one slap of his black fist, and then held her down while he tore the clothing from her body—while his lusting eyes gloated over her nakedness until Mandy ordered him out of the way.

Minna cowered on the floor and watched the cage with fascinated eyes. The gorilla was working himself into a feverish rage, tearing up and down the barred enclosure, but never taking his eyes off her. Sniveling animal noises came from his throat and his red eyes flamed with desire. Once he got out of that cage—

Horror had numbed her brain, had frozen her body so that her flesh felt like ice. There was nothing she could do—nothing anyone could do. Hartley and the professor were shouting threats, pleas, were calling wildly for help; but Mandy only laughed and jeered at them.

"Go on and holler," she taunted. "Even if anybody heard you they would not come near the place. I've worked on them—built up their fear and hate—so that they wouldn't move a finger to drag you back from the edge of hell"

There was nothing anyone could do, but Hartley yelled all the louder, as if to scare the gorilla by the volume of noise.

But that would not work. Mandy had unlocked the door, and the creature rushed toward it. Minna wanted to close her eyes, to hide from the sight of him rushing toward her. Already she could feel herself in his arms—could feel his black paws tearing at her soft flesh! But her eyes would not close. She had to watch—had to stare unblinkingly as the monster lunged out of the cage!

"There she is, Tana!" Mandy Goss laughed. "Go an' take your bride—jest the way you had Nonnie!"

Deliberately the gorilla loped forward on all fours. Then he was right above her, crouching on his haunches, looking down at her with flaming eyes. One black paw reached out and touched her naked side tentatively.

Minna wanted to scream, to shriek—but not a sound would come from her parched throat. She wanted to shrink away, to tear her hand out of the manacle that held her—but not a muscle would move. She lay there like an ivory statue while the black fingers ran exploringly over her flinching body.

This was the preliminary torture of Purgatory, but it would be very short, she told herself with a strange, detached calmness; then would come fiery hell itself—and after that the sweet relief of death. It would all be over in a few minutes; just a few minutes of excruciating, quivering agony, and then—

Was she mad, entirely? Was her delirious brain conjuring up phantoms to add to her torment, peopling the cave with gorillas? There, in the entrance, was another one—and behind it still another!

But they were not creatures of her imagination! Hartley saw them, too! For a moment he stopped tugging and tearing at the ropes that bound him to the bench, and gaped at the cave entrance. Then new hope dawned in his sweat-streaked face. He recognized them!

"Dora! Obo!" he called out to them.

"Come, Dora! Come, Obo! Come here!"

The gorillas seemed uncertain; hesitated, not knowing just what to do—and Hartley "talked" to them in the way they had come to understand. A weird medley of sounds—clicks, whines, grunts and huffs—came from his lips. And the apes understood!

With an angry roar they loped into the cave. Tana was quick to sense their challenge. He turned from Minna's alluring white body and leaped to meet them.

In the next moment three hairy bodies were locked in a tumbling ball of savage fury. Long arms flailed and pounded, prehensile feet ripped and tore, and gleaming teeth bit and slashed. The cave was filled with the fury of their struggle, and Minna expected that at any moment they would roll on top of her and grind the life out of her beneath their straining bodies.

But theirs was not the only primeval passion unleashed in that cave. When Mandy Goss saw her long-cherished revenge slipping from her grasp she became a shrieking fury. With bony fingers curled into talons she threw herself at the professor and raked his defenseless face.

Minna stared in horror, but at that moment Hartley tore his wrists free and drove his fist into the hag's face. Before she could return to the attack he had untied his feet and sprang up from the bench. With one arm he knocked Mandy out of the way—sent her sprawling, dazed into the middle of the cave—and then he closed with Corby, the fake gorilla, who came rushing at him.

Back and forth the length of the cave they battered and pounded at each other, but Corby's strength was prodigious. Minna watched fearfully, saw unmistakably that Hartley was weakening. Then Corby got his long, hair-covered arms around his opponent's waist and lifted him bodily off the floor.

For a moment they traded blows, Corby using only one arm while the other pressed

tighter and tighter around Hartley, squeezing the breath out of him. Then they pitched to the floor and Hartley was underneath. Desperately he tried to keep up the fight, but he was weakening—weakening—

Out of the corner of her eye Minna saw Mandy Goss get to her knees. She was creeping—making her way toward where Corby had dropped the knife with which he had cut Minna's bonds. Once the old woman got her hands on that knife she would plunge it into Hartley's breast!

But before she could reach it she had to pass within Minna's reach!

Every nerve taut, the girl waited until exactly the right second. Then she threw herself the full length of the chain—and her arms tightened around Mandy's legs, dragged her back into the center of the cave and closed in a death grip around the the hag's arms. Mandy raved and cursed, but those white arms held her helpless with the strength of utter desperation.

Minna hardly dared to take her eyes from her captive, but when she did flash a glance at Hartley sickening fear enveloped her. His arms were futilely trying to ward off Corby's clutching fingers—but the ape talons were already wet with blood, and they darted back again and again to his torn throat!

"Dora!" Hartley gasped through puffed, battered lips. "Come, Dora!"

And the almost human gorilla heard his cry, heard and left it to her mate to finish the half-dead Tana. Noiselessly she glided across the cave and loomed up over the struggling men. One black paw reached down and grabbed Corby's shoulder, to yank him backward; the other closed around his throat, and Corby died the way he had killed his helpless victims, a yell of terror strangling in the blood-clogged

throat that was being torn from his body!

The moment Hartley was free he sprang to Mandy Goss and took her out of Minna's arms. He was just finishing tying her with the ropes that had been around his own arms and legs when Don Porter crawled into the cave entrance.

"Good work," he congratulated and managed a painful grin. "Just about in time, too; that posse is down at the house again. They're coming this way now and they mean business this time."

"Don!" Minna cried. "Where did you come from? I thought that monster—Corby—killed you when he murdered Gebhardt."

"That's what he thought, too," Don nodded. "He left me lying up there in the bushes while he chased you. But I'm a pretty tough bird to kill. I couldn't make much speed in the condition I was in, but I managed to crawl down the hill. When I heard Hartley and the professor yelling for help I figured they were in a pretty bad way for reenforcements. I wasn't worth a damn myself, but I knew Hartley has a pretty good drag with those gorillas, so I crawled into the laboratory and turned them loose. They followed the sound of his voice—and you know the rest of it."

"Good man," Hartley clipped. "We won't forget it, Don." Then he turned to where Minna huddled, blushing, still chained to the floor. "And now, before those hill-billies come swarming in here to start Mandy on her way to the electric chair, we've got to get some clothes on you, darling."

But even before he attended to that he gathered her in his eager arms and covered her trembling lips with a fervid kiss—a kiss which she returned joyously and thankfully, without even a trace of a terrifying reservation.

THE END