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Number 2

Cover Design	J. Allen St. John	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "Buccaneers of Venus"</i>		
De Brignac's Lady	Kirk Mashburn	147
<i>A sensational goose-flesh story of baby vampires</i>		
The Fire Vampires	Donald Wandrei	179
<i>A scourge struck from the sky, killing countless thousands</i>		
The Chadbourne Episode	Henry S. Whitehead	191
<i>A sbuddery graveyard tale—ghastly happenings—half-gnawed bones</i>		
The Head of Wu-fang	Don C. Wiley	201
<i>A Chinese mandarin exacts a fearful punishment upon those who brought him to death</i>		
The Cult of the White Ape	Hugh B. Cave	210
<i>A horror-story of the Dark Continent, where evil magic is still worked</i>		
The Mirror	George Burrowes	225
<i>A strange story of a weird happening in the depths of a looking-glass</i>		
Buccaneers of Venus (part 4)	Otis Adelbert Kline	237
<i>Breath-taking adventures amid the very perils of another planet</i>		
The Cripple	Maurice Level	252
<i>A grim, tragic story of a French peasant who stood helpless while a girl drowned</i>		
The Mandrakes	Clark Ashton Smith	254
<i>A tale of sorcery, and weird homunculi that grew in the grave of a murdered man</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
The Cats of Ulthar	H. P. Lovecraft	259
<i>A brief masterpiece from one of the early issues of WEIRD TALES</i>		
The Eyrie		262
<i>A chat with the readers</i>		
The Vanishing of Simmons	August W. Derleth	266
<i>A strange tale of voodoo and the malevolent power of a jealous mulatto woman</i>		

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De Brignac's Lady

By KIRK MASHBURN

"Will you tell?" he
grated; "will you tell me
where you lie by day?"



A story of baby vampires—gouging, biting, scratching—an utterly strange tale of infant marauders belonging to the Undead

1. Death Strikes Bonne Chasse

IF THE end should overtake me before you arrive——"

This was my first word of Armand de Brignac in upward of two years. With his alarming, almost incoherent letter spread before me as I packed my bags, and with no more understanding than I had gained on first perusal, I read again:

Dear Wynne:

Can you come to Bonne Chasse? Rather, you *must* come! This is a matter that concerns not only myself, but the safety—the immortal souls—of hapless others.

If the end should overtake me before you arrive, you know the address of my attorneys. I have drawn my will in your favor, and arranged a power of attorney in your name, should I disappear with my death unestablished. In either circumstance, you will find old black *Tante* Celie somewhere about the place—though not within the house—and she will tell you enough to guide your future actions.

However incredible her story, if it happens you are forced to seek her out, you must believe her—you *must* believe her!

I have not, as you know, a single living kinsman; there is no other to whom I can turn in my distress. Do not fail me, Wynne; and come as quickly as you may. Hasten, *mon ami!*

Yours, as ever,

DE BRIGNAC.

Our lifelong friendship left de Brignac no room to doubt that I would answer his unusual summons without question, and with all dispatch; nor did any other course occur to me. Beyond the actual hours consumed in my rapid journey from the North, there was very little time to account for, from my receipt of Armand's letter to the moment I stepped from a noon train in New Orleans.

Bonne Chasse, plantation and country seat of the de Brignacs since French Colonial days, lies some twenty miles down-river from the city. I had telegraphed Armand to expect me, and the uneasiness I had felt since first reading his puzzling message was not allayed by his absence at the station, and the failure of a servant to meet me in his place.

Stepping into a telephone booth in the station, I called the number listed under Armand's name in the local-long-distance section of the directory. At my insistence, the operator made repeated unsuccessful attempts to establish the desired connection, until I finally accepted her report that my party did not answer.

After some hesitancy, I determined first of all to call upon Armand's attorneys. In keeping with my lack of further definite plans, I left my bags in the depot checkroom, and consumed a hasty luncheon in a near-by restaurant. A short while later I entered a dingy suite of offices that belied the repute of their occupants, and asked to see that grizzled old barrister, Judge Henry Claybourne.

I HANDED my card to an exceedingly pretty girl, who, I made note, had brown hair of a shade that was almost auburn, and the most disturbing pair of deep blue eyes that I have ever seen. Glancing at the bit of pasteboard, the girl smiled regretfully.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Randall, but the judge

is in court, and young Mr. Claybourne is out of town. Could your business wait until later this afternoon?"

I considered for a moment, in some hesitancy, whether I should go on down to Bonne Chasse. Although I had wired Armand of my coming at the commencement of my journey, his failure to meet me at the train left me uncertain as to whether he had received my message and was expecting me. I wondered, also, at the failure of my attempt to telephone him from the station. However, I decided to go to Bonne Chasse.

"I don't think I can get back this afternoon," I told the young lady. "I intend to hire a car and go down the river to the de Brignac plantation, and I don't know just what my plans will be after I get there."

"Oh," the girl exclaimed, with sudden interest, "Mr. Armand de Brignac's place?" Then, in some confusion, she hurried on, "If you're going to hire a car, my younger brother has been out of a position, and rather than be idle, he has been using our car—that is—he——"

"Why, of course!" I responded. "I'd be delighted to let him take me down, Miss—er——"

"Jackson!" she breathed in relief. "I know where to 'phone Andrew, and if you'll sit down, I'll have him here in just a minute."

Miss Jackson's brother showed up in a little more than the minute she had promised, and I liked the boy on sight. He was a clean-cut, intelligent-looking youngster, hardly more than twenty-one or -two. I speedily struck a bargain with him; and, after I had thanked his sister, we set out at once for Bonne Chasse.

When we had reached the plantation, I showed Jackson where to turn off the highway into a road leading across the estate, and we drove between double

rows of ancient oaks until we came to the Big House of the de Brignacs.

THE sun was bright, and had fulfilled its earlier promise of one of those balmy, spring-like days that I had sorely missed in the chill winter of the North. Even so, the shadows under the long double row of gnarled oaks that led from the highway to the house seemed too somber, and at sinister variance with the brightness of the day. The impression remained as, bidding Andrew to wait, I knocked at the closed door upon which I had never felt the need to knock before.

It was odd that the door should be closed at such an hour; odd, likewise, that I had seen no living creature about the grounds on my way up from the main road. Stranger still (knock upon the door with increasingly impatient fist as I would) was the fact that I, who came in answer to a summons, should receive no answer to my own.

Acting upon the thought, I moved aside from the door, and peered in at the windows opening upon the front veranda. I had not previously noticed that all the window-blinds were closed, and my testing fingers proved them thick with dust, as were also the panes of glass I could feel by prying between the wooden slats.

Taking Armand's letter from my pocket, I confirmed only what I already knew: that it was written less than a week past, and that it specifically bade me to come to Bonne Chasse. In the face of this, Bonne Chasse lay shuttered and deserted, with dust and spiders' webs of more than one week's accumulation between the interstices of the blinds.

The house, like all those in that region of potential floods, was built upon high pillars, so that it had, in effect, a capacious basement entirely above ground. The brick walls of this under-story were flush

with the walls of the house proper, and the paved open space between them and the outer pillars supporting the floor of the veranda formed a sort of cool, covered pergola, which would, normally and in such pleasant weather, have been put to those uses which the comparison suggests; or, on the side hidden from the road, devoted to sundry domestic activities. I descended from my fruitless inspection of the porch, and made a round beneath it, with similar results.

Here below, the shutters were solid, and I could not peer between them, but the dust upon the pavement was a quarter-inch in depth—except in one place, beneath a window at the back of the basement. At this spot, the thick dust was shuffled away, in a kind of irregular path across the bricks, and footprints were plainly discernible. I stooped closer, and I do not know what faculty of intuition caused the chill feeling with which I recognized, among the large tracks a man would make, the unmistakable impressions of a woman's small and shapely foot.

I looked at the shutters over the window. The cracks in the joints of the hinges showed sharp and clearly defined, lacking the film of rust which quickly accumulates in the humid atmosphere of the region. The seal of spiders' web was missing. It was evident that this window was in use—but why, and by whom?

Uneasily I debated whether to return to the city and again seek to consult with Judge Claybourne, or find black old *Tante* Celie, for what light she might shed upon this growing mystery. De Brignac's letter suggested both courses, but I decided upon the latter to begin with, as I was already upon the grounds. I re-entered the car, and Andrew drove, under my direction, to where I knew were situated the cabins that housed the plantation's laborers.

Although, in the light of what I had already seen and learned, I should have been in some measure prepared to find the quarters lifeless, the actual discovery of their appalling emptiness came as a shock. Filled with life and bustle, and the almost certain ready laughter of their natural tenants, those rude and weathered cabins would have possessed a simple homeliness, and a touch of the picturesque, to redeem their barren lack of beauty. Now, lifeless and forlorn, they seemed, in their desolation, far more squalid and dilapidated than the meanest hovels. I shuddered, touched by something more oppressive than mere brooding silence, unnatural as that was. I was wondering of the *cause*. . . .

"HALLO!" I shouted, not knowing which cabin Aunt Celie might occupy—if, indeed, it was reasonable to hope that the silence hid the presence of any living thing. The sound of my voice served only to emphasize the recurring stillness.

"There are some clothes hanging on the line behind that cabin, yonder," commented Jackson, pointing.

I followed the direction of his finger, and saw that what he said was true. There hung the capacious garments of some girthy negress; and, judging by the defiantly serviceable nature of certain old-fashioned undergarments exposed to our inspection as we walked nearer, their owner was no wench of youthful years and yearnings. In spite of my somber mood, I chuckled as I looked.

A second hail to the cabin produced no more result than the first, although the clothes upon the line had all the indications of recent washing. I noticed that the door of the cabin was slightly ajar, and placed my foot upon the rude steps that descended from the threshold

directly to the ground. Suddenly, as I stepped upward, I knew that I wanted to turn around, to be away from that place as quickly as I might. Without going further, I *knew* that I stood upon the edge of unholy discovery. . . . I did not want to enter that shanty!

I stepped unwillingly through the door. At once, a faint sickening odor assailed my nostrils—the place stank with the foulness of a charnel-house—and I experienced a wave of nausea. Only the light coming through the open door relieved the shuttered obscurity of the room; but we could see, plainly enough, the rude bedstead in one corner . . . the huddled shape . . .

"Open the window!" My dry lips hardly framed the words.

Jackson threw back the solid shutter from the single unglazed window, and the clean afternoon sunshine had that much more chance to dispel the fetid murkiness of the room. I was thankful that I could see better, that I did not have to go closer to that corner. . . .

Upon the bed, clad in the torn remnants of a clean though faded nightgown, and partly concealed by the disordered coverings, lay a thing that once had been Armand's black Mammy Celie. The body was contorted, as if a struggle had preceded death, and there were great brown stains of dried blood upon and all about it, particularly the upper part. It looked as if the throat had been ripped wide open. A different kind of horror overcame my previous squeamishness, and I moved closer, staring.

"Looks as if a dog, or some kind of animal, chewed her throat to pieces," Andrew's awed voice sounded in my ear.

It looked just like that! Whatever did it, it must have happened in the night, judging from the evidence, and as recent-

ly as the night before. The blood stains were hardly dry and brown.

I pushed Jackson through the door ahead of me, and the air was like balm to our nostrils. We climbed into the car and sped back toward the Big House in silence. Our throats crawled too much with nausea to endure the strain of speech.

2. *A Corpse Disappears*

NO WORD passed between us until Andrew applied brakes to the car, bringing it to a stop in front of the deserted mansion. Dismounting, I started to climb the front steps; but suddenly remembered that the doors were locked, and that I had no keys. Then I thought of the window underneath the veranda, toward which led footprints in the dust upon the pavement, and which had shutters with hinges bright from constant and recent use.

Acting upon the thought, I walked around to try for entry at this window, Andrew at my heels. My suspicions were justified when, in response to an inconsiderable effort, the shutters swung easily open, and I raised the sash.

The basement, familiar enough to me, was divided into quarters for the house servants, and a large room used for storage space. The door to this latter compartment was locked, but we were able to give the rest of the basement a hasty but unproductive inspection. Except under the window, where there was more dust than elsewhere, and so some further evidence of the footprints likewise visible on the outside, there was no indication of any intrusion or disturbance. Ascending the stairs to the house above, we found the rooms there equally deserted, but all more or less in order.

The library was the last room to come under inspection. Conspicuous upon a

table, my searching gaze descried a leather-bound volume, reinforced with metal edges and supplied with a neat but efficient-looking lock. Gilt lettering on the leather cover proclaimed the book to be the diary of Armand de Brignac, and I felt that I was justified, in view of the disturbing import of my friend's letter, in forcing the lock which secured its pages. With some difficulty, and at the cost of complete ruination of the binding, I accomplished my purpose.

My inspection, however, was necessarily cursory, for I had to notify the authorities of the gruesome discovery of Aunt Celie's mutilated remains. Using the telephone in the hall, I soon apprised my old friend, Sheriff Grandison, of such details as I had knowledge.

"I'll notify the coroner, and be right over, Wynne!" The sheriff's voice on the wire was brusque and business-like as always, but I seemed to detect an added quality of harshness.

The house was supplied with electricity from a plant in the basement, and as the dusk was fast gathering, I switched on the lights and we settled down in the uncomfortable desolation of the place, to wait for the sheriff's arrival. We had not long to wait.

Through a window, I soon observed a pair of flickering headlights coming up the road in the deepening murk of late twilight. With a hair-raising screech of brakes, and a convulsive shudder as the ignition switch was turned off, a decrepit coupé came to an abrupt stop in front of the house. I ran down to the basement, and out through the one open window, calling to Grandison as he started up the front steps.

HASTILY explaining the locked doors, I shook hands with the lanky, grizzled old officer, whom I had known all

my life. Before I could give him my account of the tragedy in the negro quarters, a second and quite obviously smarter car sped up and parked behind the sheriff's vehicle. I greeted Doctor Duplessis, fat and affable, who had been the parish coroner for as long as I remember.

"What's up, Wynne?" puffed the doctor, after he had wrung my hand in both of his.

As briefly as I could, I told them what Andrew and I had found in Aunt Celie's cabin. They heard me through in silence, except for occasional cluckings from the voluble little doctor. The sheriff, who wasted few words, turned to Duplessis:

"All three of us can ride over to the quarters in your car: it would be a tight squeeze in mine."

Andrew had come out of the house and joined us. When I had introduced the youngster, Duplessis urged, with several dark hints I did not understand, that he be permitted to share the rumble seat with me, instead of remaining alone at the house. Obediently we climbed in, Grandison sharing the driver's seat.

As we rode, I wondered at the fact that, apparently, no plans had been made for the removal of the cadaver we were going to see. I voiced what was in my thoughts, and the sheriff favored me with a quick look over his shoulder.

"There ain't going to be any body!" The unexpected reply came clearly to me, through the open back of the car.

I repeated Grandison's statement in surprize, and demanded: "Why won't there be? What do you mean, sheriff?"

"Wait." There was a finality about the word that made me understand the futility of further questioning. Duplessis drove ahead without saying anything; but I sensed his excitement, and that but increased my own puzzlement.

We came to the quarters, and I picked

out the cabin we sought, with the aid of a powerful electric torch that Grandison handed me. The sheriff took over the flashlight as we quit the car, and hustled briskly into the shanty. The other three of us followed at his heels, Andrew and I somewhat less briskly.

Grandison played the beam of light from his torch in a wide arc about the room, until it rested upon the bed in the corner. . . .

"Well?" grunted the sheriff, while I gave vent to my surprize.

It was undoubtedly the same bed: there were the same bedclothes, with the same unmistakable dark stains upon them. Beyond those disordered coverings, those sinister dark patches that were not a part of their quilted patterns—the *bed was empty!* The body was gone!

"I told you so," said the sheriff, with glum satisfaction.

"Where did the body go, then?" I demanded. "You must have had it moved, since you were so sure it wouldn't be here."

"No," disputed Grandison, "I didn't have it moved, and I don't know where it is—I wish to God I did!"

"You were sure the body wouldn't be here," I insisted, "so you must have an idea what happened to it."

"Yes," grimly assented the sheriff, "I got an idea, all right."

"What sort of an idea?"

I waited for an answer, but Grandison remained obstinately silent.

"It's after sunset," Duplessis quietly interposed, "and when people die as folks around here are going to say old Celie died, they—come to life—between sunset and dawn!"

"It's all right for them to say so—but do you believe that sort of rot?" I scoffed, conscious of a chill along my spine in spite of my ridicule.

"Unless you leave Bonne Chasse very quickly," gently replied the doctor, "you're likely to learn that a lot of things you've thought were rot are horribly true." I was convinced, now, that his quietness of manner, so unnatural under the circumstances in one of his voluble temperament, was forced in order to cover up his actual excitement.

"We might as well be going back," Grandison curtly interrupted. Then: "Are you going to stop at Bonne Chasse tonight?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's your business, but I wouldn't, if I were you," the sheriff advised darkly.

"I'll chance it," said I, as we climbed once more into the car.

When we had come again to the hall, Grandison added, abruptly, "Got a gun?"

"Why, no," I answered, getting out of the rumble seat.

"It's just as well that he hasn't," observed Duplessis, between whom and the sheriff there seemed to be understanding. "The kind of ammunition he'd be using wouldn't be any good. I have a gun I'll give him—one that's loaded *right*."

I took the pistol he proffered with his words, a compact, vicious-looking automatic of blued steel.

"What will I need this for?" I asked.

"I hope you don't!" fervently declared the old sheriff. "But if you see Armand's wife, or old Celie—or *Armand!*—for God's sake don't hesitate to shoot! I mean that!"

I hardly knew whether to laugh or shiver. Before I could do either, Grandison bellowed a hasty farewell, and departed amid a series of explosions from his Ford's exhaust, and a rattling of fenders that flapped as if the contraption vainly tried to fly.

3. *The Diary of Dread*

I STARED down the road for a moment, then turned blankly to Duplessis. I wondered if the sheriff had suddenly lost his mind.

"He went off as if there had been no murder," I protested, "or as if there were nothing for him to do about it, in case there has!"

"*Corpus delicti*, you know!" wryly enlightened the doctor. "There wasn't any *body*, and as far as Grandison *knows*, there wasn't any murder. That gives the sheriff all the excuse he needs, eager as he is to wash his hands of the matter."

I turned hotly to Andrew.

"Although the sheriff and the coroner seem indifferent," I cried, "the people of this house have disappeared, and you and I know that old Celie was murdered in her cabin. I am going to stay here and get to the bottom of all this, if it takes a year! I don't want to stay alone: are you game to stick with me, for at least a week—and begin tonight?"

Doctor Duplessis started to voice a protest, but I waved him contemptuously aside. Andrew readily agreed to remain with me, but stipulated the necessity of first making a flying trip back to town for some clothes, and to inform his sister of his plans, and make those various other arrangements which normally attend an unexpected absence from home.

I accepted the condition as being reasonable; the more so as it would have been necessary to send for supplies for our larder, in any event. I also wanted to get my own clothes in the hand-bags at the depot check room.

As I handed him money with which to purchase provisions for about a week, a further thought occurred to me. Having no desire to entrust my stomach to Jackson's ministrations, and still less to my own, I asked him whether it would not

be possible to obtain the services of a temporary cook—one he knew to be steadfast and reliable. I was willing to guarantee a week's wages, and named a sum which I knew to be generous.

"I don't know——" Andrew shook a dubious head. Then, brightening: "Tommie might come! If it's all right with you?"

"By all means," I assented. I had not the least idea who Tommie might be, but he evidently had Andrew's full approval, and I was entirely content to have the problem solved so readily. Andrew climbed into his car.

"I'll be back by nine o'clock," he promised, letting in his clutch. Duplessis had stood silently by during this time, until Andrew roared down the road; then I felt his hand upon my arm.

"Come into the house, son," he said to me, gravely paternal. "There's a lot in the way of explanation—and warning—coming to you."

"It's about time!" I agreed shortly.

HE ACCOMPANIED me through the basement window, puffing as he was forced to climb the stairs to the floor above. I led the way to the library.

"Well, Wynne," commenced Duplessis, when we were comfortably settled in our chairs, "everything around Bonne Chasse has been in a state of unrest since Armand returned from the war with his wife. You knew she had died, of course?"

"Why, no," I exclaimed, considerably taken aback at this unexpected news. My irritation, which had mounted steadily for some time, prompted my complaint: "There seems to be a whole lot around here that everybody knows but me!"

"How well did you know Armand's wife?" The doctor puffed on a cigarette, ignoring my outburst.

"Not very well," I answered. "We met her together, in Paris right after the Armistice, and Armand married her after an unbelievably short courtship. Beyond the fact that she had been a Russian countess, and fled to Paris to escape the Bolshevik proscription, I know nothing at all of her—except, that is, that she was fascinatingly beautiful"—I hesitated, searching for the right words—"beautiful as Circe and Delilah must have been."

I did not add, aloud, that I had disliked Armand's Countess Helene on sight. I had seen progressively less of my friend during our remaining days in Paris, following his marriage, and only occasionally after we had returned separately to New Orleans.

My father died while I was in France, and his death left me alone and brought about the crash that swept away his shrunken fortune. I struggled hopelessly until, at length, an opportunity to rehabilitate myself offered in the North; and nearly two years passed before I again walked along the bayous, or gazed upon the moss-bearded oaks I loved so well. Until today, when I came at Armand's call.

Duplessis snubbed his cigarette; and, breaking in upon my musing, abruptly exclaimed, "Armand's tenants and plantation hands had a sullen, frightened hatred of his wife. I have seen, with my own eyes, women snatch their babes from her reach, and even shield them from her mere glance—openly, on her own husband's estate.

"The house servants, most of whom had been employed at Bonne Chasse throughout their entire lives, gradually deserted their posts, giving Armand—they avoided their mistress—evasive reasons for their departures, or no reason at all. Finally, only faithful old Celie remained, of the original domestic staff."

The doctor paused long enough to light another of his cigarettes.

"The queerest part of it all," Duplessis continued, "was that it began to be noticed, by even the most casual observers, how Armand appeared to have developed the same deadly hatred for his wife that his dependents long had entertained. He plainly avoided her, and when he commenced gradually to show evidence of ill health—although I was his physician, he failed to ask my services—I surmised, at first, that he suffered from a nervous disorder, which could arise very easily, in one of his naturally high-strung temperament, over chronic domestic difficulties.

"Then I observed, on two occasions when I happened to see him, that he appeared unnaturally weak, and his throat was wrapped with a silk muffler, although the weather was warm. That made me wonder . . ."

"Go ahead," I said. He had paused, seemingly, to wonder again.

"Then," he resumed, "two small children disappeared. One of them was an infant belonging to the family of a brutish, illiterate moss-picker who had already faced one subsequently unproven charge of infanticide, some years ago. That passed. But another babe disappeared, this time from equally lowly but much more reputable folk.

"The plantation hands, the shrimp-fishers and the moss-pickers on the bayous, said that Armand de Brignac's wife abducted them both! Abducted them for purposes upon which you may speculate for yourself!"

"What rot!" I cried. "What utter rot!" But I knew the possibilities of mongrel superstition.

"Wait," the doctor cried, his beady eyes alight with excitement that now was plainly manifest, "wait until I tell you something that you will think more out-

rageous than all the rest of it, combined:

"Do you know what Armand told me? He said, '*She should have been burnt at the stake! I would have driven a stake through her foul heart, except that I told Father Lavalle, and he watched to see that I did not!*'"

Ignoring my startled exclamation, the doctor rushed on, with the air of one determined to finish a matter and be done with it:

"There remains to tell you that Armand himself disappeared a few days ago, about a week after his wife's burial. I know that he made one trip to the city, and visited Judge Claybourne's office. That is all I do know—all that any one *knows*—yet!"

Duplessis closed his words with an abrupt gesture, and awaited my comment with half-defiant expectancy. As a matter of fact, I was completely nonplussed, and I do not remember to have said much, if anything. Evidently with some relief, the doctor prepared to leave.

"Call on me if you need me," he urged, with another of his pats on the arm; "don't hesitate to use the 'phone at any time—day or night—if you need me for anything at all."

I thanked him and saw him to his car.

RE-ENTERING the house, I decided that the library would be the place to occupy my time until Andrew's return. I wanted to go through Armand's diary again.

I commenced at the first entry in the book, which was dated almost two years previously, and read through the pages that followed with systematic care. I found many vague references to Helene, of a nature to establish the fact of his hatred for her; and my startled conviction grew that his obscure and often incoher-

ent later entries revealed a progressive fear and horror of the woman he had married.

My search for pointed disclosures was first rewarded, however, where Armand's pen had scrawled words that spoke eloquently of the agitation that had unsteadied his hand:

"I am positive [I read] that she is what I have feared. My God! These tiny wounds in my throat, that will not heal, this awful weakness: this is *her work!* And *this foul creature of the night is my wife!*"

Entered a month later, another passage seemed to shout aloud from its smeared page:

"Some one has finally done it! The father of one of those pitiful babes, or some one else who knew or suspected enough to be in a frenzy of fear and hatred of my *'wife'* (God pity me!) fired from without a window of her room, and shot her through the head! There will be no hunt for her assassin—her executioner, I should say!—as Doctor Duplessis (who is the coroner) believed what I told him, and already had suspicions of his own. There were no witnesses, and Duplessis had the courage to sign a certificate of death from heart failure, in his other capacity of physician to my family.

"If only I could be sure that she is truly dead, that she can be killed in this fashion! I fear, instead, that there has been loosed upon the world a horror in all its fullness. I would have settled the point, but Father Lavalle will not believe me. He guards her body from the stake I have already sharpened. . . ."

Then, this last entry:

"I have written Wynne, today, but I fear I have waited too long.

"I found a woman's footprints, this morning, in the dust of the pavement at the basement window I left open when I closed up all the other doors and windows. I forgot to lock it last night, or it may be that she called me in my sleep and I opened it for her. She was here in the house. There are wounds in my throat again, and I feel that accursed weakness. . . . But I do not understand why, when I awoke, my hands were soiled with fresh earth. . . ."

"Ah, if Wynne can but come in time!"

If I but came in time! I still did not know whether I had, or not. I had found enough to cause me consternation and apprehension, but nothing in Armand's diary disclosed his present condition or

whereabouts. My head spun from my efforts to review, in rational fashion, what I knew of the whole incredible mystery.

THE circumstances in which I found myself involved gripped me, however, with less than enough intensity to subdue my growing hunger. I had lunched in the early part of the afternoon, and found myself wishing that Jackson would hurry his return with the elements of a makeshift supper.

As I helplessly dropped the diary back upon the table, I heard the throaty purr of a motor coming swiftly up the road. A car came to a stop in front of the house; and in a moment I heard Jackson's voice, and I thought I caught an indistinct reply. Good, thought I: the capable and enterprising youngster has kept his promise and brought us a cook, despite the shortness of the time he had in which to work.

I heard them walking over the bricks toward the basement window through which I had entered, and I started to meet them. The hall was lighted, and I had previously located a master switch near the stairway from below, that controlled the lights in the basement. I turned it on, as I heard footsteps climbing the stairs.

I waited a moment, and suddenly started with surprize and disbelief in the evidence of my eyes. With the reflection of the light giving it a sheen like spun gold, a ruddy mass of wavy hair, framing an eager, piquant face, bobbed up the stairs. Two wide, dark blue eyes looked brightly upward into mine, evident enjoyment of my stupefaction dancing in their depths. The girl who climbed the stairs was Judge Claybourne's secretary!

I stammered something, and the girl laughed. Close behind her, Andrew grinned triumphantly.

"I told you she'd come and keep house for us, didn't I?" he demanded.

"You did not!" I contradicted. "You said something about somebody named 'Tommie' coming back with you, but you certainly didn't mention this young lady——"

"Well, *this* is Tommie. I thought you'd remember meeting her in Judge Claybourne's office."

"Tomasine, Mr. Randall," the girl laughed. "Andrew isn't very definite at times, I fear. The young rascal——she gave his arm an affectionate squeeze as she thus libeled him——"couldn't have kept me away after he told me what a perfectly gorgeous and goosefleshy mystery there is here. I've always wanted to be in on something real shuddery! Fortunately, I have had to defer my vacation this year, until now; and I have two whole weeks of my own, beginning tomorrow. I didn't have the means to do very much, and I was wondering how I was going to spend the time."

"Well," I stammered, "I——"

"After all," Tomasine reminded, with a smile that was the feminine counterpart of her brother's rake-helly grin, "you *did* want a cook, didn't you?"

I laughed. It was really funny, this idea of Judge Claybourne's secretary filling my order for a cook. At that, I reflected, it wouldn't be at all unpleasant to have her about; and she had an air of pleasant capability that promised much for our comfort. There was another side to it, however, and I sobered on reflecting that she might become involved in the events casting their somber shadows all about us. She read my thought.

"I'm capable of looking out for myself," she assured me. "I'm not given to hysterics, and that sort of thing. If Andrew can run risks, so can I; and besides, I know how much Judge Claybourne would like to have all this cleared up.

He's an old dear, and if I can help you solve the mystery, I'll be doing him a favor."

When a woman—especially a young and very pretty woman—makes up her mind to something, mere man might just as well give way. I surrendered (secretly pleased that I could not avoid it), and helped Andrew carry provisions into the kitchen.

I was really too near starvation to argue, anyway; and I did full justice to the tasty meal that Tomasine quickly put together, of cold canned food that I had never before known could be made so palatable.

4. *De Brignac's Lady Appears*

AFTER we had eaten and then assisted Tomasine in tidying up, I led them to the library, which I favored because of its comfortable chairs. What Andrew had told her, and what she had learned in Judge Claybourne's office, put Tomasine in possession of most of the facts about happenings at Bonne Chasse. I showed her Armand's letter and his diary.

"How are you going to start about unravelling things?" she asked. "I get the impression you don't expect much assistance from the sheriff?"

"You're right about the sheriff," I admitted. "And frankly, I don't know just how to go about getting at the bottom of this affair. All this talk—mostly insinuations—about vampires and that sort of thing——" I finished with a gesture indicating my bafflement.

"Do you believe that part of it?" Tomasine asked.

I hesitated. "That's rather a strain on credulity, don't you think?"

"Well," Tomasine evaded, "what little I knew of Mr. de Brignac indicates him to have been a man not given to wild imaginings. What he has written, partic-

ularly what he implies, constitutes a basis for some pretty startling speculations."

I shook my head, moodily. I was beginning to fear that the affair was too much for me. Andrew offered a practical suggestion.

"It's after ten o'clock," he said. "Suppose we turn in and sleep on it. In the morning we can start out fresh, and we may find something that will give us a lead."

"Good idea," I agreed, and Tomasine nodded. "If we can't make any progress tomorrow, I am going to call in private investigators and see what they can do."

LONG habit gave me a preference for sleeping alone; but I had previously given a thought to occupying a room that was furnished with two beds. I sensed an underlying disquietude in my surroundings that caused me to welcome the prospect of Andrew using the extra bed. Immediately adjoining this room was another comfortably furnished chamber, to which I showed Tomasine.

I am ordinarily a sound sleeper, but I had reached that state of mental fatigue where I was actually too tired to rest well. When I did finally drift into fitful sleep, long after Andrew's regular breathing betrayed his untroubled slumber, I slept un-easily, troubled with confused fragments of disordered dreams.

It must have been well after midnight when I started into full wakefulness, gripped with a feeling that all within the house was not as it should have been. Through the windows of the room poured a flood of moonlight, and it was plainly to be seen that here at least was nothing to account for the apprehension with which I had awakened. Mentally and wearily I cursed the mad dreams that would not let me rest. Clearly, there was nothing in this room, no sound within the

house, to warrant my disquietude. Nothing in this room . . . the words ran through my tired brain, with a sinister insinuation in the repetition. In *this* room!

Impelled by an impulse I could not resist, I slipped out of the bed. At least, I could take a look around, and so convince myself of my own foolishness. In case something should be wrong—after a moment of indecision, I took from beneath my pillow the pistol Doctor Duplessis had given me. Quietly opening the door, I slipped into the dark, unlighted hall.

The feeling that something was amiss grew stronger. Suddenly I caught my breath. There was a thin streak of moonlight athwart the hall—and it should not have been there! There was no way in which the moon could shine into that hall except through one of the rooms flanking it. The pencil of ghostly light came from within Tomasine's room—and I distinctly remembered seeing her close the door when she retired.

All my senses alert, I crept toward the barely opened door. I listened, straining my ears, but I heard no sound. The door was not sufficiently ajar for me to see within. Cautiously I opened it wider; and then I forgot caution at the scene that met my startled stare.

Tomasine's bed was near the windows, and I could partly see the outline of her body beneath the coverings. I say partly, because of the stooping figure that crouched over her, its back toward the door. The bending figure was shrouded in white, and there was something in its attitude that chilled me as I looked. Over all the scene the ghostly moonlight flooded.

I saw that the intruder was a woman, but I did not then perceive why that realization should send fresh shivers along my back. Whoever this intruder, she had no right to be there. Whatever her mo-

tive—suddenly, dread intuition prompting, I gave a hoarse cry. The crouching figure whirled, and I cried out again, with horror in my voice, but nothing of surprise. Something had whispered swiftly that I would gaze—as I was gazing—into the flaming eyes of Helene de Brignac!

"What are you doing here?" I demanded harshly.

The white, dead face smiled, and the smile was more dreadful than any grimace of hate. The eyes, curiously lifeless and yet at the same time lit with a cold, feral glare—those eyes burned into mine, held me spellbound and helpless. I knew, in that awful moment, that here was a horror that had no right to walk the earth. And I stood helpless, bound by the grip of those hellish orbs. The white-shrouded thing that had been Armand's wife glided toward me. Pallid arms reached out, white hands that were too white, with long slender fingers, reached under my chin . . . to bend back my head . . .

At the touch of those cold fingers, clammy with the chill of death, something snapped inside me, breaking the spell that held me enthralled. I leaped backward, a strangled cry in my throat, and fired pointblank with the pistol in my hand.

The shrouded figure screamed with pain, and I knew that I had scored a hit. It backed away toward the windows, one of which was open; while a fleeting thought of wonder flashed through my mind that, if she were what I thought, bullets could harm her. Then I remembered what the doctor had said about having the "right kind" of ammunition, and I felt swift elation.

"Silver bullets!" I cried, while the Thing screamed again and scampered for the window. She tumbled through the opening, spreading her arms so that her

white shroud flapped in startling semblance of two monstrous, pallid batwings. I fired again as she leaped from the window-sill, and knew that I had missed.

NO MORE than a few minutes had elapsed since I had left my bed. Andrew was at my side, demanding:

"What's the matter? I heard your shot; what happened?"

"Wait!" I commanded. "Turn on the light and let us see to your sister."

The light snapped on, and we bent over Tomasine. She stirred and, gasping, struggled to a sitting position.

"Those eyes!" cried the girl. "Shining at me out of a dead face in the mist that seemed to come with her! . . . And her red lips . . . they were alive!"

"Who?" Andrew demanded. "Whose lips?"

"You aren't hurt," I soothed; I could see that her smooth, exposed throat bore no marks. Thank God I had been in time!

"For the love of heaven tell me what happened!" Andrew demanded in exasperation.

"Something—some whisper of instinct—wakened me and sent me into the hall," I told him. "I saw Tomasine's door ajar, and knowing that I had seen her close it, looked inside. I saw—Helene de Brignac—bending over your sister! I shot her once, I think, and missed her with another shot as she jumped through the window."

"All those stories must be true, then," whispered Tomasine.

I nodded, slowly and reluctantly.

"I'm afraid we've encountered something I didn't dream could exist."

"Hadn't we better look outside, under the window, and see if we can follow whatever it was that hopped through?"

This practical suggestion came from Andrew.

"Yes," I assented. "If you will stay with Tomasine, I'll have a look."

"I'm going too," Tomasine declared. "Wait until I slip on some clothes, and I'll be right with you—I don't think I want to sleep any more tonight!"

"I don't imagine any of us will sleep much more, tonight," I was forced to agree.

"Look," directed Andrew, "you hit her, all right! There's blood on the window-sill."

We hurried to the window, verifying the fact that at least one of my bullets had found its mark.

"It's her blood; no mistake about it," I said.

"Hurry!" Tomasine excitedly exclaimed. "If she is hit, she may not have been able to get away——"

"And I can complete the job," I finished grimly. "You're right. Come on, Andy!"

We returned to our room and hastily pulled on trousers over pajamas, slipping our feet into shoes. Buttoning my coat, I stepped into the hall, Andrew following. Quick as we had been, Tomasine came through her door at the same time, fully clad.

I turned the master switch at the head of the stairs, lighting the basement. Mentally, I resolved to have a locksmith come over as soon after daylight as I could get one, and have keys fitted to all the doors.

WE UNLOCKED the basement window and stepped out. The window through which the Thing had leaped was on the opposite side of the house, and we hurried around. There was no mark in the turf to indicate that anything had leaped from the veranda, falling heavily

to the ground. Andrew remarked as much.

"Of course not," Tomasine pointed out. "It was stupid of us to expect it—naturally, she ran down the steps."

This was logical, so we ran to the steps, hoping to pick up the trail there. Sure enough, a flashlight revealed another of the dark stains upon a step, although it was only a small spot.

"She wasn't hit hard, evidently," Andrew deduced. "She didn't spill a whole lot of blood." He took my torch and swept it in a wide arc, illuminating the brick pavement beneath the veranda. Suddenly he gave a startled exclamation. "There's another stain!"

"And another!" cried Tomasine. "It looks as if she went around that corner of the house, under the porch."

Such indeed seemed to be the case. We discovered several more of the blood-stains, fairly marking the direction our quarry had taken. And the trail led plainly to that basement window through which we had just come!

We stared at one another in bewilderment.

"She's gone back into the house," Tomasine whispered.

I shook my head. "She can't have got in that way," I reminded. "The shutters were barred on the inside, up until the time we opened them. I'm afraid we're up a tree though; I suppose we may as well go back in the house, and wait for daylight."

While it seemed evident that nothing could have gained entrance to the house through the barred and solid shutters of that window, I was nevertheless careful to look about as we went inside, searching for more of the telltale stains that we had followed. I found none, however, and called attention to the fact with some relief. Again fastening the shutters, and

then the window, we passed to the floor above.

5. *The Traitor*

None of us felt that we wanted further sleep. We stayed in the kitchen while Tomasine made strong coffee, which we then took into the library, preferring to drink it there. The steaming beverage warmed and soothed us, in a measure restored our normal perspective. Tomorrow, I vowed, would see the end of the terror that gripped Bonne Chasse. I said as much, aloud.

Tomasine regarded me with a sudden puzzled frown.

"One thing that we seem to be taking very lightly," she pointed out, "is the fate or whereabouts of Mr. Armand Brignac. If we could locate him, we should be able to solve the whole mystery."

"All we should discover," I disagreed, "would be Armand's own fate. As far as concerns what we have to do, I think I know that already. Much as my intelligence rebels at the idea, the evidence compels the belief that Helene de Brignac—*whom we saw tonight*—has become one of those monsters whose existence outside of folklore and legend I would previously have ridiculed: a vampire."

Tomasine shuddered, and her brother stared at me across his empty cup.

"Fortunately," I continued, with an uncomfortable feeling that, in spite of all we know, belief in such things was ridiculous, "very fortunately, the legends of vampires and werewolves that have come down to us from olden times, also tell us how to kill such horrors. Tomorrow, I intend to open Helene de Brignac's grave, and do what there is to be done—"

I saw Tomasine, who was sitting facing the door, gasp suddenly, and her eyes

W. T.—2

open wide, while a familiar voice interrupted:

"It won't be at all necessary, my dear Wynne!"

I whirled, with an exclamation of pardonable surprize, and beheld, standing in the doorway to the hall, none other than Armand de Brignac!

"Armand!" I cried. "Where did you come from?—and at this hour?" I rose to offer him my hand. Strangely, he made no move to accept it, but walked over and seated himself in an unoccupied chair.

"I've been away," he vaguely replied to my question. "I've just got back from—er—a trip. Sorry not to have been here when you arrived, after sending for you and all that, but I'll explain it satisfactorily in the morning: it's too long a story to tell now."

This did not seem at all like my friend of old, and there was an air about him, as well as a certain elusive suggestion, that faintly perturbed me.

I looked at him, for a moment, somewhat at a loss for words. Then, using what tact I could, I blurted out an account of our recent disturbing visitation. Armand listened in silence, and with astounding indifference. When I had finished, he ignored the entire subject! As if he had heard not even a word of what I said, he coldly observed:

"I see you have Judge Claybourne's secretary here"—he had dismissed Andrew with an uninterested glance—"which is fortunate, as it happens. I am faced with the necessity of again leaving Bonne Chasse—for a longer period of time, I fear, and there are some changes I would like to have made in my will. A codicil—I believe that is the correct term for it, Miss Jackson?"

Acknowledging Tomasine's affirming nod, he asked, "As you seem indisposed

to sleep, would you mind taking down the changes I have in mind—now? I am somewhat pressed for time. You can transcribe your notes on the typewriter on that table in the corner."

"Why do you want to draw up a codicil to your will at this ungodly hour, Armand?" I asked. "Can't it wait until morning?"

"I can't be here in the morning," Armand answered. "I want to be sure of certain arrangements, and there is no telling what may happen, nor when: 'In the midst of life we walk in death,' you know."

For some reason, the quotation seemed a ghastly thing to me. Perhaps it was because Armand's face was so white . . . so dead. . . .

"I don't mind," Tomasine said. "I believe I have a ruled notebook in my handbag. If you'll wait until I get it——"

I thought, at the time, that she left the library with more haste than was necessary, as if she feared, oddly, that her departure might be hindered. I have since realized that her feminine perceptiveness, more delicately attuned than my own, in a measure warned her of what was to follow.

"It was good of you to come, Wynne," Armand said, after a moment of silence. "I certainly owe you an explanation—and, in due course, you shall have one." It seemed to me there was a curious, underlying irony in his flat, almost perfunctory words.

"There's a lot more than your failure to meet me in need of an explanation," I answered, rather forcibly, as Tomasine reentered with a notebook and pencil.

SHE was hardly seated, her pencil poised, when Armand, as if he could not restrain his eagerness to be done with it, commenced to dictate.

He directed that I, as before, was to continue his sole legatee, inheriting his entire estate in the event of his death. There was one reservation, however, which constituted the simple substance of the codicil, and which was curious enough in its way. His house, with five acres of ground of which it was the center, was to be shut up and securely boarded, *to remain for ever unaltered or unoccupied by me, my heirs or assigns, or any other persons whatsoever!* A trust fund was provided to take care of taxes on the property thus reserved.

"Type it, quickly!" Armand urged Tomasine, when he had ceased dictating. He was positively in a fever to be finished with the matter.

Obediently, Tomasine sat down at the machine in the corner. There was not a great deal of typing to be done, and her shorthand pothooks were speedily transcribed into legible matter.

Swiftly, yet, so it seemed, apprehensively and anxiously, Armand read through the finished draft; after which he borrowed my fountain pen and affixed his signature. Returning the paper to Tomasine, he requested that she and Andrew sign as witnesses. To me he explained that, as I was his heir, it probably would be better to leave me out of it.

"I shall mail it to Judge Claybourne," he concluded, "along with a letter explaining that I am leaving the country for an indefinite period—perhaps for ever. I have no doubt," he informed Tomasine, with what sounded like sinister insinuation, "that your signatures can be verified, if necessary."

He rose from his chair, straightening to his full height. With the action, he discarded the mask that he had, with obvious impatience, compelled himself to wear.

"Now," he abruptly addressed himself

to me, "where is the weapon with which you wounded my wife?"

"Why," I stammered, taken aback at this sudden and unexpected turn, "I put it back under my pillow, in the bedroom."

"Ah!" breathed Armand. "Good—very good! And that being the case, let me show you something, my *dear* friend!"

Puzzled, but still unsuspecting, I watched as he walked over and took down a pair of bright rapiers from their pegs above the mantel. I noticed, as he flexed the long blades and tested their points with satisfaction, that Tomasine was watching him with a sort of tense expectancy. I heard her breath catch sharply, and vaguely wondered why, as Armand laid one of the weapons on the near-by table, raising the other in almost the same motion.

Tomasine fumbled in sudden desperation at something in her bosom. Then, to my utter stupefaction and horror, just as Tomasine jerked out the revolver I had left beneath my pillow—with an air of cold detachment, Armand buried his slender, vicious blade deep in Andrew's body!

6. *A Duel With the Dead*

TOMASINE'S weapon exploded as her brother clutched his side and, with a choked cry, fell to the floor. She had acted too late, however; for, with the same flick of his wrist that served to withdraw the *épée* after his thrust, Armand's blade lashed across her wrist like a whip, deflecting her aim and sending the gun spinning.

For one frozen second I had stood staring and rooted in my tracks, while Armand felled Andrew. Now I leaped for the pistol, determined to end this creature whom I saw revealed a fiend.

"One moment, my dear Wynne!" de

Brignac mocked, the point of his swift blade forcing me back.

"You are another such thing as your wife!" I hotly accused, flinching in spite of myself before eyes that glowed redly in the dead waxen mask of his face.

"Is it not splendid," he leered, in tacit admission of my charge, "that, after the foolish hatred—at least on my part—that marred the association of our natural lives, my dear wife and I should finally be reconciled and share a closer kinship, a greater passion, than we could ever have known before?"

I made a furious gesture of revulsion, held in my tracks by the blade, the nonchalant, careless poise of which deceived me not at all. Armand—the Thing that had been Armand—wagged his head in mock reproach.

"How you misjudged her!" he chided. "How *I* misjudged her! All the while I loathed her, thinking her a thing of evil, intending only evil toward me, her lover and husband. Yet she sought merely to introduce me to that state of forbidden but transcendent ecstasy I now enjoy."

"Why, then, did you write me, begging me to save you from the obscene condition of which you now—damn you!—so glibly boast? You, whose least foulness is the murder of that boy: I ask you—*why?*"

"Because I was blind," he answered regretfully, "and did not realize what I did. I have since learned much. I have learned delights that burn in their intensity; of nights that are a delirium of joy. Doubtless the days I spend in the cold earth with my Helene would not be pleasant, except that we sleep the dreamless, unknowing slumber of death. But our nights together, when we revel to our satisfaction . . . ah, the nights!"

"Monster!" I grated, calculating my chances of reaching the pistol on the

floor, or the sword on the table. I wondered whether, if I should create a sudden distraction, Tomasine could get the gun. She looked tearfully up at me, from where she knelt beside Andrew, and I think she read my thought aright. But Armand also understood.

"Come," he urged, "be reasonable. You can not hope to get the pistol, and you have no need of stratagem to obtain the sword. You must realize, of course, that friendship belonged to you and that Armand I once was: to all those things that, for me, are past. Yet there is some lingering sentiment, for which Helene chided me (and to which she is a stranger) that moves me still to make some concession to bygone friendship."

"Just as you made concession to the loyalty and devotion of your old black mammy," I bitterly interrupted. Armand smiled, with the air of one correcting a child.

"Even there," he enlightened, "Helene had to—to do what was done. It had to be done: old Celie knew too much." He laughed, a grating, sardonic laugh. "What annoyed Helene most was that I had some slight added compunction on account of the old woman's color!"

"Let's finish this," I panted, afraid that my fury would unsteady my nerves. "You intimated that you were willing for me to have the other sword. If so——"

"Yes," mockingly conceded de Brignac; "take it—for dead friendship's sake." He lowered his point, and I feverishly seized the rapier that glittered upon the table.

OUR blades leapt up in swift salute; a split second later and they swept into play. I laughed as steel met steel. It was a mere matter of tradition that we should both be expert swordsmen; but I knew myself to wield the faster blade, to

possess the stronger wrist. Swordsmanship is the one and only accomplishment at which I have excelled. Armand matched my laugh with a sneering, mocking grin.

"I said a trace of sentiment remained for friendship, my cockerel," he taunted, "and that is right—a *bare* trace." He parried a thrust that I had been sure would prove his undoing, laughing in his turn. "Do you think me a fool? Bah! It is you who are the fool: I have powers the old Armand never had. No mere mortal swordsman could stand against me now!"

By the barest margin, I parried a thrust that nearly passed my guard. I countered with a thrust of my own, only to have it deftly swept aside.

Dimly, I was aware that Tomasine, white-faced and staring, strained forward on her knees beside Andrew, watching us with fascinated horror.

Back and forth within the limited space at our disposal, we weaved and strained. Once Armand stumbled against a chair; then my blade furrowed his wrist. First blood! Armand merely jeered:

"What matter? Again I say you are a fool: if you thrust me through the heart, yet—*steel can not kill me!*"

That was true! A vampire could be killed, made truly dead for all time, only by a wooden stake driven through its heart, or——

"Tomasine!" I shouted. "Get the pistol—*it's loaded with silver bullets!* I'll hold him away from you, but in God's name, be quick!"

Desperately I beat at de Brignac's seemingly enchanted blade. Sweeping his point over my head, I stepped in close, trying for a desperate maneuver. As we strained, toe to toe, I suddenly whipped my sword downward, away from his steel, describing a narrow arc that ended in a hammering blow of my guard against the heel of

his blade. I had hoped to disarm him, or at the risk of breaking my own, at least to snap his weapon. As it was, Armand shifted, so that my trick failed; and he came near to ending me with a furious counterthrust.

I knew that I had met more than my match, felt myself weakening. Tomasine must hurry, slip past Armand and get that pistol, or it would soon be too late. And with me disposed of, she would be left alone with—that—Thing. . . .

My last strength went into a desperate engagement of Armand's blade, to keep it from me and so give Tomasine another second. I knew, now, that I had no hope of doing more. Tomasine must dodge past our weaving legs, past our biting, snarling blades that swung, straining, in a fanned arc from side to side.

"Hurry!" I panted, grudging the breath it cost me. Then I saw that her fingers had reached the butt of the gun—knew that Armand saw. "*Silver bullets!*" The phrase seemed to sing from my tired blade.

With a yelp of fear, de Brignac leaped away, flinging his sword point-foremost at my throat. Taken unawares, I parried tardily, and it scratched my skin. But that was all; and Armand, with one last snarl of mingled fright and rage, scampered down the hall before Tomasine could fire. Seizing the pistol from her hand, I rushed in hot pursuit.

7. Tomasine Declines to Quit

ARMAND was not in sight in the hall, but I felt certain that he had not entered any of the rooms opening from it. For one thing, I knew that all the doors had been closed, and I had heard no noise such as he must have made in his haste, had he opened one of them. Aside from that, I had an instinctive con-

viction that he had scuttled down the stairs to the basement. And the door to the stairs was open. . . .

Hastily I threw on the light switch, and bounded recklessly below. Although I ransacked the basement from end to end, there was no sight of Armand. Then I thought of that window which was, so far, the only way into and out of the house. As I had suspected, the bolt was drawn, the heavy shutters slightly ajar. . . . This was the way my bird had flown. I knew that the pursuit into the night was useless; and above was Andrew, wounded, perhaps killed, by the monster who once had been my dearest friend. Again I barred the window, and retraced my way upstairs.

I found Andrew half unconscious and very weak, apparently from loss of blood. Tomasine had already summoned Doctor Duplessis, with whom she was acquainted through her connection with Judge Claybourne. We put the youngster to bed, making him comfortable and stanching his wound as best we could; after which there was nothing for us to do but sit and wait, and watch for the doctor's arrival.

To do him justice, Duplessis was not long on the way. We heard his car speeding up the road and, shortly, the doctor bustled into the basement and up the stairs. With only a few words about what had happened, I let Tomasine hurry him in to her brother.

After a careful examination, Duplessis greatly relieved our fears by expressing his belief that Andrew's hurt was not grave. No vital organ appeared to have suffered injury.

Naturally, the doctor was consumed with curiosity, and demanded full details of our encounter with Armand, and his wounding of Andrew. So I led him once again into the library, where Tomasine served the coffee she had hastily prepared.

As I rapidly related what had happened, from the time of Armand's startling appearance to his escape, with me in hot pursuit, Duplessis listened with absorbed interest. When I had finished the narrative, he rose to take his leave.

With grave friendliness, and an assuring hand upon my shoulder, he promised: "If there's any way I can help you, Wynne, I've already told you I'll be glad to do it. I'll be back to see the young man, some time in the morning. If you'd like me to, I think I can arrange to stay a while and help you settle this affair."

I thanked him sincerely, gladly accepting his offer. With a kindly word of encouragement to Tomasine, the doctor took his leave. I accompanied him to our basement exit, then hurried back to the girl.

"I've just looked in at Andrew," she said, "and found him sleeping." A shadow of anxiety clouded her eyes. "I do hope that funny little fat doctor is right in saying his wound is not serious."

"I am confident that he is right," I soothed her. "Some of the people down here are rather primitive, and knife and gunshot wounds are probably less of a novelty to Doctor Duplessis than to most of his urban colleagues."

"I don't want to go back in that room alone," Tomasine complained irrelevantly. "I'm worn out, and so sleepy I can hardly hold my eyes open, but I'm afraid to go back to sleep."

"Well," I suggested, "why not curl up in that big chair and rest a while? We've only about two hours to wait for sunrise. . . . It sort of gives me the creeps, too, to think about sleeping in this house at night."

Tomasine shivered and nodded. "Yes," she agreed, "at night, when those—*Things*—are alive."

Her head drooped, bravely as she tried to stay awake and talk to me. Poor girl!

She had been in the house less than one full night, and had, in that time, encountered a tumult of fear and horror greater than falls to the lot of an average person in a lifetime.

I SAT and watched her, settled comfortably in the depths of the great soft chair, saw her succumb to the weariness that showed in her heavy eyes, in the droop of her tired mouth. She slept.

In relaxation, one slender, rounded leg displayed a disquieting length of sheer, shimmering hose. Above the other knee, half tucked away beneath her, I had a glimpse of smooth, white flesh. In sudden confusion I averted my eyes, feeling guilty of unfairness and, under the circumstances, oddly embarrassed.

A surge of tenderness swept me. Tomasine was so sweet, so brave and capable! Under the strain of what she had endured, the average woman would have been a hysterical wreck. Well, tomorrow she must leave, go back to town and away from this breeding-place of horror. Meanwhile, I made sure that the pistol, with its remaining bullets of silver, lay on the table, ready to my hand. Until sunrise brought safety, I would watch and guard her.

But I, too, was tired. Just for a moment, I closed my eyes, so heavy had they become. Just for an instant, and then I would rouse, throw off this creeping lethargy. My lids felt as if they must have been weighted with lead . . . I was so . . . tired. . . .

Morning came. I awoke with a guilty start, and much the same feeling that must come to a sentry on wartime duty who awakes to the realization of having slept at his post. The sun was streaming in through the windows. My feeling of guilt gave way to a sense of thankfulness that the night of horror was safely past.

Taking care to make no noise, I rose and slipped from the room. Entering the bedchamber on tiptoe, I first satisfied myself that Andrew still lay in apparently normal sleep; after which I went to the kitchen, and there set about brewing the black coffee with which every true Louisianian begins the day. When the last drop of scalding water had been dripped slowly through the fragrant coffee, I filled two cups and carried them into the library.

Tomasine had barely wakened, and was sleepily rubbing her eyes open with her knuckles. Her nose wrinkled appreciatively at the aroma which accompanied my entrance.

"Good morning," I gave her deliberately cheerful greeting. She responded brightly, and took the cup I offered.

The piping coffee dispelled a measure of the fearful reality of the night just past, but it did not serve to lessen my determination that Tomasine should be sent back to the city. I broached the subject over my cup.

She, as I had half expected, refused to consider my proposal.

"There won't be any need for me to go back," she protested. "You have already said that there were ways in which to really kill those—things—haven't you?"

"Yes," I admitted, "granting the existence of such beings (which it seems that we, at least, certainly must do!), there are prescribed means of dealing with them."

"Well, then," Tomasine triumphantly made her point, "you will have to do it in the daytime, won't you? And you surely aren't going to wait a week!"

She had the right of it, at that. I admitted that I intended to do what must be done, that very day, and as quickly as possible.

"I am waiting only for Doctor Duples-

sis," I told her. "Folklore is a hobby of his, and his assistance will be valuable. His status as coroner, of course, makes his presence as a witness to what happens particularly desirable. Armand, unlike his wife, isn't even officially dead, you know."

Tomasine nodded understanding. "You can go with him as soon as he has looked at Andrew. He and I will be perfectly safe here during daylight."

There was plenty of time to pack her off to town later, if I failed to accomplish before nightfall what I planned to do. We agreed to let it go at that, for the time being, and went into the kitchen to fix breakfast while waiting for Duplessis.

The doctor drove up, and I admitted him, just as we had finished the meal.

Andrew had awakened and called to Tomasine, while the doctor was coming into the house. The youngster grinned weakly as I followed Duplessis into the room.

"How about some breakfast?" he demanded. "I don't have to starve, on top of everything else, do I?"

Duplessis, after examining his patient, expressed complete satisfaction with his condition, and told Tomasine she might give him the food he demanded.

8. *We Drive the First Stake.*

WHILE Tomasine busied herself with Andrew's breakfast, Duplessis casually led me aside. Without preamble, he plunged into the subject which was uppermost in both our minds.

"Judge Claybourne sneered at me," the doctor reminded, a shade of bitterness in his words, "when I hinted to him of certain fears I entertained, and which, in the light of last night's events, seem well grounded. I take it for granted you agree that we have to deal with creatures who

have no place in a normal world—in short, with vampires?"

"Twenty-four hours ago, I would have considered the existence of such creatures an impossibility. Today"—I spread my hands in a gesture of helplessness—"well, as you say, I have no choice except to admit that they do exist."

Duplessis nodded vigorously. "The beliefs that have come down to us out of mankind's dawn have, I believe, their roots always in fact. As we progressed through the ages, the more intelligent men gradually discarded what they came to call the superstitions of the ancients. The peasantry, keeping close to the primeval soil, have not become calloused to the promptings of *hereditary memory*. . . . We know they are right in believing in such things as werewolves, vampires, and other beings which are of the same host of evil!"

The chubby disciple of Hippocrates wagged a stubby finger before my nose.

"Now, Wynne, the point of all this is that, fortunately for us, the same legends which tell of the vampire also tell how he is to be dealt with. Do you follow me?"

"Oh, yes," I answered, rather inanely, I felt; "they have to be shot with silver bullets, or caught in their graves during daytime, and wooden stakes driven through their hearts to render them forever harmless."

"Well," Duplessis indicated significantly, "we drive some stakes, do we not?"

"Yes," I exclaimed—"we drive some stakes! Let us be about it!"

"Good!" cried the doctor, smacking one fat fist into the palm of his other hand. "I have some sharpened stakes, that I brought along for the purpose, out there in my car." He hesitated a moment before adding, "They have been sprinkled with holy water that I obtained from Father Lavalle. I not only finally succeeded in

convincing him of what he has until now refused to believe, but also obtained something else from the good priest—the giving of which, if the archbishop knew of it, would call forth the thunders of wrath from that outraged prelate. Our parish priest, if you understand me, was once a simple French peasant; the archbishop is an intellectual ascetic. Well!"

"What is it?" I demanded, with natural curiosity. Duplessis shook his head in refusal.

"That I have promised not to tell. I will say this much, however: It is something with which to—torture—the things which were Armand and his wife, either or both of them, into telling us what we must know before we can complete what we have to do."

My face must have expressed lack of understanding, for the doctor went on to explain: "You comprehend, do you not, that several children, mere babes, have disappeared since Helene de Brignac came to Bonne Chasse? And that she is suspected by most people hereabout of being responsible? In short, that the victims of the vampire themselves become vampires—and we must make her tell us the whereabouts of her victims, since they did not (as ordinarily would have been the case) gradually succumb in their homes to her secret visitations, and so be buried in places known to us? We must find those poor little babies!"

"How horrible!" I cried. "The others are bad enough, God knows, but *infant* vampires—"

The impressionable little doctor nodded wretchedly; his revulsion was not less than my own. He repeated my own earlier words:

"We drive some stakes, you and I. . . . Let us be about it!"

I called Tomasine from her brother's bedside; and without any details, told her

we were off to find the daytime resting-places of our visitors of the previous night, and kill for ever the terrors of Bonne Chasse.

"There is no danger—to you?" she whispered.

"None, not in the good daylight." I reassured her. I had seen something in her eyes that, as I went with Duplessis to his car, gave me the feeling that all the charnel horrors of earth and hell were things of little consequence.

DUPLESSIS threw his car into gear, and we set off in silence. Both of us knew where we were bound. Armand's wife—I wondered about Armand himself—naturally would lie in the de Brignac family plot in the cemetery of the parish church. This was our destination, and we were not long in arriving. Duplessis stopped the car on the roadside and we dismounted.

The doctor got an iron maul and stout wooden stakes from the rear of the coupé. The stakes were about two feet long and pointed on one end. To me he handed a small iron pinch-bar.

We entered the cemetery, which was set some distance back of the church, well off the road, and screened from view of the casual passer-by by a tall, thick hedge along an iron fence. The burial ground was tended by a part-time sexton, who was elsewhere just then. I suspected that Duplessis had connived with Father Lavallo to insure his absence. We found the grave we sought, unquestioned and unseen.

The cemetery was on fairly high land near the river, well drained, and here it had not been necessary to follow the practice generally observed in that region of lowlands, of interring the dead in tombs set above the level of the ground. The last mistress of Bonne Chasse had been

laid in a place that, even without the aid of a terse inscription, we at once identified by the new and unweathered appearance of the thick flat slab and severe square headstone that marked it. There was something repellent in the very starkness of the smooth, dead-white marble.

Duplessis took the pinch-bar from my hand, placing it beneath the marble slab covering the grave. The slab was heavy, but it slid to one side with more ease than I had anticipated.

"Well," said the doctor, "now we dig." And dig we did. We dug great shovelfuls of earth from the oddly loose dirt that presumably covered Helene de Brignac, working in haste and piling a growing heap to one side. My shovel struck something that resisted its thrust. A few more scoops and a casket lay uncovered to our view.

Duplessis took a deep breath. We hesitated. After all, we had no enthusiasm in despoiling the grave of what it rightfully claimed. Then I think we realized, simultaneously, that we were there but to confirm the grave in its own, and that we had a task in which necessity, rather than our liking, played the principal part. Duplessis pried at the top of the casket. It came off, with the same unexpected ease that marked our shovelling of the dirt from the grave. I swore, and Duplessis made a sound that was like a woman's high-pitched scream. . . .

The body in Helene de Brignac's grave was not her own!

"Aunt Celie!" I whispered, between lips that grudged the words. Duplessis laughed, hysterically.

"Of a certainty," he cried. "Armand's wife forced *him*, before he finally died of her attentions, to prepare another resting-place for the two of them! Naturally! She foresaw that we would make this

visit, and so forestalled it. For the time being, it is checkmate."

"At least," I dismally suggested, "we can relieve poor old Celie——?"

"Yes," agreed the doctor, "at least we may do that much."

I motioned with my hand and turned away; Duplessis understood that I left the deed to him. From earliest memory, poor, faithful old Aunt Celie had held a place in my affections, and I had not the doctor's professional callousness. I walked farther away.

DUPLESSIS drove the stake. With the first sharp impact of his maul against the wood, there burst upon my ears an awful screaming, a crescendo of shrieking agony that ripped my taut nerves in shreds. Despite my inclination, I whirled and looked back. Of the turbulence and writhing agony, the livid hate and anguish within that grave at which I looked, I leave all unsaid but this. Duplessis, his swarthy, rotund face for once a putty gray, grimly mauled home the stake.

All at once the writhing, screaming thing lay still beneath the doctor's blows. The soft fingers of contentment smoothed hate and torment from the poor black face at our feet. For one brief instant it seemed that the old *Tante* Celie I had known and loved looked up at me, ineffable peace and a message of great thankfulness in the depths of her dim, tired eyes.

"It is finished," croaked Duplessis. He sprinkled a few clear drops from a small vial down upon the quiet figure. "Now, poor soul, go find that 'Land of Jordan' of which you loved so well to sing."

Tears rolled slowly down upon my cheeks as we shoveled back the earth and restored the violated grave. We were glad to leave that place.

Once, midway of our return to the

house, Duplessis stopped the car. He took a pint flask from a door pocket, and passed it to me. "I think a little of that would help," he said, simply. I drank, as did he when I returned the flask. The sunshine, as much as the whisky, served as a stimulant that raised our spirits by the time we had come again to the house. We sat awhile in the car and talked.

"I'm afraid that you'll have to endure another night of it, Wynne," the doctor sighed. "Helene and Armand put old Celie in Helene's grave, in the hope, I assume, that they would have done away with us before we had time to accomplish what we have just come from doing. Where they have made their own den, where they have hidden their other victims—those poor little babes—we do not know. We must find that out, tonight—from them."

"Then Tomasine goes back to town," I asserted. Duplessis looked dubious.

"She ought to go," he agreed, "but I doubt that she will. Her brother should not be moved, and I do not believe she will go away and leave him here." He found the heart to chuckle, giving me a sly glance from the corners of his eyes. "It might be that she would refuse to leave anyway, even if he *could* go with her! Eh?"

"She's going, just the same," I rejoined, half angrily because of the flush I felt creeping upward to my ears.

But the doctor was right, as I found when we entered the house. Tomasine refused, pointblank, what she termed the desertion of Andrew.

"Then I'll send to the city for a dozen private policemen, and keep every light in the house burning all night," I promised, when I found that argument was useless.

"You can't do that," Duplessis objected. "It would only cause those fiends to

seek elsewhere for victims not so well prepared to receive them. We *want* them to come here, and fight on what is as much our ground as theirs. . . . You must remember that each new victim becomes a fresh recruit to the ranks of the menace we are fighting."

"We have only one gun," I warned, realizing the weight of his contention, "and but four of the silver bullets in it."

"I brought along three revolvers more," Duplessis promptly returned, "all loaded with silver, and a half-dozen extra bullets for your own. We fight, my boy, and I feel that we shall win."

"You're staying with us?" I asked.

"I'm staying," he affirmed quietly. "This is as much my fight as yours."

There was a heartening feel in the grip of his stubby fingers, when I instinctively extended him my own.

9. *Vampires Strike—and Tomasine Disappears*

THERE were not very many preparations we could make against the coming night, but the locksmith to whom Tomasine had telephoned came and fitted keys to the front and rear doors of the house, and to the other two that opened upon opposite sides of the veranda. At least, I thought, we no longer had to come and go through the basement window. This gave me another idea—that of securely nailing shut the one open lower window, and, as a further precaution, spiking all the others to prevent them being opened. I felt, when I had done it, that we were secure against attack from that quarter.

Later, after lunch, Duplessis advised spending the afternoon in sleep. The soundness of this suggestion was obvious; and Tomasine and I, in particular, were quick to follow it.

When we awoke, toward the close of

day, we faced the coming of darkness with more confidence than exhaustion and jangling nerves would have permitted. Duplessis, who had not needed as much sleep as we, had attended Andrew regularly between short naps. He announced the boy to be even less seriously hurt than he had already believed, and able to withstand any nervous shock he might experience. The doctor went so far as to give him one of the four pistols we had, which Andrew fondled with grim satisfaction.

"One crack at that guy"—Andrew was never quite able to register the idea of vampires—"one crack with this thing is all I want!"

"I hate to disappoint you, old son," I told him, "but I've locked your window-blinds together to make sure you don't get it! What's more, I've either nailed or padlocked every other window, and all the outside doors except one. If we have any visitors tonight, they'll come in at the front door!"

"With a reception committee ready to greet them!" Duplessis grimly added.

The "reception committee," as the doctor put it, later settled down in the dimly lit entrance hall. Tomasine had found a large electric percolator, which she dubiously suggested pressing into service if we desired coffee during our vigil, without any of us leaving our posts. No self-respecting South Louisianian, of French or whatever extraction, will drink other than dripped coffee if he can help it; nor considers percolated coffee very much superior to the "boiled" variety—which few conceivable circumstances could force him to accept. I seconded Duplessis' prompt veto of Tomasine's proposal. We could do without the coffee.

THE night wore on. There was no sign of our expected visitors, and I began to wonder if our precautions had

not been so complete, and our guard so obvious, as to have made our quarry shun the trap. If so, we had utterly failed of our purpose. We could not stand watch every night; and if we could have, we but diverted a ravening evil to spread and increase itself in other quarters.

It is difficult to keep small talk alive, over a period of hours, in an atmosphere of tense expectancy. It must have been close to midnight when Tomasine eventually abandoned pretense and got a book from the library; but from the restless way she skipped back and forth through its pages, I doubt whether it occupied her mind as well as her slender fingers. Duplessis fidgeted and perspired, and smoked innumerable cigarettes that he rolled himself. It may have been the smoke that made my eyes smart and grow heavy; but I was fast becoming tired.

The thought of coffee recurred insistently. There is perhaps no other people, except the Arabs, with whom the beverage is so much a part of the ritual of living as those among whom I was born. On the warmest summer afternoon, as on the bleakest winter day, one drinks coffee if nothing else. To those unacquainted with the custom, this may seem a trivial thing. Yet, it was my wish for coffee that afforded the peril crouched behind our backs (while we fatuously awaited it at the front door!) opportunity to pounce upon us. . . . God grant I never place Tomasine in like jeopardy again!

The long, broad hall in which we sat ran entirely through the middle of the house. Curtains, hung from the ceiling and loosely caught back against the side walls, gave the long passage the semblance of division. From where I sat, I could see down its entire length, except that the far end was lost in shadow. It happened that I was staring vacantly beyond the curtains, when it seemed to me

that there was dim movement in the murky reaches of the hall. As I dismissed what indifferent assumption told me was a trick of the shadows, it suddenly appeared that one of the loose curtains moved slightly, although there was no stir of air. I blinked my eyes and sat erect, only to observe that, as I had thought, the curtain was perfectly still.

"Can't we make some coffee?" I demanded. "My eyes are getting so tired they're playing tricks on me. When I stare at anything for long, it seems to move."

"I like the idea of coffee, myself," Duplessis approved, snubbing a cigarette.

We decided, after brief reflection, to leave the doctor on guard at the door, while I went with Tomasine to the kitchen. As we started down the hall, I half thought I heard a door opened, softly but in haste. I listened, alert at once, but there was no further noise. It had sounded like Andrew's door, but I could see, as we passed, that it was closed; and I refrained from opening it for fear of disturbing the youngster. The noise I heard—if, indeed, I heard a noise—could have been merely the racket of a mouse. I shrugged and followed Tomasine into the kitchen.

We made coffee, but it was never drunk. A high-pitched, startled cry rang through the house; the cup I was raising to my lips dropped unheeded from my hand. It was Andrew's voice!

"You stay here—where you'll be safest!" I snapped the command to Tomasine in tones that brooked no argument—and it would have been better had she disobeyed. I left her and rushed headlong to Andrew's door, from behind which his cries and panted curses mingled with shrill piping *gurgles* and low, evil laughter, to combine the noise of bedlam.

Duplessis, pistol in one outstretched hand, reached the door a leap ahead of

me, yanking it open without missing a stride. I charged through upon his heels. For one brief instant we stopped—staggered by the sight that met our eyes.

On the far side of Andrew's bed, crouched so low behind him that she must have been on her knees, Helen de Brignac—or what had been she—strove with him for possession of his gun. But the supreme abominations were the twin diminutive horrors—the more horrible *because* diminutive!—that swarmed over the coverlet and worried Andrew, crawling about his head, clawing at his eyes with evil, chubby little fingers. He spared an arm to fling them off, and they were back upon him in a flash. I felt sick and weak at the sight of those two round, tiny faces, still plastic in the mold of immaturity, but alight with lust and evil that was old when the world was young.

Helene secured the gun. Andrew had fallen back and lay still, faint from exertion and the pain of his wound. I think I laughed—insanely, if I *did* laugh—at the grotesque spectacle of the vampire turning to her own account the weapon designed for her undoing. The gun roared; I heard the bullet thud into the plaster of the wall behind me. Surely the world was mad when a vampire shot at men with silver bullets!

This thing that had been a woman crouched low behind Andrew, shielding herself with his body. Duplessis took careful aim, as coolly as though he were at target practise. As Helene leveled her gun for another and more careful shot, the doctor fired. The vampire screamed and fell backward, her weapon falling from her fingers to the bed. Duplessis leaped around toward her, drawing from his pocket what looked like an ordinary cigarette case. I seized the pistol from the bed, and flung aside the pair of tiny, vile things that worried Andrew. On the in-

stant, they transferred their attack to me, and so engaged my attention in beating off their onslaught, astoundingly fierce and disproportionate to their size, that I was unable to assist or even attend Duplessis' struggle with Helene.

Those wretched infant horrors leaped about as if they were made of steel springs, swarming up my legs, clawing at my eyes, scratching, gouging. They hardly should have had teeth in their drooling little mouths, yet I repeatedly felt them bite. I flung them off, and they sprang back, leaping about until they seemed almost to fly. Their obscene little arms waved and beat the air, causing me an odd thought of wings—bat's wings—as they thrashed about. When I cast them off, they *floated* lightly to the floor.

Helene screamed. Like some tortured and stricken thing, she screamed in awful anguish. My vile little adversaries left me like a flash, throwing themselves upon Duplessis with fury and abandon. I had a moment in which to see the doctor, kneeling upon Helene's prostrate, writhing body, pinioning her to the floor with his knees and one hand. With the other hand he held the silver case against her breast. I could see Helene's dead-white flesh quiver and shrink from its touch. One of her arms was limp, shattered by the doctor's bullet; the other hand clawed agonizingly at Duplessis. Whatever the doctor's case held that Father Lavalley had given him, its touch was direst agony to his victim.

"Will you tell?" he grated, "will you tell me where you lie by day?—you and Armand?" Then the two mites of hell were upon him, and the vigor of the attack I had sustained was mere play compared to the insensate fury of their onslaught upon Duplessis. They took all of his attention. While he fought one from his face, the other pounced upon his

shoulder, biting fiercely at his fat, swarthy neck.

Blood streamed suddenly over the doctor's collar, and I quivered with horror at the avid sucking noises of the little monster clinging to his shoulder. Duplessis plucked it off, and calmly and dispassionately pistoled it through the head with cold precision. It went weakly limp, and the doctor dropped it to seize and mete like treatment to its mate. It, too, crumpled up, and Duplessis cast it down; so that they lay side by side in two small, broken heaps upon the floor. They were nothing, now, but two shattered babes, their poor little brains seeping out to stain the carpet.

I HAD scant leisure for pity, just then. Helene had seized her opportunity, and scrambling over Andrew to get past me, was making a frantic rush for the door. Instinctively I raised my hand that held the pistol, and fired full at her. Without thinking, I had aimed at her head, and I do not often miss. She fell, literally blown off her feet at short range.

"Now you've done it!" Duplessis cried. "I would have tortured her until she told where they have made themselves a grave to lie in during the day. Then"—he spread his hands in a characteristic gesture—"then I would have shot her. . . . Armand still remains, you know!"

"Yes," I blurted out, feeling a sudden uneasiness at the thought of Tomasine alone in the kitchen; "yes, Armand still remains——"

As if to justify my apprehension, there came the noise of something overturned and falling, from the direction of the kitchen, and a woman's cry, abruptly cut short.

"Tomasine!" I cried. Duplessis swore, staccato fashion, and I bolted from the

room under the impetus. I raced the last few steps.

I knew, something told me, even as I ran, what I would find. The kitchen table was overturned, the coffee pot lay in scattered sections upon the floor, and coffee was spattered everywhere. Tomasine was gone!

"The front door!" Duplessis shouted, and we ran in that direction. One hand before me to fling it aside, I rushed at the screen door—and my hand ripped through the unyielding wire. The door was hooked—on the inside!

"I was sitting close to it, you know," Duplessis breathlessly recalled, "and dropped the hook when I got up and ran back to see what all the noise was."

"And every other door out of the house is both locked and nailed shut."

"Then she—and Armand—they are in the house!" the doctor exclaimed, with logical conviction. "Let us search, let us hurry!"

We ran through every room, switched on every light. There was no sign of Tomasine.

"The other doors are nailed, the front screen is latched on the inside." I sought desperately to reason things out. "The door from this floor to the basement is locked; the basement doors and windows are all nailed shut. . . ."

Some thought of my subconscious mind strove for comprehension. There was something that, could I but remember, would solve the puzzle, show us the way out—if I could grasp what it was that had clicked in the back of my head when I spoke of basement windows. . . . They were nailed shut, had all been locked, anyway. They were locked—I had it, I had it!—One had not been locked, before I nailed it shut!

"Duplessis!" I shouted. "The base-

ment—the window that was open when I came—to the basement, man!"

The doctor excitedly tried the door to the stairs, shrugging with despair when it proved fastened. I brushed him unceremoniously aside, jabbing its key into the lock. I explained as we leaped down the stairs:

"That was a duplicate key, they are all duplicates——"

"And Armand has the originals!" Duplessis excitedly supplied. "The store-room, that is where we look, eh?"

I did not pause to answer, but he was right. It was to that rear part of the basement that I ran, to the partitioned space that made a storage room for all those odds and ends that every household ordinarily accumulates in the attic. I remembered that a great part of it was floored with heavy boards laid, unfastened, upon the earth. It would not be difficult to move them aside, to dig. . . .

10. *Deliverance*

THE door upon which I pushed was locked, and I had no key for it. It was a heavy door, and though the doctor and I threw our combined weight against it, the stout panels held. We wasted precious minutes vainly hunting for something heavy enough to use in battering our way in.

"Shoot through the lock," Duplessis urged. "If it should strike Tomasine, at least a bullet is cleaner than what she faces if we do not hurry."

I accepted his advice. Silently praying that Tomasine might not be in its way, I sent a bullet from the heavy gun crashing through the lock. The door still held, but with weakened grip that we broke with one mad lunge of our shoulders. I prayed, again, that we might be in time.

The place was dark. The shutters kept out whatever light the moon might have

furnished, and this part of the basement was not wired for electricity. Duplessis, however, with that forethought which was a marked characteristic of his, had kept a small electric torch on his person since the beginning of our night's vigil. Tensed for instant action, we watched while the inadequate beam of light played over stacked boxes and old trunks, over broken furniture and debris that littered the floor and piled against the walls. The light seemed to hesitate of its own accord upon one corner, where a space some six or eight feet square was clear of storage. A miscellany of trunks and crates screened the floor in the corner from our view so effectively that their random disposal took on more than casual significance.

"There!" whispered Duplessis, pointing with his torch. I agreed.

"Move up," I told him, in the same low voice. "Keep your light on the floor, and I'll raise the loose planking."

We threaded through the crates in our way, and I stooped and tugged at a heavy cypress plank, rough-sawn to about two inches thick and twelve wide. The board turned over atop the one beside it, and I put my hand where it had been. I touched no earth, but my arm went downward to the elbow in empty space. There was, as we had expected, an excavation beneath the planks!

As I jerked my arm up, I thought there was a swift sound of movement beneath my feet, like the swish of a heavy knife cleaving the air. I could *feel* malevolence saturating that dank corner. I grasped another board and turned it aside. Now I could see below me, in the pit I had disclosed, the phosphorescent glare of twin points of feral light that blazed hate up at us. Duplessis saw, also, and swore breathlessly in a falsetto of excitement. We had our quarry holed, and there was no further need of silence.

"Throw off another board, Wynne, and shoot the dirty beast in its head!" Duplessis cried. "Throw off another board, so that I can find him with the light!"

I seized a third plank, almost to my undoing. The heavy lumber slipped in my grasp, and I jerked away my hand as a splinter of its rough surface stabbed beneath a finger nail. An arm, with a dead-white hand, flashed out of the pit. Something glittered in the light of Duplessis' torch, something bit wickedly into the plank where my hand and wrist had been. We had holed a snake that had fangs!

"He has a butcher knife from the kitchen!" the doctor shrilled. "Grab the planks at this end, where they rest on solid earth!"

I had been beforehand with the same thought, and was acting upon it even as he spoke. I heaved over two more of the planks with considerably more strain and effort, but in comparative safety—so I thought! Duplessis' light now picked out the monster in the pit: I saw a quick movement of his arm, and heard something streak past my ear as I crouched. Duplessis' cried out, and the flashlight dropped and bounced into the yawning hole at our feet.

"He got my arm—not badly," the doctor snarled. Then, more brightly—"But perhaps now he is unarmed!"

THE hole was no more than three or four feet in depth, and the flashlight burned steadily on as it lay at the bottom. The feeble light dimly disclosed Tomasine, prone and still upon the earth. Just beyond her, in the farthest corner of the pit, was a crouched shadow, with two red, luminous eyes that burned up at us with hate and fear. I sensed that Duplessis raised his gun, and I hastily pushed aside his wrist.

"No, no!" I cried. "Don't shoot—the light is too bad, and you might hit Tomasine."

"I can hit him," the doctor obstinately insisted. "Get out of the way!"

The thing in the hole reached swiftly out of his corner, pulled Tomasine's limp form close, and held it before him in his arms. For the first time since we had run him to earth, the monster spoke:

"You can't shoot without hitting her! Go away—or let me go away, and I will agree never to bother any of you again. I wanted her, myself, but let me go, and I will give her back to you—she is unharmed."

I did not know what to do next, and I do not know what I growled in answer.

"You could wait until sunrise, and have me then," the horror gibed, "but you would not have your Tomasine!" His voice quivered with fury, and with hate that was more intense because it betrayed his awful fear. "Let me go, or you will need to drive no stake for Tomasine! My teeth are not as they once were, Wynne. They are long and pointed, and so *very* sharp! I would have bitten this soft, white neck so gently, so caressingly, and made her all my own. Let me go and I will give her up—let me go or I shall bite, not softly, but so deeply you will never need your cursed stakes for her!"

I saw a dim, ghostly white hand slide over Tomasine's throat in an obscene caress.

"This white, soft throat——" The whisper mourned as well as threatened, but the words fell wholly vile upon my ears. I went berserk.

Without being able to consider the possible consequences to Tomasine, I think I must have flung myself in a headlong dive toward the source of that foul whispering. I threw aside my gun as I leaped: I wanted to tear, to rend and

break, with only my bare hands. I seized another throat—a cold, waxen-clammy throat—between my hands, and I knew that my fingers had reached their mark before Tomasine was harmed.

We writhed and thrashed, that thing and I. How Tomasine escaped with no more bruises than she did sustain from our heels and flailing arms and elbows, is something that remains a mystery.

I found, again, as I had found when we had dueled the night before, that I was the weaker. I held on grimly, calling for Duplessis. I felt the fat little doctor tumble in with us, and thought he had gone mad when one groping hand—I knew it was his, because I felt its warmth and pudginess—threw a cloth over my head. It was his coat, and I thought, for one desperate instant, that the strain he had undergone had snapped his reason. I did not hear him tell me, then, and it was only later that I understood his wish to save me from the burn of the gun he pressed between me and my murderous antagonist.

The pistol roared. I felt Armand go limp, and I had to clutch him closer to keep from being overbalanced. For a brief moment, it was as if I held him in my arms. I am glad that it was so, glad-der still that he was able to whisper:

"Good-bye, Wynne! You've done what I wanted you to do, when I wrote for you to come. . . . Thank God! Good-bye—and—forgive."

I think I sobbed. God knows I had hated the thing I fought, hated it through that time of horror since I had come back to Bonne Chasse; but that thing had not been Armand. I had played with Armand in our childhood years, fought beside him in the mud of France—it was he who came, amidst a sleet of shot and shell, and dragged me back, that time. . . . I am glad it was Duplessis who fired that

last shot, glad that Armand could still whisper. For it was the old Armand, the Armand I had loved, who whispered and then lay still in my arms.

W E LEFT him, for the time, in the hole he had made for himself and that Helene who—I swore it!—should never lie again beside him. We had Tomasine to care for, and Andrew besides; and in Andrew's room there was a shambles that had to be considered. We carried Tomasine upstairs, and Duplessis forgot everything except his calling.

"She has only fainted," he said, at length. "Horror and fear were too much for her nerves. I doubt if she knows anything about that infernal hole we found her in——" He looked up at me, and I understood his thought.

"If she doesn't know now, she never shall!" I fervently assured him.

The doctor nodded, and left to see to Andrew. Tomasine opened her eyes. Returned terror crowded swiftly on her consciousness, but gave way when she realized that it was I who held her fingers in my own.

"It is over, Tomasine," I gently reassured her. "There is nothing more to fear."

Yes, it was over, and there is little more to tell. Duplessis drove off toward the river, after a while, with one bulky, white-wrapped burden, and another, much smaller, that might have been the two poor little things I had last seen upon the floor in Andrew's room. They were well tied, and I think they were weighted, although I have never asked Duplessis any questions.

Tomasine was not hurt, beyond a bruise or two, and she had no memory of what had happened, other than her fright when she was seized by Armand in the kitchen. Andrew had withstood his shock remark-

ably well, and his struggle with Helene had not, as we had feared, opened his wound.

There was one thing more we had to do. Armand's death had to be given logical explanation, and he himself had prepared the way for that. He must have planned to burn down the house above his self-made daylight hiding-place. I would never again want to live at Bonne Chasse, and his plan seemed the best way out.

We bundled Andrew carefully into the rear of his car, after moving it to a safe distance. Tomasine, Duplessis and I stood in the dawn watching the holocaust to which we had given Armand and his hall. We had spread a drum of kerosene through the house, and there were two drums of gasoline in the basement which had been arranged to explode shortly after we quit the place. The flames would be a roaring inferno before curious folk of the countryside inevitably gathered.

Duplessis spoke, as if he were explaining to no one in particular, or to any one who might want to know, exactly how the fire originated.

"The lights went out—a short circuit somewhere, probably. There was a drum of kerosene, and also two drums of gasoline, in the basement under the house. Our host, Mr. de Brignac, went down alone to get some kerosene to fill some lamps, taking a lighted candle with him. Shortly afterward the house was rocked by a tremendous explosion, and we were able only to leave the building in all haste. There was no possibility of reaching Mr. de Brignac, who was probably killed at the moment of the explosion.

"This should be a warning to others not to keep kerosene and gasoline under their houses—or, if they must do so, to stay away from it with lighted candles."

The doctor smoothed his tie with a chubby hand, and turned complacently to me:

"Sometimes it is a good thing for the coroner to be along, isn't it?"

I watched the flames without making answer. I had loved this place better than any other except my own old home that I had lost and the river had since taken. I would never have wanted to live there again, but I could not see the flames destroy it without a feeling of sadness. I expressed something of my thoughts to Tomasine. She put her fingers lightly on my arm, looked up into my face with eyes that were wistful and something more. She knew that she could be quite sure of herself.

"You'll never want to live down here, after this," she told me. "You will have Armand's money—you will take it because he wanted you to have it—and you can afford to live in town, anywhere you like." Her eyes dropped, at this point, and there was a faint flush upon her cheeks that was not altogether of the fire we watched. "There is an old house in town, in the Garden District, that was ours before it went like everything else. I love it, and I think that you——"

Not all the fires, coroners, nor thoughts of all the vampires in the world could have kept me from sweeping her into my arms. Vaguely, I was aware of a discreet but very complacent cough from Duplessis.

"Sometimes," he admitted, as if merely speaking aloud to himself, "sometimes I suppose it would be a good thing for the coroner to be somewhere else!" I heard him chuckling as he turned away.

It was not important to Tomasine and me whether he went or stayed. We had other things to think about.