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BUS LINE for the DEAD

By Otis Cameron



Long
Horror
Novel!

The bus which picked up Nell Mansfield had come from the nether-most regions of hell! Its passengers were ghastly, undead things stinking of decay; its destination was the last stop in horror—a carnival of things spawned from the grave and thirsting for her blood!



CHAPTER ONE

The Bus From Doom

THE BUS was not due yet. Nell Mansfield knew that even as she stepped out into the early darkness of the autumn



evening. The train from the city had pulled in at five-fifty, and the Interurban Bus braked like clockwork to a ponderous halt before the railroad station at six sharp every day. Never a minute early, never a minute late. In fact, the valley folk set their timepieces by its roaring passage along the concrete highway. Gus, the driver, hadn't let them down yet.

It was not cold, yet Nell felt herself shivering through her brown tweed coat. The familiar valley seemed subtly charged with eerie menace, the rampart of hills, that edged it, glowered down upon her. Her nerves were decidedly on edge, she told herself stormily. They had lived here in Pine Mills for two years now—she and Sid—Dr. Sidney Mansfield to his patients—and nothing out of the ordinary had ever happened. But now . . .

She laughed shortly at her newly acquired fears, but the laugh was weak and unconvincing. She shrank from its feeble sound as it punctured the still night air. She was alone, a slender, solitary figure at the edge of the pale white glimmer of concrete. No one had descended with her at this little suburban station. The train had gone on, with many snortings and pounding of wheels, to the last stop in the heart of Pine Mills. The wooden station building was dark and deserted—the sleepy agent invariably went home at half past five. Even the broad highway itself, curving around the outermost bend past the little community of homes where she and Sid and all the professional and substantial business people of Pine Mills lived, was silent, deserted.

Nell stared down at her wrist watch in an agony of unreasoning impatience. Good God! Only five minutes had passed since she had descended from the train. It seemed an eternity already. Five more minutes to go! Five more minutes before the bus would roll smoothly down the road, pull to a stop before her. Already

she savored the cheery greeting of Gus, the driver, and the eager, loving welcome of Sid. Dear Sid! Her heart did queer little flutters at the thought of him. After two years of marriage she loved him more devotedly than ever. There was no professional dourness about his lithe, boyish face—an eager little smile always crinkled up his lips and brought answering grins to the drawn faces of even those of his patients who were the most critically ill.

And, as always, there would be others on the bus—men of Pine Mills who invariably caught the five-fifty bus out of town, passed the railroad station at six sharp, and were deposited into the bosoms of their families just as invariably at six-fifteen. A ritual of routine, a domestic saga, that went on, day in, day out, ever since Sid had opened his office in Pine Mills.

But tonight something shrieked within Nell for the bus to hurry, to anticipate its immemorial schedule. For the first time in her life she was afraid. That was why she had fled from her home that morning, hurried into the city to spend the day. She had not told Sid about it, for she had been ashamed of the quivers of fear that continued to chill her flesh.

But now, as she waited for the bus, and the comforting presence of her husband, she was determined to tell him. Let him laugh, call her a silly little goose. . . . This morning's episode had been the last straw.

THEIR house was the farthestmost of the little community. It stood off by itself, for she and Sid had both liked the idea of privacy, of seclusion. But some unseen, lurking menace had broken into the security of that seclusion. . . .

For almost a week now, she had heard queer noises at night, stealthy rustlings through the massed flowering bushes that bordered their house. Twice she had compelled Sid to get up, to search the grounds. There had been nothing, no sign of any-

thing that could have disturbed the hushed stillness of the night. But that morning, in the early dawn, just after Sid had grunted out of bed and departed on a call, with mock imprecations on such folk as were inconsiderate enough to take suddenly sick when all good people should have been fast asleep, an indistinct form had bulked mistily at the window. Before she could cry out, it was gone, but the dull thud of something falling to the floor proved that the intruder had been no distortion of waving branches.

Nell pulled out of her bag the little wooden ring she had found on the floor, and stared at it with wide, frightened eyes. Even as she had done a hundred times in the city, where she had determined not to return to her home alone. The ring burned like a live coal in her fingers; a malign influence seemed to flow from it up her arm, and spread in shuddering waves through her whole body. For the hundredth time she tried to drop it, to cast it far away from her, to flee its cursed hidden meaning. But a power beyond her will contracted her frozen fingers desperately on its cold, yet burning wood, forced it back into her bag.

What dreadful secrets lay intact in that smooth, round band of wood? What warning was it meant to convey, that it had been thrown into her room? What horrors were withheld in that plain, unornamented ring carved out of a strange,

exotic wood? Tonight, she determined desperately, she would tell Sid, show him the thing that had fallen on her floor early that morning, brave his kindly laughter, his talk of mischievous, harmless boys.

A soft roaring on the highway jerked her head up. Far off, down the ribbon of white, from the direction of Pine Mills, twin yellow eyes rushed toward her with catlike fierceness. A dim, huge shape surged forward, like a hunched beast of the mountains, pouncing on its prey. The night fell away from its leaping progress with a thunderous rattle. In less than a minute the bus would be upon her, and Sid. . . .

Gladness leaped in her heart in anticipation of Sid's strong arms, the accustomed faces of their neighbors, and safety from the fears that had pursued her with scorpion whips all that long day in the city. Unconsciously her eye wandered to her wrist. It was a valley tradition to check one's watch against the observatory-like accuracy of the bus. Not that her timepiece was more seconds out of the way. She had compared it with clocks in the city time and again, had balanced it against the train conductor's ponderous instrument.

Her eyes widened. It was three minutes to six. The bus was at least two minutes too early! For a moment dread enveloped her limbs in a sheathing of ice, as it had

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that morning when the curious wooden ring thudded dully to the floor of her bedroom. Then she laughed shakily at herself. Suppose the bus was two minutes ahead of schedule. It was traveling fast, too, faster than Gus usually tooted it along the road. He must have a reason for his hurry. Certainly there was nothing to be alarmed at in that. And there, over the fast rushing vehicle, glittered the lighted oblong sign, *Interurban Bus*. She must get hold of herself, force her nerves back to steadiness.

The bus was not more than a hundred yards away now, yet it slammed along the middle of the highway, wide of the little waiting space on which she stood, without any slackening of speed. It was going to pass her, to hurtle down the retreating ribbon of white. Gus had never done that before. The railroad station was a regular stopping point.

FEAR clogged her limbs. He *must* stop, he *must* pick her up. Sid was on that bus. There wouldn't be another along for an hour. She couldn't bear to be alone here at night. The hills loomed in the background, dark and turbid. The mist was rising slowly from the warm ground, writhing into strange and fearful shapes. The deserted station behind her was sinister with unmoving quietness. The nearest habitation was three miles away. . . .

The wooden ring in her purse seemed suddenly a live thing, pulling her down, down with nightmare weights.

Nell ran desperately out into the middle of the road. Gus *must* stop for her. The rushing headlights enveloped her slender form with a ghastly yellow light. She raised her free hand in thrusting appeal. The bus thundered down upon her like some mythological monster. For one dreadful instant it was a Juggernaut, careening straight for her, unswerving from its course, leaping at her with mad

whimpering whines, to crush her beneath its ponderous tires.

Instinctively she jerked back. What was the matter with Gus? Was he crazy, or blind drunk? The flare of headlamps limned her frightened, staring face, and swung away over the bordering fields. There was a screeching of brakes, the hiss of slithering, burning rubber over rough concrete. The great bus shook with mad vibration, and shuddered reluctantly to a halt some twenty feet ahead of her.

Anger blazed through Nell's veins, died suddenly. There was something queer about that bus. It was two minutes early, an unheard of thing. It had tried to whiz past her, to run her down, even. Its interior was dim, filled with formless figures, not bright with glowing lights as was usual. And the tail light was dark and shadowy, revealing no license plate beneath.

Fear tugged at her heart, sent the blood shuddering through her veins. Her feet froze to the solid cement. Something shrieked in her ears to turn and run, over the fields, into the woods, anywhere, away from that strange, now deathly silent bus. Even the motor had died to a stealthy, sinister purr.

Then the blood that churned around her heart resumed its normal, even flow. The withheld breath expelled from her lungs in an explosive gasp of relief. On the side of the bus nearest her, the third figure from the front, his back to her, was Sid! There was no question about it, even in the dim, shadowy light of the interior. She could not mistake the particular shape of his head. Sid never wore a hat until zero weather was in the offing. He had the dark, curly hair which her fingers loved to rumple.

Yet why did he sit so motionless, un-stirring, face forward, not looking back at the station, without his normal, cheerful wave of greeting? What nonsense was she thinking! The answer was simple. He

did not even know she was there — he thought she was still home, waiting for him with bright, gay smile and a warm cooked meal. Besides, he must be terribly tired. He had been out since dawn, on an emergency call, and then all day in the office. That was why he seemed so queerly slumped.

SHE ran forward now, all else forgotten in the joy of Sid's heartening presence. Even her anger at Gus's strange driving had evaporated, was forgotten. The door next the driver was open, and the step was down. Gus seemed hunched over the wheel, his face shadowed by his peaked hat and the filtering dimness.

But Nell was not thinking of him any more. All her thoughts flew before her to Sid, to his expected surprise at seeing her here. She dropped her coins into the metal box. They made hollow, bonging noises. She flung a breathless "Good evening, Gus!" at the driver. He did not answer or turn his head. His lanky form was an unstirring blob of darkness. But there was a click and a whirl behind her — the steps had folded up and the door had slammed — and there was a hissing sound she never heard before, like the hiss of a striking serpent. A faint odor enveloped her, made her slightly dizzy.

Vague alarm trembled through her frame. Somehow she felt trapped, enclosed irrevocably in a doorless dungeon. She turned with a questioning gesture toward the faceless driver, but a lever ripped through gears, the bus jerked forward in sudden motion, and she was flung staggering through the door into the body of the bus.

It was dim inside, ghastly dim. A single hooded light barely pricked out the seated figures. The strange odor was stronger in here; it pierced her skin with pinpoint of fire. She flung out her hand, caught at the firm edge of a seat, and steadied herself as the bus went rocking and roaring with

insane speed down the smooth highway. The man propped up against the window never turned. His barely discernible face was slanted against the cold, unyielding glass as if he were staring with death-like intensity out at the dark night that fled interminably before them.

But Nell's eyes were riveted only on her husband. She barely saw the others out of the corners of her eyes. Why was he sitting so quietly, swaying only with the motion of the bus? Why did he not lift his head? Why had he not seen her enter?

CHAPTER TWO

First Stop—Hell!

THE LITTLE spot of fear in her bosom grew to a formless lump. It pressed against her heart, her lungs; it froze the marrow in her bones with its icy coldness. A whimpering cry welled in her throat, strangled into silence on her lips. She must not make a scene. It was too silly. The other passengers, dim, unmoving as her husband, would mock secretly at her womanish fright.

Sid was tired, that was all. He had been up since dawn and was probably exhausted from calling on patients all day long.

She forced herself erect, moved her dragging limbs down the narrow aisle. Men sat on either side; only men. The nacreous light retreated from their darkling shapes. She could not distinguish their faces. But no one spoke; no one uttered words of greeting. Only the vibration of the bus, the savage roar of the motor, broke the sinister silence.

She slipped into the seat next her husband with a choked murmur of greeting. But Sid made no response. He sat hunched in the corner, head bowed. She fought back the dreadful fear that twined with octopus-like tentacles around

her heart. There was nothing wrong, she argued with herself. Sid was asleep, nothing more. Poor dear! He had had a long, hard day.

Nell nestled closer, waiting for him to awake, to become aware of the warm nearness of the girl who was his wife. The bus raced around a curve. It threw her against her husband; his head banged sharply against the glass. But still he did not move. His body slumped downward; he sagged heavily in his seat.

Dread forced its frozen breath through her veins. This was not sleep! This was . . . Her chilled hand jerked forward, plucked at her husband's arm.

"Sid!"

No answer.

Heavy weights pressed unendurably on her skull. She shook him frantically. Her voice was shrill with terror. "Sid! What's the matter? Speak to me!"

A tremor seemed to pass over him. His slumped body straightened up, slowly. Warm deliverance gushed through Nell. Thank God! Thank God! For one dreadful moment she had thought. . . .

Slowly, very slowly, Sid Mansfield turned his head toward the frightened girl who was shaking him. His eyes opened, stared. . . .

A great shriek slashed through the narrow confines of the plunging bus, smashed high above the noise of the swift, lunging flight. Nell drew back in horror from the thing that was her husband, clawed frantically to her feet.

His face was a mask of pallid whiteness, bereft of blood. His cheeks were hollow and sunken, like those of a man just dead. His hair hung in a dismal mop over his forehead, caked with slimy dampness. But his eyes! Dear God! His eyes! Twin holes of blankness, black with mindless emptiness. The stare of one who does not see, of one who does not understand! Passing through her body as if she did not exist, transfixing her with vacuous glare.

BUS LINE FOR THE DEAD

The odor was stronger now, almost overpowering. It had spurted out at her from her husband, whirled her screaming thoughts into a pinwheel of fire.

Something had happened to Sid! Something dreadful, terrible! She must get help for him at once, before it was too late. The other passengers, they would know what to do. They would know what was wrong. He needed first-aid, or he would die. She dared not think even to herself what it might be.

SHE lurched blindly toward the rear of the bus, calling wildly: "Help! Please! My husband is sick!"

There, on the rear seat, directly under the hooded light, sat someone she knew. William Dyce, Principal of the Pine Mills School. A neighbor of theirs. A tall, cadaverous man with wisps of white hair that he combed smoothly into place over the egg-like baldness of his head. A strict, unbending man, a disciplinarian who installed terror into his pupils.

She staggered eagerly toward him, calling his name. "Mr. Dyce, help me with Sid. He's . . ."

The School Principal raised his head slowly, with infinite effort. Nell shrank back with a whimper of fear. Her hand clutched backward at a seat to keep from falling.

"You too!" she mouthed thickly. The principal's eyes were glazed with an empty glare. His lips were blue in the beating light; his throat worked incessantly and brought forth no speech. Then he slumped down on the seat, and his head dipped on his bosom like a bald vulture tearing at its prey.

Everything swayed before Nell. The bus, the fetid air, the silent passengers, her husband's limp form, and now—William Dyce. She must not faint! There must be someone in this death-like vehicle . . .

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A-ah! Two men occupied the seat she grasped. Strength flowed back into her limbs again. Her brain cleared of its strangling fumes. The slanting glimmer of light showed their faces, close to each other, seemingly absorbed in eager conversation. She knew them both. Humphrey Peabody, the town banker, with his paunchy form and sleek jowls; and Matthias Wilson, pharmacist and purveyor of drugs to Pine Mills.

She had never liked either one. Peabody, the banker, was known as a hard and merciless man on mortgages, and Wilson, with his weazened face and quick, furtive eyes, had given rise to considerable gossip. Especially since the vaccine he supplied had been used with disastrous results.

But this was no time for likes and dislikes. They were neighbors, fellow townsmen, members, with her husband, of the Board of Health.

She flung away from them as their faces lifted into the brighter light. She went mad. She ran screaming down the swaying length of the bus. There were strangers in front, men whose faces had been averted as she passed.

Perhaps they were normal human beings, not like . . . A great sob tore the muscles of her throat. Her hand gripped hard on the shoulder of the forward passenger, swung him around. A moan of horror froze on her lips. She jerked her hand away as if it had touched a serpent.

DEATH stared at her from the man's corpse-like mask. Death, rigid and unyielding in every lineament, leered at her with frozen mirth. She whirled from seat to seat, stumbling, sobbing. Everywhere the ghastly, strange men rimmed her in with hideous, unhuman faces, watching her with silent mockery. And still the men of Pine Mills slumped in

their seats, heedless alike of the ghostly, nightmare crew and of Nell.

The bus lurched around another curve. It threw her against the sharp edge of a seat. The swift stab of pain rid her limbs of their paralysis, cleared her brain of clogging terrors. Up ahead a street lamp gleamed. A crossroad. A filling station. Two men stood in the glow of the pulsing light, heavy, powerful looking men. They were waiting for the bus. A gasp forced its way through her rigid lips. They would not be afraid of these corpse-like creatures. They would help her husband and the men of Pine Mills. See, one of them had stepped out, was signaling!

The bus leaped forward with a shattering roar. The man had barely time to leap backward. Nell beat with small, frantic fists on the thick glass of the window, her cries smothered in the racking rumble of the motor. The man looked up, startled, saw her pallid, distorted face pressed against the cold, unyielding glass. Then gas station and light and the presence of humans were lost in the backward flow of the night.

Nell clawed around. Fear squeezed her skull in a vise-like embrace. Gus, the driver! He was mad, insane! She must get to him, stop his frightful progress!

As she surged forward, blindly, to the driver's seat, she felt the evil gaze of the passengers boring into her skull, mocking her, sneering at her puny efforts. The hunched form at the wheel had never stirred, never looked back once in all that terrible journey. Her skin crawled at the thought that came to her, but she forced herself on, crying: "Gus! Gus!"

She was almost upon him now. The ribbon of road extended in the flare of the headlights like a ghostly path to Hell.

"Gus!" she repeated shrilly, "for God's sake, stop! Don't you hear me?"

The driver lifted his face sideways. The reflected glow from the dashboard caught his features, held them up like a poisoned cup for her terrified glance to drink from. The skin shriveled on her body, the flesh beneath was a fiery torment. Her heart thudded like a clanking machine torn loose from its moorings. *It was not Gus!*

WITH a tremulous shriek she darted back into the body of the bus, from the sight of that snarling, hate-filled swarthinness, from those blazing eyes that burned like red hot irons into her skull. Even the hellish passengers were better than he. She collapsed into the seat beside Sid. He did not move. His eyes did not lift.

Oh, God! What had happened to them all? To what dreadful fate were they being driven? This was not the Interurban Bus; this was a bus from the shrieking depths of hell itself, come to claim them to doom! She shrank down into her seat, gripping the straw with bleeding fingers. Sid's body was grave-cold against her burning skin. A half mile further was another crossroad, another stop. After that the road branched. One way led to their community of homes, the other . . . With the awful clarity that comes to those condemned to die, she knew which road the hell-driven bus would take.

The next crossroads! Merciful God! Was it possible? The bus had slackened its rushing speed, was braking to a squealing stop. Hope flared madly in her brain. Perhaps. . . .

She flattened her nose against the pane, stared out feverishly. The arc light beat its white luminance on a slender figure, waiting with uplifted finger and upturned face. Hope died in her tumultuous breast. She knew the expectant passenger. It was Conrad Greenway, the town's perfumer and maker of beauty

creams and unguents. She had patronized his modest store on Main Street many times. A puny fellow, slight of body and timid of soul. What could he do against that swarthy driver, against the silent, undead things in the bus?

The vehicle was rumbling to a halt now. Conrad Greenway stepped forward. In another instant the door would open, and he would be swallowed into the waiting trap. Nell jerked against the window. Great Heavens! He couldn't help her, he couldn't help Sid or the others. He would be just another victim on the horrible journey to an unknown fate.

Her balled fists slammed against the thick glass. Her voice rose in a frantic cry of warning, it echoed and reverberated in the closed bus.

"Mr. Greenway! Mr. Greenway! Don't come in!"

He must have heard some filtering emanation of her shrieks. He looked up, caught sight of her pallid face pressed tight upon the window, saw the frantic movements of her hands. He smiled, tipped his hat with a queer, old-world gesture and walked deliberately toward the quiet bus. The door opened with a whirring sound; his feet thudded solidly on the steps.

Nell sank back with a hopeless moan. He had misunderstood. In the flickering shadows he had mistaken her desperate motions for waved greetings. She had lured him to his doom. But she roused herself for one last warning cry. Perhaps he would hear and understand this time, would jump to the ground before the irrevocable door would close.

It was too late! Her scream slashed out simultaneously with the fateful scraping sound. She saw his startled glance flick inside, coin poised in his womanish, tapering fingers; she saw him shrink backward. But the hunched driver's clawed brown hand leaped out like a darting snake to clutch his arm. The

next moment Greenway came stumbling into the bus. There was the clash of gears, and they slammed into the thick night with a triumphant roar. Another dweller of Pine Mills had been caught like a fly in a web.

The perfumer clutched for support at the nearest seat. A black-clad thing turned slowly, stared at him with unwinking regard. Greenway's eyes widened with horror. Little inarticulate noises gurgled in his throat. His thin, dark, pockmarked face turned imploringly toward Nell; his delicate, high-bridged nose twitched as if with St. Vitus' Dance.

"Mrs. Mansfield!" he gasped. "What—what does this mean?"

"It means," she fought to keep her voice steady, "that we have been kidnapped—all of us. My husband is—" She choked. She sprang up wildly and caught hold of the trembling man by his sleeve. "You're a man," she shrieked. "You must do something before it is too late. In two minutes the road branches. Do you know what that means?"

But even as she shook him with the desperateness of her pleading, she knew that it was no use. His slight frame trembled in an agony of fear. His dark face was grey with terror. His eyes twitched like those of a cornered mouse.

"But what can I do?" he jittered. Even his voice was effeminate. "They are many. They will kill me. Mrs. Mansfield, what—what shall I do?"

The man was actually clasping his hands, ringing them in an ecstasy of womanish dread.

"Do?" echoed Nell dully.

CHAPTER THREE

The Death of Hope

IF ONLY she had a man's strength, if only Sid were normal, not the strange, fearsome thing he was! If even

the other men—Dycé, Peabody, Wilson—were in possession of their faculties! Yet inside, deep within the icy layer that enveloped her like a shroud, Nell knew that the perfumer was right. Those mask-like strangers, silent, unstirring, were guards from Satan's own bodyguard, come to take them to their doom.

Just ahead, the concrete swung in an arc. Out of the valley, on to the city—to their homes. But there, to the right, a rutted road twisted up a ravine, climbed higher and higher into the mountains. With bated breath and clenched hands she waited. Which way would the driver take?

The bus lurched suddenly. The chauffeur swung on his wheel. Conrad Greenway fell with a hoarse cry against Nell. The slouched figures of the Pine Mills' men slumped over. The huge vehicle jounced and jarred and complained. The floor slanted steeply.

Nell disentangled herself from the writhing perfumer. She staggered painfully to her feet.

"They are taking us into the mountains," she said very low.

Greenway clutched her arm with a death-like grip. "Not there!" he screamed. "There are devils and witches and weird people in the hills. I—I know it. Once, when I first came to Pine Mills, I went with my car. I didn't know then. And I saw—" He stopped, cowered and put his hands up to his face. "I'm afraid," he whispered.

NELL fought to keep the contagion of his terror from infecting her. Devils, witches, queer people! These were old world superstitions. They did not fit in the twentieth century.

"Surely you don't believe—" she began.

He lifted his face. It was haggard, drawn. "I tell you I know," he shrilled. "I saw them myself. I saw them behind rocks, peeping out, watching me. Their

faces were just like—" He shuddered and was still.

An ever-mounting fear encircled Nell's heart. Bony fingers twanged horrible chords along her spine. Vainly she tried to tell herself that Greenway was a superstitious weakling. But she *had* heard queer tales aplenty about the mountains. Sid had gone up there recently to take care of an epidemic among the mountain folk. Something had gone wrong. For a while the town had swarmed with State Troopers. There had been trouble; the town had buzzed with excited talk. But that was over two weeks ago. Matters had quieted, though Sid had been very grim and wrathful about it all. And very vague. . . .

Higher and higher they climbed. The motor was groaning now, wheezing like a soul in torment. The road became a dirt path, boulder-strewn. Nothing on wheels had ever lunged through here before. The ravine widened, became a tumbling mass of scarred peaks and ominous forests. Night pressed down upon them like a smothering blanket.

NELL clung to her husband, chafing his gelid hands, trying desperately to bring back the warmth of life to his frozen body. But she dared not seek his eyes. There was something in their mindless depths that clattered her blood to curds.

Greenway crouched on the opposite seat, whimpering. He seemed terribly futile. The guards held their rigid masks averted, staring interminably out into the night.

A little thrill of hope sang through Nell. Had she been mistaken, or had Sid's hand seemed warmer? Had there been a feeble pressure to his touch?"

"Darling!" she whispered and renewed her ministrations. If only he came to himself . . . Ah! That time he had unmistakably moved. A groan bubbled from

his lips. His head shook weakly from side to side, as if to clear away befuddling fumes. His body stiffened.

"Sid!" she whispered again feverishly, "wake up! It's Nell. Do you hear me? Wake up!"

The sound of her voice penetrated his daze. His head moved slowly around. His bluish lips opened in a weak little grin.

In back of her she heard other stirrings. The effects of the weird paralysis must be wearing off the others, too. She twisted her head around with new found hope. Dyce dropped his head with a muffled groan. His body slumped down again in its seat. But Nell had seen, or thought she had seen, the stealthy regard of his frosty eyes, the twitching of his thin, straight lips. Fear prickled the smooth texture of her skin. Was the principal staring at her from under those half closed lids? Were Peabody and Wilson eyeing her with furtive glances under pretense of unconsciousness? Was it all but a horrible plot to do away with Sid and herself? There had been no love lost between the members of the Board, she knew that. Time and again Sid had fought for appropriations to carry on proper medical service in the town. And Sid was not one to mince his words.

Nell's eyes went wide, froze in a dreadful ecstasy of awareness on the thing that ringed the third finger of Dyce's long, gnarled hand. A round wooden loop, blackened with age, worn smooth by much handling. A low cry burst from her lips.

Greenway swung around at her cry. His startled glance followed hers, fastened on the wooden ring. His body jerked like a puppet on a string. He clawed feverishly in the pocket of his coat. His hand came out holding a circlet of wood, as like as a pea in a pod to the one on Dyce's finger, to the sinister emblem that had been thrown through Nell's window.

"It's the same," he shrieked. "Oh, God, it's the same!" Suddenly he darted out of his seat, slammed toward the front. His feet drummed along the jouncing bus, his womanish hands fisted at his sides. A desperate valor seemed to infuse his small body. Nell jumped up, panting with hope. Sid tried to raise himself, fell back weakly.

Greenway catapulted along with shrill, incessant cries. Just as he reached the first seat of the vehicle, two silent, black-clad passengers flowed rather than moved into the narrow aisle. Their chalk-white masks that were not faces stared unwinkingly at the fear-maddened little man. Daggers gleamed with an evil luster in skeleton hands.

Greenway recoiled with a shriek from the thirsting steel. Mouth agape, eyes bulging, he retreated to his seat, fell into it with a convulsive shudder.

"What are these rings?" Nell whispered. The cords of her throat seemed locked in a spasm of dread.

The perfumer's head was hidden in his hands. Smothered words issued from behind tight-gripping fingers. "I should have known! I should have known!" he wailed despair. "I didn't understand when I found the dreadful sign on my counter this morning. Now it's too late. Mr. Dyce has it; all of us have it. We are doomed!"

SID opened his eyes, stared mistily around. "Doomed?" he echoed vaguely. "What's that?"

Greenway rocked and moaned. "There are stories—of men who received the sign and disappeared, never to be found again. Years ago. It's the vengeance of the Things in the mountains. We must have offended them, I don't know how. But the ring is the summons, and no man has ever come back."

Great pulses pounded in Nell's temples. As if fascinated, her eyes turned back to Dyce. The bus jolted. Was it the sud-

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den motion of the vehicle that caused his head to jerk down again, or had he been watching, listening? Her glance strayed down. Her swift cry slammed Sid into clear awareness, and brought him upward, pulled the trembling hands from the perfumer's face. Even Peabody the banker, and Wilson the druggist, swayed to a sitting position at her clamorous outburst.

"Nell!" Sid shouted. "What's the matter? Where are we? What—"

But his wife was pointing to Dyce's long clawed hand, still pressed against his knee. There was no ring upon his finger! It had vanished as though it had never existed. Yet his head still slumped, unheeding, seemingly unknowing.

Sid caught at his wife. Her hand was over her mouth, as if she were holding back the dreadful words of suspicion, of fear. There *had* been a flicker of those curiously dark eyelashes, as if—as if Dyce were still trying to watch!

SID held her body tight to his. His eyes had cleared. Anger flamed in their grey depths. Understanding came to him with a rush. His fists knotted. The cords of his neck swelled. "Steady, old girl!" he warned his wife. He deposited her gently in the seat while he eased out into the aisle, stared for a breathless second at the sinister, black-enshrouded strangers. Then he jerked forward suddenly.

"Look out!" Greenway shrieked. Long, keen-bladed knives lifted in a half-dozen skeleton-like hands, bristled in a forest of deadly points along the aisle. But Sid slammed ahead, unheeding, a growl in his throat, fists poised for action.

Instantly the dim interior of the plunging vehicle was in confused turmoil. Greenway was on his feet, shouting indistinguishable words. Wilson clawed past Peabody's shrinking body, with blind mouthings. Only Dyce seemed to sink

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farther and farther down into his seat.

Nell screamed in horror. Knives thrust for her husband. Sid whirled. His fist shot out in a lightning slash. It caught the nearest guard on the point of his white, chalky chin. There was a terrible crunching sound and the man went down with a crash.

But the others had flowed into the unsteady aisle, their faces dreadful with the mockery of the grave. Gleaming blades swooped for Sid's defenseless body. Nell scrambled to her feet, toneless shrieks on her lips, ice clogging her veins. Sid would be killed! He swung his arm upward to ward off the cruel steel, but down they came remorselessly, unswerving in their terrible path.

Nell jerked forward hopelessly, anguish tearing at her bosom. In an instant it would be all over.

There was the grinding sound of brakes suddenly applied. The huge bus slithered and screeched to a swaying stop. Sid fell backward, his head crashed against the brass-bound seat. Knives hissed vainly through unresisting air. Blood oozed from a ragged wound on his pallid forehead. His eyes were closed.

NELL fought her way to his side. She dropped down on her knees and caught his lifeless head in her arms. "Sid darling!" she implored, "Speak to me! Tell me you're not dead." But her husband did not answer. There was no sign of life in the white pallor of his face.

A hand seared into her shoulder, jerked her roughly to her feet. A corpse-grey face leered down upon her with unwinking rigidity. Then she was surrounded by the swarming passengers. They clawed at her slender form, pushing her toward the exit. Hopeless terror swept over her with panic folds. What did these strange creatures want with her? What were they going to do to Sid?

Sid! The thought scorched her brain with hellish fires. She would never see him again, never witness the tenderness in his eyes. She screamed and struggled and fought with the fury of a woman bereft of her mate, but the hands that propelled her along were steel-hard in their cruel strength. Out to the platform of the driver's seat they dragged her; out into the night they pushed her.

Then suddenly she was alone. The huge bus had ground into gear; its formless bulk went careening madly over the uneven terrain, and it disappeared with a thundering noise around the looming thrust of a mountain.

Nell heaved herself wearily upward from the ground where she had landed. Her body ached like a single vast sore. Her head was a rumbling, sparking dynamo. The last thing she saw of the vanishing bus was the distorted face of Matthias Wilson, the druggist, flattened against the rear window, illuminated in the hooded glow of the single lamp. Then vehicle and passengers were gone, swallowed up in the blackness, vanished completely from the world of living men.

She was alone! It took minutes for that to penetrate her befuddled senses. A wind roared down from the mountains, ripped through her with icy knives. She shivered and stared fearfully around. She was on a plateau, it seemed, a rubbly plain from which stark, cold shapes pierced a cold and merciless sky. Blackness enshrouded her; blackness and the eerie sound of the wind.

Alone? She strained her ears suddenly. Was that the whisper of the rushing breeze among the dark-tumbled boulders that strewed the ground, or was it . . . ? In vain her staring eyeballs strove to penetrate the murky night. The sky was heavy with black clouds. The earth was a pool of darkness.

A pebble made a rattling noise. As if

it had slid from under a stealthy foot. Oh God, then it was not the wind! There was another crunching sound. The dim, eternal rocks seemed to waver, to dissociate themselves from their fellows, to flow forward in fantastic motion.

Nell felt the iron bands of fear constrict within her skull. There were things out there in the night, crawling toward her with dreadful purpose. She looked around wildly. She tried to force her aching brain to the belief that it was fever, madness even. She was alone, she told herself frenziedly over and over again.

Then, close to her, so close it seemed to fan her icy skin, came a muffled sound. Low, labored breathing! She whirled, and the blood fell in a pounding waterfall around her heart. There, not three paces away, behind a jagged, up-flung rock, a hand extended. A skinny, hideous arm, with dreadful, clawing fingers, reaching toward her, moving. . . .

She shrieked and turned to flee. The sound of her voice smashed through the wind like a plunging sword, tumbled with hideous echoes through the cupping hills. She raced madly away from the reach of that groping hand. She fell headlong over a stone, stumbled to her feet with exploding lungs.

Directly in front of her, crouched as if to spring, was something dark and fearsome. The shadows swirled about its hideous form, elongated it out of all human shape and semblance. Then a brown hand shot forward, clutched at her. It missed her by inches. Whimpering, Nell turned and ran again.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Orgy of Blood

IN her blind panic she almost collided with the motionless thing she thought to be a stone outcropping. A grating chuckle pierced her eardrums as it rose

and lunged for her. Nell ducked and swerved her course. Her gasping breath stabbed her lungs; her heart shattered itself against her ribs. She was in a trap, a slowly converging circle of faceless creatures, advancing on her with outstretched, pawing hands.

Madness shrieked in her veins, beat and pounded in her brain. She glanced around, crouched, huddled from the inexorable approach of the Things of the mountains. She could see them now; dim, shadowy forms crawling closer, ever closer, hemming her in, until. . . .

Oh God! To what dreadful fate was she doomed? To what hellish creatures had she been thrust?

"Sid! Sid!" she screamed, and knew, even as the tortured cry for help ripped from her knotted throat, that it was worse than useless. Her husband was dead! So were the others. There was no help for her in all the world!

A hideous cackling swept from the formless, half-seen beings; an obscene merriment convulsed them, jerked them up and down in spasms of mockery. Nell shrank back. They were almost upon her. With a final despairing shriek she whirled again. On all sides figures rose from the ground like ghastly exhalations. Bony fingers pointed at her with terrible accusations. As if. . . .

God! If they ever touched her, she would go mad! Her flesh shuddered at the thought of such contact; her lips were stiff with chattering terror. She thrust her arm up blindly, to ward off their slow approach.

Somewhere, far off, a curious sound rose on the whispering wind. The thin screech of a violin, trilling devil's madness along the mountains. As if it were a signal, the faceless forms ebbed away to one side, pressed closer on the other.

Nell staggered back, and the circle ebbed with her. She was being forced along a definite path. Sobbing, gasping,

tripping over unseen undergrowth, stumbling blindly to her feet again, Nell weaved crazily over the rough, uneven plateau, closer to the mountains, close to the place where the bus had vanished.

The eerie violin was silent now, but the relentless surge of the shrouded things pushed her on and on, around the sharp outthrust of the cliff, into a cupped depression where red tongues of fire leaped and danced wildly to an ominous sky.

Nell dug her spiked heels into the slithering shale, and froze to a halt. Her mad-staring eyes were glued to the frightful sight, her slender frame was sheathed in a cold coffin of horror. She did not even feel the taloned fingers that stabbed her spine with rocklike hardness. All her shuddering senses were fixed with frightened intentness on the little valley.

The fire flared in a glowing horseshoe of showering sparks. She was facing the open end; at the farther side, within the rimming flames, was a throne-like structure. On it sat a woman. But such a woman as Nell had never seen before! Her dress was a fantastic glitter of startling colors, her hair was swathed in a yellow scarf. Great blood-red earrings dangled from her withered ears, and rings loaded down her skeleton fingers; fingers that gripped the arms of the raised chair with a frozen grasp. But it was her face that sent the blood roaring through Nell's throbbing temples, and the worms crawling in her skull.

Once it had been a woman's, now it was a loathsome corruption. The dull grey flesh was pitted and gouged like the craters of the moon; pustules of greyish yellow matter heaved from the ravaged skin like a billowing sea of maggots. Her eyes stared out of deep-hollowed sockets like a dead jelly fish at the bottom of a stagnant pool. And her fleshless body was held with tight ropes to the arms and back of the chair.

A man lay outstretched on a black

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coffin before the grisly, motionless figure. Stout lashings ran around his heaving body, held him bound to the oblong box of ill-omen. Scream after scream tore from his gaping mouth in horrible, toneless succession as he writhed and twisted in his bonds. His bald head glistened in the red shadows and his paunchy face, no longer sleek, was white with quivering fear. A thrill of horror rippled over Nell, a strangled gasp rose to her lips.

THE bound victim was Humphrey Peabody the banker of Pine Mills, whom last she had seen drugged and gibbering in the bus. And in front of the wretched man, within the circumscribed area of the avid flames, leaped and shuffled and twisted a hideous rout. Their skinny arms stretched out toward the motionless figure on the throne; they mouthed and whimpered and gabbled strange gibberish. Their backs were to Nell; she could not see their faces. Her wide eyes caught on the queer, contorted bodies that lay motionless on the ground, like flung sacks of grain, indistinct among the crawling shadows.

But she knew who they were, and a great cry swelled the muscles of her throat. It was Sid, and the others from Pine Mills, awaiting their turn after the frightful doom that was about to overtake Humphrey Peabody.

Even as she screamed, a hooded figure glided from behind the throne and its grisly occupant. A long, keen blade glittered in his red-gloved hand and a low, whining eagerness burst from the leaping rabble. They surged forward like wolves to some dreadful feast.

The masked one waved them back. They retreated like whipped dogs into a weaving semicircle around the unfortunate banker, hunched in snuffing expectation. Peabody sensed what was going to happen. His screams rose to a frenzy

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of madness. His paunchy body writhed like that of an animal whose back has been broken. The spittle of terror dribbled from the corners of his wide-gaping mouth. The hooded demon advanced toward him with relentless pace. The evil blade lifted slowly.

Nell knew she was going to be sick. Her stomach churned with queazy motion. Her skull was a blazing madness. She flung herself desperately around. She would rather face the things of the mountains than that which was about to take place.

But her shoulders were gripped with brutal fierceness by the figures who encircled her. They wrenched her around, forced her down to the edge of the fires, held her rigid in their grasp. Yet there was a respectful distance between their company and the whining mass that flowed like a pustulous eruption within the limits of the blazing embers. As if even they, spawn of the mountains, dared not approach too close to the worshippers of that terrible, unmoving travesty on the throne.

A fiery mist clouded Nell's vision as the devilish figure closed on the wretched banker. A great bubbling shriek shattered her ear-drums, jerked her fevered body erect under the impact of its horrible sound. Then silence for one dreadful instant, followed by a long, eager howl from a score of throats.

Her eyes cleared. She tried desperately to close them, to faint even. Oh God! Why didn't she die, why didn't they kill her swiftly, mercifully, so that she wouldn't see? But her lids were held apart in some fearful paralysis, her body was a gelid lump in the unrelenting grip of her captors. Like iron filings to a magnet, her eyes fastened on the fearful sight. . . .

The masked demon held a basin aloft in his dripping hands. From it he sprin-

kled a scarlet fluid. It fell in a gruesome rain upon the upturned faces of the yammering horde. They struggled and trampled each other like animals to partake of that bloody bath. They cried and howled and gyrated with fearsome glee as the drops splashed on their dreadful faces. And on the coffin, limp and lolling in his bonds, silent now for all eternity, sagged Humphrey Peabody, banker of Pine Mills. His throat was slit from ear to ear, and the gaping wound was empty of blood!

Blood! The word yelled through the blazing corridors of Nell's aching skull. That was what the baptismal fluid was. The drained blood of poor Peabody. A hellish bath in which those frightful celebrants revelled with diabolic glee!

NELL struggled frantically against the steely grip on her shoulders. She could not stand the horror of it any more. She wanted to run screaming and shouting through the barren mountains, until death would overtake her with merciful touch. Sid's still, white face, Wilson, Greenway, Dyce, whirled about her in a bloody haze. The whole nightmare scene blurred into red-streaked oblivion. She was fainting. She was. . . .

What was that? Sharp, agonizing pains darted up her spine, forced her reeling senses back to awakening madness. A knife was prodding her forward, a guttural voice snarling in her ear. "You go, or I kill!"

The thirsty steel imbedded itself in her quivering flesh. It pushed her along in spite of herself. Moaning and swaying she stumbled within the horseshoe of crackling flames. The blade pulled out with a sucking sound. Feet pounded behind her in quick diminuendo, as if her captors were retreating hastily from the lethal orbit of the fires.

For a moment Nell knew nothing but the terrible agony in her back. Then

awareness came to her with a rush. Over there, prone on the ground, head raised in straining toward her, was the bound and gagged body of her husband. There was pain in his wide grey eyes, pain and a desperate warning. A speechless warning that she could not fathom. Farther to the left, huddled in motionless bundles, were two other captives.

But Nell's eyes were on her husband. He was alive! The blood raced warmly once again in her veins. She dragged her shaking limbs toward him. If only she could untie his bonds. . . .

Too late! The blood-sprinkled rout had leaped toward her with cackling cries; they flowed between her and Sid, they cut off all chance of escape in a solid wall of dancing, twisting, clawing demons.

Horror invaded her limbs, rooted her to the ground. Merciful God in heaven! Was she enthralled in some hideous nightmare from which she would awake with gasping breath, or were these creatures real? Those snouting faces could not be the faces of human beings. Nose and mouth and features were swollen into unrecognizable dimensions; red patches of inflamed tissue alternated with swarthy brown; huge pustules were bursting with a thick yellow corruption, and a horrible stench surrounded them with a nauseating effluvia. Only their eyes were visible; black, burning with fever, crawling with inextinguishable hatred.

They thrust their repulsive countenances close to Nell's fainting body; they gesticulated and mouthed thick, spumy phrases in an unknown tongue. The frightened girl shrank feebly away from the crowding monstrosities. The awful truth exploded in her brain, sent waves of revulsion over her crawling flesh. She knew now into what frightful lazar house she had been taken.

These disfigured wretches, these demons out of hell, were infected with smallpox in a particularly virulent form.

The most contagious, the most dreadful disease to which suffering man is heir! Here, in the remote recesses of the mountains, where primitive folk and bands of gypsies lived in jealous seclusion, the filth-bred disease was taking its awful toll.

A MOAN forced its way through her stiffened lips as she squirmed in an ecstasy of revulsion away from the shuffling rout and the all-pervading stench. Everything was clear now, too horribly clear. There had been an outbreak of smallpox among a gypsy tribe camped in the mountains. Talk of it had filtered down to Pine Mills. Sid had taken it up with the town Board of Health, of which he was a member. The others were Wilson, the druggist; Dyce, the school principal, and poor Peabody. He insisted on compulsory vaccination, so did Wilson and Peabody. Dyce had fought against it, claimed the town should not spend funds on outlanders like the gypsies. Their camp was miles away, inaccessible, and the contagion could not spread. He was out-voted.

Sid had taken vaccine purchased from Wilson and tried to penetrate the fastnesses. The gypsies threatened his life. He went back again with State troopers and forcibly inoculated the tribe. When he returned a week later, they were gone. The camp was razed and no trace of the gypsies or their sick could be found.

All this flashed through Nell's reeling senses in an instant. This was the gypsy tribe, these hideous monstrosities who surged around her with unutterable hate, who had slain Peabody by some ancient, witchborn sacrifice to cleanse themselves in his blood, were afflicted with a most virulent form of smallpox. Something had gone hideously wrong with the vaccine. And now. . . .

A violin raised its mad, lustful voice. The seething mob fell away from the girl, left a lane for the masked figure. He

moved toward her with a dreadful slowness. His red, still dripping hand touched her arm. She shook it off with a frantic gesture. Nausea swept her. Behind that mask she sensed a face more hideous, more repulsive in its pestilence than the ravening enormities that surrounded her.

He chuckled, and the sound sent shivers slithering down her spine. "I haven't the smallpox. I am immune. But these others—well, you see. Come with me, or I shall command them to carry you. It will not be pleasant, I assure you."

"What do you want of us?" Nell implored. "What have we done that you torture us so?" But even as she spoke, she knew the answer.

"Done?" the muffled voice echoed. "Look!" He thrust out a dramatic arm. "Look at our poor suffering tribe, look at our queen! This you have done, accursed ones, against the Roms. In the evil of your hearts you concocted strange poisons; under pretence of medicine you forced it into our bodies. For this we must have vengeance."

"But it isn't so," Nell cried frantically. "It wasn't Dr. Mansfield's fault. Something went wrong with the vaccine. Give him a chance to cure these people. They will die if they do not receive medical care."

The pest-ridden rout surged forward, brandishing their brown, scabby arms. A frightful clamor tore from slits where mouths should have been. "Blood! Blood of the Gentile! Give us more blood!"

The blood-red figure chuckled in the folds of its hood. "You hear them. They are impatient. They wish no more of Gentile medicine. They have their own methods, practiced in accordance with ancient tradition. Sprinkle the blood of a fresh slain man on the pox and it will disappear and leave the patient sound and whole again. I cannot deny them their cure. But for you, my dear lady, is reserved a nobler fate. There is an in-

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credibly old belief in our tribe that when the queen dies, she may be returned from the shadows of the dead by stuffing her nostrils with the fiery ash of a newly burnt woman. It has never been tried before, but this time . . ."

His arm whipped out with incredible speed. His dripping fingers gouged into the girl's wrist. "Come!" he snarled.

She wrestled against his tightening grip. Panic fear gave her strength. She broke away, crouched madly in the middle of the seething, shrieking horde. "No! no!" she cried. "I won't. You can't . . ."

A loathsome creature, whose face was a purulent, oozing sore, sidled over to her. His bloated hand moved toward her chalk-white face. She screamed and jerked away.

"You see," chuckled the monster. "Even death by burning is preferable to that."

Because she could do nothing else, Nell went, clenching her teeth until her gums bled, to prevent hysteric shrieks. A path opened before her—a lane of the gibbering damned. Behind her the ranks closed; in front they ebbed away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Live Flesh for the Dead

THERE, before the very throne of the gypsy queen, hideous with the pestilence from which she died, a stake had somehow been driven deep into the stony soil. They led the trembling, fainting girl to the post. The hooded devil lashed her to it with chains of steel, that would not melt in the hottest fire. The pox-infested creatures tossed armfuls of wood around her sagging body until it covered her knees. Her head lolled to one side. "Oh God," she prayed, "make it swift and merciful. Let me not feel the sizzling of my flesh."

The hooded man lit a taper, He thrust

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it under the heaped faggots. They were dry. Nell heard the dreadful crackling as the tinder took the blaze. Soon the licking flames would crawl along the sticks, reach up with greedy gloating for her tender limbs. Already she felt the nearing warmth as the blaze leaped from stick to stick.

She raised her head for a last, hopeless, despairing glance. Over to one side, Sid reared himself with frantic efforts. The light of the nearby fire flared on his face. It was ridged with mighty effort; his eyes met hers in a dreadful look. Then he fell back to the ground with a thud, his body threshing and heaving against the restraining ropes. The other figures, farther on, barely visible in the darkness, lay immobile, as if dead or too hopeless to fight.

A red tongue of fire shot up with a sizzling sound. It touched the hem of Nell's gown. The cloth scorched, smoldered, and burst into flame. Tongues of fire darted through the piled wood, united, flared about her. The blaze swirled around her ankles, seared the skin with unendurable torture.

A great shriek smashed through the night, high above the drooling mouthings of the gypsies, high above the hoarse chuckling of the masked one. "Sid! Help! Help!"

The girl writhed and twisted wildly in her chains. The smoke whirled up and choked her. The mounting flames wrapped round her in a sheath of frightful agony. Hell-fires were not as hot as these! Her limbs were fiery torments, her arms were molten lead. "Oh God in Heaven! I can't stand it, I can't any more. Sid! Sid!"

The pest-ridden creatures leaped and howled with gluttoned hate at the agonies of their victim. Soon she would be a blazing pyre, crying out her pain even as they in the grip of the disease that coursed through their bodies; soon her

ashes would bring their queen back from the dead, and the blood of the Gentiles rid them of their raging plague.

Nell screamed again, and again they howled with delight. Soon . . . A thunderbolt of destruction crashed through their midst. A tornado of wrath and fury heaved their wretched, disease-ridden bodies out of its path.

"Hold tight, Nell, I'm coming!"

Blessed cry! The girl opened her pain-swept eyes, saw her husband, strands of broken rope trailing behind him, gag thrust askew from his mouth, fists flailing like windmills, eyes terrible with glinting madness. He smashed through to the fire, scattered the burning brands with powerful kicks, crushed out the live flames that crawled along her dress with his bare hands. "Nell! Nell! Are you hurt?" he cried in anguish.

Her eyes flickered over his heaving shoulders, held on the swift rush of the maddened men.

"Look out, Sid!" she screamed frantic warning.

He whirled around to meet the rush. Their faces were hideous with disease and snarling hate. Suddenly he stooped, snatched up a red-smoldering stick, whirled it around his head, and tossed it into their shapeless countenances. And another, and another, in rapid succession. The brands burst into dazzling flame as they flew through the air; they crashed in showers of sparks on the heads of the blood-lusting mob. Screams of anguish snarled from pustulous lips. The gypsies cowered, broke ranks and fled howling and screeching from the unending, searing, hurtling brands. Out through the horseshoe of fires, out into the vast plateau beyond, to scatter, screeching and wailing like lost souls in the darkness.

"**T**HANK God you broke your ropes in time," Nell breathed fervently. Sid was fumbling with burnt, clumsy fin-

gers at her chains, talking in broken, endearing phrases. Then he heard the thud of pounding feet even as Nell shrieked a second warning. He swung around in time to meet a new rush. Black-clad gypsies with hate-distorted faces; black-clad men with strange white corpse-masks. The passengers of the bus! Immediately behind them skipped the hooded demon, knife glittering in his blood-red hand, urging them on with shrill cries.

Sid catapulted forward to meet the attack. His knotted fists lashed out, caught a corpse-mask flush on the nose. The man howled with pain, the mask crushed with a ripping sound, and the dark face of a gypsy appeared momentarily through the wreckage, even as he went tumbling to the ground. But the others, lithe, sinewy, leaped upon him, pressed him backward. Time and again Sid's fists smashed through with lightning thrusts, sent his attackers bowling, but more came on with deadly rush. And ever in the background, hovering with uplifted knife, was the masked figure, waiting for a chance to deliver the fatal blow.

The gash opened again on Sid's forehead. The blood streamed into his eyes, blinding him. They were all over him now, bearing him down, disregarding his feeble struggles. Then they had him, pinioned, immobile.

"Good by, Nell!" he murmured through split lips. The shrouded monster approached, chuckling horribly. His knife glittered evilly in the sooty light of the fires. Nell screamed and threw herself against her chains. They gashed her raw, burnt flesh cruelly, but she did not feel the pain.

"Don't kill him!" she shrieked.

The figure paused, surveyed the frantic, smoke-blackened girl from behind his hood, and laughed mockingly. The knife moved in a wide sweep. Nell screamed again. Her eyes were heavy with horror.

The blade came down, inexorably, toward the unprotected line of Sid's throat. In a split second. . .

There was a rumble of motorcars bouncing and careening over the boulder-strewn plateau. Hoarse shouts. Commands. Rushing headlights boring the night. The gypsies reared, thrust startled glances over their shoulders, and darted like hunted animals through the ringing fires, into the darkness.

The leader hesitated an instant. Then, with an obscene curse, he lunged downward with the knife. But in that second of hesitation Sid had jackknifed his legs, released them like coiled springs straight for the middle of the bending figure. There was a scream of pain as the hooded devil staggered backward. Sid lashed to his feet and dived for the man. Snarling, screeching, the shrouded man thrust again with his knife. It seared through Sid's shoulder, but he went on with savage joy. His fist started low, swung upward with all the lithe strength of his maddened body behind it. It landed flush on a protruding chin. There was a peculiar snapping noise. Without a sound the man crumpled and fell. The knife flew wide from spasmodic fingers, dropped with a clatter to the stony ground.

Shots. Shouts. The roar of racing motors! Three automobiles bounced up to the deserted fires. Grim men tumbled over, pistols, shotguns in brawny hands. Sid grinned through his bleeding lips, leaped for Nell, and caught her just as she fainted in her chains. . . .

WHEN she came to, it was all over. A group of sullen, lowering gypsies stood to one side, masks ripped from their swarthy faces, hands tied tightly behind their backs. Police watched them alertly with cradled shotguns. Nell's head was snug and comfortable in Sid's lap. He grinned down at her with his old-time grin. The cut on his forehead was

neatly plastered. Nell's legs were encased in a swath of bandages. They hurt terribly, but pain now did not matter.

"Feel all right, honey?" he asked.

"Swell," she lied bravely.

A man hurried up. He seemed a bit scared. "Say, Dr. Mansfield, we got those smallpox birds surrounded in a little ravine back yonder. But—well, you know how it is," he stammered sheepishly, "the boys aren't too anxious to go in after them."

"I don't blame them," Sid concurred heartily. "Though if they've been vaccinated, no harm will come. But tell them not to take chances; just to stand guard and threaten to shoot the first one who tries to escape. Meanwhile, send a car back to town at once, and get all available ambulances up here. Poor devils, they're entitled to good treatment. After all, it was our rotten vaccine that made them like this. I can't understand it, Wilson."

Sid turned his head to the weakened druggist, who stood to one side. He was still trembling with remembered terror, and his face was bloodless.

"I think I can explain it," the druggist offered, "once you see who is hidden behind that mask."

"Eh?" Sid queried, startled. "By George, we haven't uncovered him yet, have we? See who it is, Wilson."

The druggist approached the prone figure gingerly, ripped away the mask with a hand that shook uncontrollably. Nell cried out sharply. The face that stared up at them was the pock-marked, swarthy countenance of Conrad Greenway, perfumer to Pine Mills!

"I just remembered," Wilson explained. "I get the vaccine fresh from the city weekly. It's always tested and certified. The day before I turned over my supply to you, Greenway came to my store. He carried a wrapped bundle of what he claimed were empty bottles. Said he wanted some cold cream for his unguents;

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that he had run out of a supply. I was busy with a customer, and told him to go to the prescription room and help himself. He must have switched the bottles of vaccine for active, virulent germs that he picked up somewhere."

"But why?" Nell demanded.

Sid frowned. "I think I can explain that too," he said slowly. "I found out in the first year of my practice through a gypsy patient that Conrad Greenway was in fact a gypsy himself. More, he was the son of that poor woman whom they have left enthroned in ghastly similitude of life back there. But he was a puny, cowardly sort of a fellow, and his mother was queen and a strong, ruthless woman besides. She did not want him to rule the tribe in the event of her death, and the gypsies themselves would not have had him. So they cast him out to live among the Gentiles.

"He had his opportunity for revenge on the tribe that had disowned him when the epidemic broke out. He changed the vaccines on Wilson when he heard that we had decided on compulsory vaccination. But then another brilliant idea burst upon his perverted, scheming brain. No gypsy is ever happy away from his kind, and he had always yearned to go back, to force them to his will. It would have fed his ego. So he sneaked into their camp while the rotten vaccine was doing its worst, and played skillfully on their superstitions and mad thirst for revenge. He blamed the whole thing on the Board of Health, and offered them at once hideous retribution on the Gentiles, and cures for themselves if they would make him king of the tribe.

"He knew about the bus, knew our daily routine. He purchased an old vehicle somewhere, fixed it up to resemble the Interurban. The gypsies drove along the road picking us up, just a minute or two ahead of Gus's schedule. We didn't

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know the difference. They passed up all passengers whom they didn't want. As we entered the door, a spring released an anesthetic gas in a spray. As for Nell, they evidently recognized her as my wife, and were afraid she would raise the alarm, so they got her too. By that time no doubt their supply of anesthetic was gone. Greenway had stationed himself at the last bus stop, to join them."

Nell sighed happily. "But how did help happen to come?"

A heavy, powerfully built man lurched forward and grinned. "That was me," he said. "That damned bus passed me down at the filling station like a bat out of hell. An' I saw you inside, Mrs. Mansfield, scared like, an' peerin' through the window. So, when Gus druv along coupla minutes later, mad as a wet hen, I put two an' two together. We phoned for men with guns an' cars, and trailed the bus by its tire marks up this dirt road."

"And now, my dear," Sid said very briskly and professionally, "here come the ambulances and I've got work to do."

THE END