

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

# Strange STORIES

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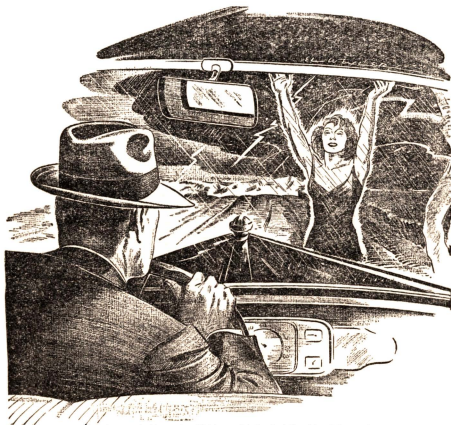
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# DEATH, I WANT TO DANCE!

By ARTHUR J. BURKS

*Author of "Kamisa," "Heads for Sale," etc.*



Sharply revealed in my headlights, a girl stood at the side of the road

**I**T WAS strange country to me—wild and terrible, a land of ghost towns where savage men and fierce women had fought long ago, killing and gambling for bright gold. Except for an important purpose, no sane man would willingly tread that soil which still was drenched with evil. I had a purpose, but it was not

*A Long-Dead Ghost Town  
Returns to Revelry While  
John Barham Follows a  
Moonlit Trail to an Eerie  
Rendezvous!*

gold. Mine was the desire to visit weird places, to know eldritch people, and that country was indeed weird and its inhabitants eldritch.

Only an investigator of the *od* would deliberately drive a car up the snaky road that led to Crystal City. Nobody else would know that torrential rains had washed away the treacherous mud of the dirt road, leaving a smooth rock-bed on which my tire treads could find a grip.

But the ride was still rough and dangerous. My headlights gleamed yellowly on the brown mud which walled the road, like piles of earth beside an open grave. As the car rocked and rolled, the motor whined and missed, bravely struggling to bring me to my destination.

Within an hour, I thought eagerly, I would reach Crystal City and be alone in the city of the dead. Boot Hill, at the end of the town, contained its dead people, but their evil hopes still lived in the deserted shacks and streets. Nobody inhabited the place any more, yet the vicious ambitions of the dead continued to torment and terrorize those who dared to enter Crystal City.

I wasn't there yet, though, and the ride required all my attention. Sternly I restrained my eagerness and watched the road.

My overworked windshield-wiper shrieked a complaint. The rain came down so hard that I had to depend more on leaning out the open window than peering through the streaked windshield. The slope of a hill fell away to my left, and the headlights splashed over a swollen, furious river. Even the strongest swimmer could not have battled across it, I realized. If I had to swim it, my career as investigator of the *od* would be finished. The car, of course, would never be able to ford it, if it had to, and I would be compelled to spend the night in the open, until the wind and the rain ceased, and the flood abated.

That realization made me impatient.

Agonizingly I longed to reach Crystal City before midnight. I stepped recklessly on the accelerator and rounded a crazy curve.

That was when I saw the girl, standing in the vicious downpour. . . .

**S**HE wore no hat. Her hair was plastered down along her face. Sharply revealed by my headlights, her clothing was soaked through, clinging to her body like a tight second skin. I thought her dress was red, but I knew positively that her hair was the color of flame. Though it hung in limp, dripping hanks, it could not conceal its beauty, nor distort the loveliness of her face and her bright red lips.

Unafraid, she waved to me for a ride. When I saw the long shadow behind her, I released my breath. The shadow removed the first chill doubt that had frozen my hands to the wheel. But what was a girl doing on the road to Crystal City? Within fifty miles, there should have been nobody but myself!

I slowed to a stop. When I reached over and opened the door, she stepped in. There was laughter on her red lips and in her dark blue eyes, as though she loved the storm. The strange fragrance about her I took to be a mingling of incense and perhaps lavender. She couldn't have been more than twenty-one.

"I thought you would never come," she said, her voice lilting with delight.

"You were expecting me?" I asked, slamming the door to make sure it was closed securely. "How could you? You don't even know who I am."

"I don't know John Barham?" she replied. "But everybody knows John Barham. We all know you by sight or reputation. Naturally I recognized your face and, besides, I knew you were coming."

"Yes," I said as I meshed gears. "But how did you know I was coming?"

She tilted back her lovely head and looked at me out of the corner of her eye.

"A little bird told me," she said archly. "Now please hurry, or we'll be late to the dance."

"Dance?" I blurted. "What dance?"

"Why, the regular weekly dance at Crystal City! Don't say you won't take me. I'll simply fade right away if you do. I seldom get a chance to go. Before, of course, I never did."

"Before?" I repeated stupidly. "Before what?"

"Just—just before. Please hurry, John Barham. I don't wish to miss a single dance."

While I desperately kept my eyes on the murderous road, she began to hum a tune that was vaguely familiar. What was it? I couldn't place it, though I felt that long ago, perhaps in some far place, I had heard it often.

"I don't even dance," I said.

"Any man can dance with me," she stated casually. "I'm Drury Shane."

Apparently that was supposed to explain everything, but it made nothing clearer to me. When I heard the unmistakable sound of teeth chattering, I glanced aside. She was trembling. I stopped the car and took off my topcoat.

"Maybe this won't keep you warm," I said, "but it'll help. Wrap it around you."

She smiled gratefully—and I shivered. I didn't know why, except that the sensation of vague familiarity had returned to haunt me.

"How can there be a dance in Crystal City?" I asked. "It's a ghost town."

"Oh, but once a week—or when it rains—people from miles around come to make Crystal City live again. Yes, there will be music and dancing."

She leaned against me, snuggling closer for warmth. She must have known it was safe to do so. I wanted to kiss her, but I couldn't smash her confidence in me. . . .

Crystal City was ablaze with bright lights! Drury Shane had been right.

The ghost town was alive that night, with lights that shone through windows which had been without glass for so many years. The sagging, rotting sidewalks creaked under the weight of rough, bearded men. From the wide-open door of the Crystal City Bar, the largest building in town, came the squeak of a fiddle, the groan of an organ, the whine of an accordion, and the piping of a harmonica.

I heard Drury's feet begin to dance on the floorboards of the car. When I glanced at her, she smiled up with utterly carefree happiness. She was undismayed by the fact that the orchestra didn't play together.

Wind-driven rain crashed against the car as I drove down Crystal City's one street.

"Is it all right to go into the bar, Drury?" I asked tentatively.

"While I am with you—but only while I am with you—is it all right," she almost sang. "It never was before, but now it's safe even for me."

**N**ATURALLY I didn't understand her. It seemed unimportant, and I was too interested in the reaction of the people as we drove up to the bar. They were staring at the car, probably because it was the only one in town. Either they were too poor, or they preferred horses. But they had no horses, either. There were just the men, shouting, swearing and fighting.

A knife flashed abruptly in the glare of my headlights. But it must have been pretense, for not even the apparently bloody fight interrupted the wild merriment. It couldn't have been anything but make-believe. Drury Shane would not have laughed in such high enjoyment if it had been real.

As if she were about to fly, she darted into the bar, and I followed her. During the ride, her hair seemed to have dried. It glistened like red gold in the lamplight. To maintain the illusion that Crystal City had come back to life, the people who had arranged the dance had chosen to use

lamps. There were lamps everywhere, some with dirty old chimneys, some with none. Most of them actually were festooned with cobwebs. Dirt cluttered the floor. Behind the dusty bar, a mirror had been broken long ago, but it only added to the smashed bottles and glasses on the sagging shelf.

It was weird, eerie—and it was fun. From behind a curtained door, the unseen orchestra creaked and grumbled "Turkey in the Straw." I felt an irresistible urge to dance, and caught Drury's wonderfully warm hand.

The couples that followed us on the floor maintained the illusion perfectly. They were roughly garbed, bearded men, and women in tight bodices and spangles, with glittering tinsel in their hair.

The old floor creaked under so many couples. But it was a grand dance, and I warmed to it. What delighted me most at the moment was that I hadn't forgotten how to dance, after all. Drury was so light in my arms that the man who couldn't have danced with her would have had to be dead.

Head thrown back, she hummed the tune as we danced. Somehow, I felt that dancing meant more to her than life or death. Whom she danced with meant less than nothing, as long as she could dance. When the members of the orchestra reached the end of the song by widely different routes, she kept on dancing until they started to play again.

The usual stag line tried to cut in. I didn't want them to, but it was Drury's prerogative. I looked down at her hopefully. Without a word from me, she evaded them. Completely puzzled, they gaped after her. And we went on dancing together, apparently both of us equally graceful. I no longer noticed anything, then, but the rhythm of our dancing and the warmth of her in my arms. I don't even remember the tune of the next dance, nor the next, nor the next. . .

"It's almost midnight!" someone

yelled, startling me. "It's the shank of the evening!"

He broke the neck of a bottle on the bar. At that instant, a dusty lamp went out. I could smell the smoke from its dirty wick, and see the oil in it, with mud floating on top. As we went on dancing, another light went out, nearer the bar than the first.

**I** STARED in bewilderment. Around the first light that had gone out was a pool of deep shadow, which extended to the second lamp that went dark. No one had extinguished those lamps. They had simply gone out, with a smell of smoke. And the shadow crept closer to the bar.

Then I noticed that the dancers avoided the shadow, though Drury and I did not. It was deep, cold and strange. When we danced into it, I could hear her teeth chatter as though she were afraid, and she suddenly lost the music's tempo.

The third lamp flickered out. Instantly the shadow seemed to jump. As if an invisible hand were snuffing them, more lamps died. Now there was so much more shadow than light that the faces of the dancers looked pasty-gray and somehow haunted, watching the shadow that crept toward them inexorably, despite their terror.

The handlebar-mustached bartender must have been putting out the lights. He had nothing to do now but polish glasses sorrowfully, since fewer men were ordering drinks.

Not even the cold shadow could kill Drury's love for dancing, though she clung to me when we strayed into it. At those moments, her face was close to mine, and her eyes begged me to keep it from terrifying her. The illusion was so perfect that everything must have been rehearsed.

Immediately after the lamp nearest the bar went out, my eyes narrowed puzzledly. As the couples danced into the creeping shadow, they vanished!

Determined to investigate, I danced her into the shadow, and for the first time, she tried to resist. But the explanation was perfectly simple. The couples were cleverly using this eerie way of departing.

"I'm not afraid, while you are holding me tightly," Drury whispered. "It is only when you let me go that I am lost."

I smiled at her quaint whimsy, but my heart beat faster at the suggestion that she needed me. Involuntarily I held her more tightly, and she drew back. It was only natural for me to relax my arm when she was displeased. But with a little murmur, she snuggled closer to me. When I would have responded by tightening my arm, though, she pushed lightly at me, to let me know that I must not.

Nobody had called her by name, I suddenly remembered, yet most of the men had looked at her. Perhaps her sweetheart was among them, content to let her enjoy herself, but ready to fight if I attempted familiarity. That must have been the explanation for her reserve.

Two more lights went out, and only half the bar was out of the shadow. The bartender started to move toward the light. Sighing, though, he shrugged and stayed where he was. When more lamps darkened, the stench of wicks and oil filled the place, and the bartender seemed to be partially dissolved. The largest, dirtiest, most cobwebbed lamp died, and he was gone.

Slowly I shook my head in admiration for the wonderful illusion. I wanted to pass through the curtain and look at the orchestra, before going home as the "ghosts" of the ghost town were doing. But Drury Shane would not stop dancing, and I hadn't the heart to destroy her pleasure. Faster and faster we danced. She did not become breathless, nor did I pant. Even if I had been tired, though, I would never have let her know.

All at once, every light was extin-

guished. The place was achingly empty of laughter, for the couples had gone.

"We must hurry, John Barham!" Drury gasped. "They will be angry at home, if I am late. But I have never been happier in all my life. Hold me tightly, John, and take me back."

**W**HEN I led her out, Crystal City was eerily illumined only by the stars and a moon that swam close overhead and seemed to smile at us approvingly. I peered around. Drury and I had the town all to ourselves.

"Hurry, John," she whispered. "I am late already. If I am to stay with you all the way, we must hasten. Don't send me back home!"

I couldn't understand her, but it was enough that she would be with me if we hurried. I helped her into the car. She still wore my topcoat, which had swirled about her dainty figure while we danced. As she sat down, I could see how the red dress clung to her, making her a creature of life and flame.

"Well, Crystal City's a ghost town again," I said lightly. "I wish we hadn't stayed till we were the only ones left. I wanted to see how they worked that weird exit of theirs."

"But then we wouldn't have danced enough, John," she protested. "I can never dance enough!"

A subconscious memory rose to my conscious mind. During our last dance, the only music that accompanied us had been Drury's gentle humming, light and free, yet with an undertone of terror. I remember humming with her. We had been so joyously intent on each other that I had not even missed the orchestra. It had simply gone with all the people.

I turned the car around in the middle of the moonlit street. Holding my hand on the wheel, I twisted my wrist to look at my watch. It was fifteen minutes after midnight. On other midnights, I could remember—

Deliberately I refused to think those thoughts. If I could keep Drury with me to the very end, nothing past, present or future mattered. It did not surprise me that I loved this girl whom I scarcely knew. I did, and that was enough for me, even if I could not know how she felt about me. Eyes closed, head thrown back, she hummed and her feet danced on the floorboards, as though I still held her in my yearning arms.

Down the drying road I drove, toward the last town at the edge of the foothills. The banks were so high at each side of the road that no one could possibly get off it. Stealthily I glanced down at the girl. She caught me each time. Wrinkling her nose, she smiled at me, showing two rows of even, pearly teeth. Her eyes sparkled with utter delight, but she was merely dancing without music or a partner.

As we approached the place where I had picked her up, I began to slow down, looking for the road or trail that led to her home. She stiffened and caught my arm pleadingly.

"No, John. We must not tarry. They never liked me to dance, anyhow."

Would I never be able to understand her odd speech? Were all girls of the dreary mountain wilderness so difficult to comprehend? Naturally she spoke almost a different language. In New York, she would have had just as much trouble understanding other girls.

Stopping the car determinedly, I turned to her.

"Drury," I blurted, "I must tell you, even if I never see you again—"

Like a frightened creature of the woods, she stared at me. But I didn't feel her shrink back. Every action of mine followed instinctively. I caught her shoulders firmly and pulled her toward me. When my lips were almost on hers, she made a hurt little sound of protest. I felt her warm palm against my lips, struggling to prevent the kiss. But my arms tightened about

her, and my lips sought hers, refusing to be denied.

"Then you are like the others!" she breathed sorrowfully. "I am lost again! Perhaps my father and mother were right . . . No, John, please! Before they died, they made me promise—"

"But I held you close all evening," I whispered urgently. "Let me kiss you. I love . . ."

Instantly she was gone. I didn't open the door, nor did she. I would have heard it open, yet I heard no click and slam, and my eyes had not blinked in that heartbeat of time.

**I**N ONE moment she had been there, with fear in her wide gaze—and perhaps a hint of hopeless love. In the same breath, she was gone. And I could still feel the warmth of her in my arms.

I was so startled that I sat trying to figure it out. The motor was murmuring sympathetically. I stared through the yellow headlights. Nothing moved in the twin cones that searched through the night.

Swiftly I backed the car and cramped the wheel to the left, so the lights would shine along the top of the ridge where I had first seen her. Far away, where the two beams merged into a single funnel of light, she was running like a scared deer, holding my topcoat close to her throat with both hands. Like golden banners, her hair was streaming out behind her.

The light no longer shone full on her, and she became a blur against the darkness. In the next instant, she must have fallen into a ravine, for she was gone.

I wrenched open the door and scrambled out. Racing after her, I shouted her name. There was no answer. I ran faster, knowing she must have hurt herself badly. Perhaps she lay unconscious on bloody rocks. . . .

I reached the ravine where she had disappeared. It slanted toward the left. Recklessly I jumped into it and

kept running. The moonlight hadn't gleamed on a body, and I couldn't stop to search for her footprints in the wet earth. Shouting, I darted along the bottom of the ravine.

Far away, toward the mountains, I heard a swelling roar. The wind and the rain were returning to drench the hillsides and flood the lowlands. A violent river might soon be sweeping down the ravine, but I didn't care. If I couldn't find Drury, I would never care about anything again.

With horrifying suddenness, I came out upon a plateau. I stood shocked among cairns of rock, blackened crosses, leaning gravestones. Had she gone the other way? She must have. . . .

At that moment, I saw something dark flutter in the wind that shrieked through the ravine. My heart stopped beating until I reached it.

It was my coat!

"Drury!" I yelled. "Drury!"

She couldn't have been far away. But there was no answer. I stopped shouting and picked up the topcoat. It was still warm with her vital warmth, still fragrant with her wonderful fragrance.

The wisps of mist drifted from the moon's face. More brightly than ever, it shone down, revealing how despairingly hopeless it was to continue pursuing the girl of the wind and the rain. It glowed weirdly on the inscription of the gravestone my topcoat had covered.

#### To The Memory Of

#### DRURY SHANE

Born September 12, 1835

Died November 6, 1856

Even Death Could Not Destroy  
Her Love For Dancing

Sobbing, I turned and ran back to the car. Lightning flashed behind me, and thunder rolled in a terrifying chase. The second I slipped under the wheel and slammed the door, the rain smashed down like a river.

I had found her in the rain. Perhaps I would find her again—

**T**HE landlord of the village poured me a drink as I stood warming myself at the crackling fire.

"Drury Shane?" he repeated. "Yeah, that shore was a sad case, wasn't it? Long time ago, of course, but folks around here still talk about it. They kinda scare their youngkers with the yarn, and I can't say I blame them much. Kinda scares me, too, when I hear about it."

"What really happened?" I asked, my voice trembling, as I reached for the glass he was holding out toward me.

He downed a drink and poured himself another, shuddering as he nodded toward the window. Rain was slashing down in savage fury, roaring along the bed of the creek that was dry all the rest of the year.

"There's the kind of night they say she comes out in," he muttered. "Damned fool yarn, but the rest of it's straight enough. She was jest a fun-lovin' gal, happy as a yearlin' when she could be dancin'. Her folks, though, they didn't like their gal dancin' with men who'd always get proddy if she wouldn't let them kiss her. So they kept her home when there was a dance in Crystal City.

"Well, they went and died. But they made her promise she wouldn't go with no boys who jest wanted to kiss her, and make love to her, and break her heart. She promised, all right, 'cause she didn't want her heart broke. And she kept that promise, when she found out her folks was right. But losin' them and not bein' able to dance was too much for her, I reckon.

"She ailed only a couple of weeks, and then she died. It wasn't any sickness, and she wasn't in no pain. She just died from not bein' able to dance. But folks around here say that when it rains, and once a week regular, she goes to Crystal City and dances—

(Concluded on page 97)



## **DEATH, I WANT TO DANCE**

*(Concluded from page 85)*

with other ghosts, or anybody livin' who'll take her there. . . ."

Without a word, I put down my untouched drink and stumbled upstairs to my room. The landlord called out a question that I didn't bother to understand.

I would never see her again, for I had behaved like every other man she had known. She had promised not to dance with men who would break her heart, and I had lost my chance to prove my love for her. . . .

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