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A Chat With the Readers

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*Fate Laughed Harshly at this Victim of
the Power that Lies in Suggestion*

Darkness

By CHARLES HILAN CRAIG

Author of "Damned"

I AM told that coincidence in a story is an element for which editors and readers have a dislike which approaches the sparking. But if a story be thirty-three and a third per cent each of coincidence, imagination on the part of the principal character, and irony—what then?

Coincidence, which is another name for destiny, played its trump early in the life of Graham Fletcher—in fact before his life began. But it was many years before the stakes were dragged across the game table of life and into the lap of a sneering fate.

It all started when his father, John Fletcher, was carried home after a terrific explosion in which he had lost an arm and the sight of two perfectly good eyes. His young wife fainted with the horror of it; and only a week later Graham Fletcher was born into the world, while on the wall opposite the mother's bed a dread phantom played hide and seek with a tremendous human eye, the half of which was missing. And the years which followed bear mute witness that in that terrible hour a Gargantuan fear was transmitted to the soul of young Fletcher—a fear of blindness.

Too, the daily sight of his stricken father had its influence upon the boy as he passed through his early youth. Blindness! Indelibly there was scared on his brain the fear of it, the horror of it. It was when he was fourteen that a prophecy was made about him.

Now the fortune-teller had given ample proof that she was just as elaborate a liar as the average fortune-teller is supposed to be. She didn't try to tell his fortune in the orthodox way, however. In fact he didn't want her to tell it.

It so happened that young Graham was just as full of the Old Nick as any boy. It seemed human nature to him, then, to hurl pebbles at the horses tied behind the gypsy's wagon. He meant no real harm. But that did not prevent a jagged pebble from striking an eye of one of the horses in such manner as to cause the animal to scream fearfully, while blood spurted from the injured optic.

The wrath of the woman fell upon the boy. Hoarsely she spoke to him in broken English: "For that you pay—pay, see? You blind da hoss; one day you be blind too! Then—you die!"

No doubt she would have done more than prophesy had it not been for the crowd near at hand. But it was more than enough. She had set her mark upon the soul of young Graham Fletcher. He would not forget. And so was another coincidence born—almost an inexcusable one. . . .

THE years passed by. Deeper and deeper into the being of Graham Fletcher pushed that phantom of unrest. He had gone home crying after

the incident with the fortune-teller, but he was never to forget. It was shortly after that that his imagination began to work overtime.

He had had dreams. That was the first development. In these dreams he saw a hideous old hag with vulpine features, and hawklike claws striving to reach his face—his eyes. Bad dreams at night, if continued, easily give rise to day dreams. Now, day dreams are supposed to be pleasant. They are—if you sleep well. But Graham Fletcher didn't, and so he began to "see things" even in the day time.

Many things happened which increased his fear. There was the time a hard-bodied little bug got into his eye. It sickened him, but his terror overcame even the feeling of nausea. A life in utter dark such as that his father was leading stared him in the face. He was afraid.

Of course there had been other incidents. Once he had tried to play football. A rough tackle which resulted in a black eye put the taboo upon that forever. Then there was the incident of the automobile race when a driver ran through the fence and a splinter of board struck Fletcher in the face, breaking his glasses and cutting a deep gash under the left eye. The whole world, it would seem, was conspiring to do away with the sight of Graham Fletcher. Thereafter he never attended the races and, though he needed spectacles, he never wore them.

Fletcher, of course, had his recurrent nightmare. Strange to relate, the old gypsy woman failed to appear again. Instead it was something intangible, yet quite real, which oppressed him. The change made it all the more certain that he was doomed. He never could figure out his illusion satisfactorily. Sometimes he seemed to be crushed under a weight that all the power in the world could not

move. Again it seemed that he was being dropped through infinite space. Always, though, there was the sense of his eyes being dragged out of him. At first his awakenings would be with tears. Then as he grew older he would awake in a state of cold, clammy sweat. After the dream there was little sleep for him again the same night. It was when he was nineteen that he *felt* claws on his eyes. Thereafter he left the light burning in his room when he went to bed.

IT WAS only natural that Fletcher should try to find things to keep him occupied so that he would have no time to think of his illusions. He kept busy—but the phantoms continued to come. He welcomed with avidity the chance to go into the north woods for a short stay with two friends.

For a time Fletcher was so busily engaged in the hunt that he forgot his trouble. All would have gone well, perhaps, had he not been left alone that night in the cabin.

Jones and Gordon tramped over to the station together to get supplies. They promised to be back before dark, and Fletcher had no premonition of impending disaster. During the afternoon he hiked through the woods and later wrote several letters. It was when the shadows began to become flickery that Graham Fletcher felt a chill as of a bitter cold creep through him. Twilight fell. The black shadow among the trees had arms now, arms that groped for him. Blind arms they were. Blind! He fled to the safety of the cabin.

For a few minutes the light gave him comfort. Then he saw the shadows in the cabin. Shadows that moved!

He jerked open the cupboard and took down a flat bottle.

He tasted the liquid—drank. He tried to read, but the shadows kept

creeping up one side of the page. The shadows! Sometimes they seemed to form claws—claws that reached for his eyes.

He drank again. And again. Then he decided that his partners had stayed over at the station, so he went to bed, leaving the light burning on the table. He put the flashlight near him.

His thoughts cast back over other days. He kept his mind from the specter and finally fell asleep. He dreamed. This time a new trouble beset him. That bottle! Whisky? He had read of a number of deaths resulting from the drinking of wood alcohol in liquor. Now— He tossed feverishly, and after a while went to sleep again.

The tall, old-fashioned clock to which he had paid scant attention awakened him when it struck seven. He lay for a moment thinking. Seven. The sun would be up, and—

Blackness was like a pall about him. It was thick, hideous. He could almost feel it, hear it, taste it. Blackness! Could it be that he had heard wrong—that it was still night? No! Where the lamp had been left burning on the table he could see no light! A cry of agonized dismay burst from his lips. His senses reeled—but by a powerful effort of his will

he was able to reach for the flashlight. Full into his eyes he held it for a long minute. There was no answering glow.

"God!" he said.

Ah! Fool that you are, Graham Fletcher, had you but looked at the oil in the lamp you would have realized that it would not burn more than an hour; and did you not throw away the useless battery in the flashlight yourself? Blind? You are not blind, Graham Fletcher, but you do not know this. You are moaning softly as you reach for the gun beside your bed; it is but the work of a moment to put the end of the barrel in your mouth and push the trigger with your toe. There! Destiny has raked the table clean once more.

Jones and Gordon were appalled when they saw the body of the suicide stretched out on the floor. No possible motive made itself apparent to them.

I SUGGESTED that this was a story of coincidence. There is but one thing more. It is for the friends to glance at the clock, *note that it is five hours fast*, and by some hocus pocus decide at what hour their friend took his own life. But they don't look—and therein is the irony. The clock will tick merrily on till it has run down.

