


TERROR TALES



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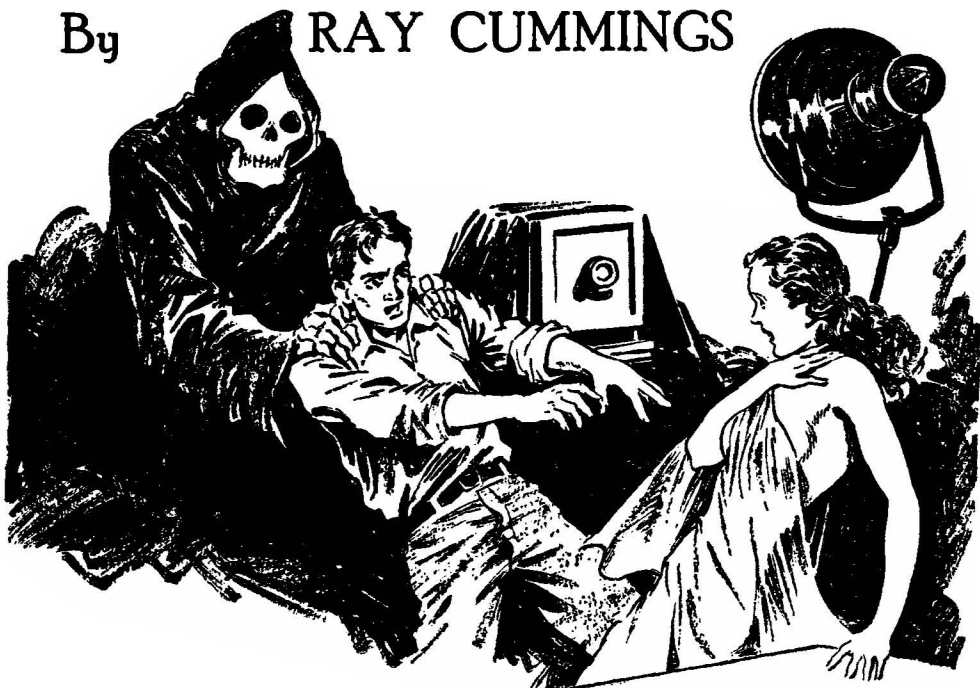
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DEATH LIVES IN MY LIPS!

By RAY CUMMINGS



Like any normal woman, I wanted to love and be loved; to feel the sharp ecstasy of a man's hungry lips pressed against mine. But I was forced to live apart from the joys of the world; for the curse of the Prabars was in my blood — and death for the man who dared to love me lay in the touch of my lips!



I WILL tell my story as it happened, and try to tell it calmly, though even now as I set it down I am shuddering with its hideous memory. My name is Manya Corot. My father, who died when I was three, was of French descent. My mother was an Austrian-American. I realize now that we had never been like other families; some intangible foreboding seemed always to be hanging over us. Though we lived quietly in the small suburban village, we had plenty of money. My father had died rich, I understood;

and mother's fortune was in charge of a Mr. Freeman, at a bank in nearby New York City.

My mother died when I was twelve, but my memory of her is more vivid than of many who have been close to me since. She was tall and dark and slim, with a certain strange exotic beauty which always seemed to me to have a strange, un-human fascination. At twelve I felt that every man who looked at mother must madly love her. I think perhaps I was not too wrong in that. Many men friends

were often at our house—Robert Freeman, the banker; our family physician, Dr. Frank MacArthur, and many others. Those others now were dead.

At twelve I had developed amazingly to be a youthful replica of mother. I recall her staring at me during her last tragic illness. And she had murmured, "Oh, Manya—you will be so beautiful—like I was. . ."

There was tragedy in her eyes. I think it was then that horror first stabbed at me, for she added, "You, too, are cursed. Your kisses—they'll mean death to the man you kiss. The curse is on us. The curse of the Prahars—and I dared to laugh when he said it would hound me and mine. But it has . . . and now I must answer for what I've done."

My mother died that next day. What she had done, I never knew. But I heard vague whispers of infidelity, disloyalty, innumerable lovers. . . Her last words burned always in my youthful mind. Subconsciously, I grew afraid to let anyone kiss me. I became nervous; neurotic. I was living with a governess and two maids in the same suburban house. I hated people. I spent my time in the hollow behind the grounds, down by a sullen stream with evil-smelling dead leaves and soggy, marshy banks. And I brooded continually.

Robert Freeman, the banker who had charge of my money, often came to see me. Dr. Frank MacArthur—a big blond handsome man of about forty now—was still my physician. Outwardly, things hadn't changed for me.

Dr. MacArthur was really worried over my health, that year when I was sixteen. "Child, you must tell me what you're brooding about," he urged me once. He gently held my hand, with his keen physician's eyes searching me.

"Nothing at all," I murmured sullenly. "There's nothing the matter with me, Dr. MacArthur."

HOW could I tell him of that stalking, ever-present fear? The fear of becoming a murderess! I might have told him of my mother's words—that a kiss from me was death; told him that always there was the urge of normal sex within me, so that it seemed I was a battleground. But I couldn't tell him.

Dr. MacArthur yielded at last; but he came with weekly visits to check on my health. And always his handsome face was grave; his gentle eyes searching me. I thought on these visits that as he gazed at me, he saw again the haunting, haunted beauty of my dear mother.

I was seventeen when I met Tom Thorp. He was eighteen—an unusually handsome, brown-haired fellow. I knew nothing of his family; he was visiting a friend in the village. Against my brooding fear, built up throughout these years, I felt a sickening weakening of my resolves—all that was normal in my highly passionate nature impelling me to light the fires of passion in him—fires which were ready for the kindling, as I saw, beneath the surface. By every artifice, that late afternoon as we walked through the snowy woods beside a half-frozen stream, I used my darkly slumbrous, exotic beauty—beauty of face and body—to arouse him. And when, in a sudden sweep he had me in his arms, and his kisses burned and throbbed against my eager lips, every instinct within me rose half-fearfully yet eagerly to meet his flaming passion.

We said nothing of love. He tried, but I repulsed him. The fever of the moment was spent, chilled with the deepening, darkening silhouettes about us. And a terrible, terrorizing question was mounting within me. It was dim and distant; but I heard its voice and a mortal fear was stunning me at what it portended. It was possible, it might be positive, that at this instant, with this man's kisses still upon my lips, that *I was his murderess!*

Dear God, my mother had warned me! What justification, if it were true, could I find?

There were shadows crowding us as we went up the narrow path. They seemed to leer at me. Trees were swaying, mocking; the wind whistling softly through the trees was whispering to me that soon this man would die.

And then, the next day, there was a note from his friend saying that Tom was in the hospital with pneumonia. I went down to the stream, torn with anguish and reproach. Yet my common sense asserted itself. There was nothing of a curse in this. Pneumonia was a most prosaic disease; it had nothing to do with this strange mystic horror which engulfed me. Tom was no part of it; my mother had been unfaithful, broken faith with a man named Prahar, and he had cursed her. What had that to do with me?

I went at last to the hospital. Tom was dying; they had him in an oxygen tent. I reached the door, but I could not bring myself to go in. I was afraid he might read in my eyes the thoughts I was thinking.

How I knew when he died, I do not know. Yet before the nurse came out with the grey-haired doctor, I knew. For an instant the door to his room was ajar. Although I was at an angle and could not see her, I heard a woman weeping. It was his mother. I could hear her babbling over him. Then I stiffened, my heart pounding and my head reeling, for her words were shrill and distinct:

"Damn her! Damn that Manya Corot. She killed you—my poor boy. She killed you just as surely as her mother killed Prahar. He cursed her as he stood before her and drove the knife through his heart—cursed her for her infidelity. Cursed her and all her spawn. They're rotten, the Corot women; cursed, and their love leads only to death—death! Oh my poor boy—she's killed you. . . ."

BLURRED and numbed, shuddering with horror, I fled from the hospital. And all that night, in bed at home I lay trembling, dank with cold sweat. Was I a murderess? Cursed by some dead necromancer? I vowed, that night, that never again would I let a man kiss me. There would be no dreams of love and passion—all that my pulsing nature craved must be subdued forever.

Again I made myself a brooding hermit. I felt that even the servants were watching me—whispering about the curse that was on me; whispering that I was a murderess. I got a new maid—a middle-aged woman named Mary Peters. I grew to like her, and I discharged the others, living alone with Peters.

But I couldn't keep up the isolation. There were times when I told myself that surely the tragedy which followed my passionate outburst was a mere coincidence. How could death be transmitted by a kiss? I was a girl of America of the Twentieth Century—how could I believe in a curse that belonged to the dark ages?

Then I met John Wallace and Alan Carter. Perhaps Robert Freeman, my guardian from the bank in New York, or Dr. MacArthur, arranged that I would meet the two young men. Dr. MacArthur always was frankly working to overcome my neuroticism—always urging me not to remain alone.

Once, impulsively, I had told Dr. MacArthur of my obsession; and as I saw his eyes open with astonishment and heard his ejaculation of relief, it seemed all my terror was lifted and forever gone.

"Why Manya—are you still thinking of what that Thorp woman said in the hospital? I heard of it, of course. But child—that's idiotic. . . ."

I promised him then that I would never think of it again.

"Just be like other girls, Manya," he told me. "No reason why you shouldn't."

No reason. How happy I was, then.

Alan Carter was a handsome young fellow in his early twenties; slim, graceful, with a mop of longish wavy black hair. His father was an art photographer in New York. Alan himself was somewhat of a camera fiend. I grew to like him very much.

But it was big rugged John Wallace—just a hardware salesman, tall and lean and rugged like Lincoln—whom suddenly I realized I loved. It didn't frighten me—that sudden realization. The past, after these months seemed to have receded like memory of an unhappy dream, so that, almost for the first time in my life, I was really happy.

Being swept along—into what? I never thought of it. I could think only of my dreams of John Wallace; his big strong arms around me, his lips murmuring that he loved me. He would tell me it soon—I had seen it in his eyes; seen his growing love for me.

Alan Carter's father died that autumn; and Alan took over his father's studio. And one evening he invited me to his home—which wasn't far from mine—asking if he couldn't take some informal flashlights of me. I accepted. God knows I had no premonition of what was going to happen. Our friendship, to me, had seemed wholly platonic.

I posed for him in the drapes which he had brought from his studio in New York. The posing thrilled me. I was beautiful—my body voluptuous, fully matured now; and my face had that strange beauty inherited from my mother. Displaying my beauty gave me pleasure, though I was thinking, not of Alan Carter, but of John Wallace whom I loved.

Alan was quiet, with a solemn tenseness as he posed me and made his pictures, impersonally in the fashion his father would have used with a professional model. Then suddenly he seized me, drew me to the couch.

"Manya," he said, "there's something

strange about you." His breath seemed choking him. "You're just a—woman of ice. And I think if I kissed you. . ."

I had no chance to avoid him; his lips smothered my protests.

"Manya darling—"

"Alan—stop!" I gasped.

But he would not listen. "Manya—you glorious woman. . ."

I tried to force myself to halt his advances, yet a wild answering passion which I was unable to stem seemed to be gripping me. Where was my love for John? This was not love, but it was a disloyalty to the man I loved.

A disloyalty. A curse. Yet it was a surging passion which would not be denied. Then the monster suddenly took shape again—the monster of my terror, leering at me. Was it Tom Thorp's dead face, like a hovering shadow over in the corner, reminding me of his body—his body which lay rotting in its grave because we had kissed?

"Alan," I heard myself protesting, "you must listen—"

Was it too late? What difference now, if it were? The ecstasy of the moment, those pent-up emotions struggling to release themselves, were out of hand. But I loved John—and suddenly I called his name:

"John—help me! For God's sake, John—"

AND as though it were a miracle, suddenly I saw John standing in the doorway! Or could it be John, with that teeming hate pouring from his eyes as he took a menacing step toward Alan? Dear God—not murder. I might be a murderess—twice a murderess; but the man I loved must not be a murderer!

How I gathered my wits and flung my torn drapes around me so quickly, I do not know. But in an instant I was at John's side, springing between him and Alan.

"Take me home, John. Please take me home," I cried hysterically.

My need seemed to bring him out of his wrath. "My poor little girl," he said. He saw my coat on a chair; my shoes, stockings and skirt on the hassock. "Here, I'll help you—" He seemed to have forgotten Alan for the instant. And Alan remained on the couch, numbed, his eyes upon me, defiant and bewildered. John hurled him one last look as he edged me toward the door.

Alan just sat watching us. As the door closed behind us, I thought I heard a heart-breaking sob burst from him.

I do not remember the taxi ride home, save that John's dear arm was about me and he murmured words of consolation and love. He had been to my home; my maid had told him where I was, so he had gone to Alan's. I hardly heard his explanation. Alan was paramount in my mind. He had dared to love me! He had dared to caress and kiss me! What price would he pay?

Within my cozy den, the evening's episode seemed almost a nightmare. John was so real, so solicitous. All the tenderness in my nature suddenly asserted itself as he knelt down, put a match to the wood and kindling that was laid in the fireplace. Then he rang for Peters, at my request. I ordered her to bring us coffee and sandwiches. John sat beside me, warming my hands between his. Would he tell me tonight that he loved me? I was trembling inside, afraid of those lurking shadows, yet longing to belong to him. Then suddenly it came. Without preface; forceful and direct. That was John's way.

"Manya," he said abruptly. "I guess you know I love you." His hand went gently to my arm, with his eyes searching my face.

"John. . ." I had no thought of coquetry as I swayed against him—no thought of anything save to tell him that I loved him, and to feel his arms around me.

"You do love me," he murmured.

"Yes!" It burst from me. And then he was holding me, with his dear arms around me, his lips coming toward mine. . .

My telephone rang. John's arms loosened.

"I'll answer it," I said. I got up and went to the little taboret across the room, lifted the receiver.

"Manya—this is Mr. Wallace—Alan's uncle. . ."

My heart leaped. Alan's uncle? His voice was urgent with emotion. He had just returned from New York. Numbly I listened, with the room blurring around me. Alan was dead! His uncle had come in and found him. Dead—of poison, the doctor said. A suicide!

"Manya, what is it?" John asked.

The room swayed and blurred around me. I think I was hysterically, wildly laughing. . . . Alan was dead! He had committed suicide. Another who had kissed me and died!

And here was the man I loved coming toward me. He too would kiss me. . . .

"Get out of here!" I heard myself gasping. "I—I never want to see you again! I hate you!"

"Why, Manya, dear—why, good Lord—"

He tried to seize me, but I shoved him away.

"I lied to you! I don't love you! It was Alan Carter I loved, and now he's dead—"

Peters stood in the doorway. "You'd better go," she said to John.

"Yes, go!" I screamed. "I hate you—get out of here! I never want to see you again!"

Poor dear John. Like a big, baffled animal he stood confused, gazing helplessly from Peters to me as he winced under my lashing tongue.

"Manya—"

"You fool! Don't you know when you're being put out? I don't love you.

I love Alan Carter and he—he's dead!"

Peters shoved at him as I sank into a chair, sobbing. Then he was gone.

Peters and I packed all that night, and soon after dawn we fled from the village.

THE house that Dr. MacArthur found for Peters and me was a little furnished bungalow, set with its back to the brink of a gully, a path of woods around it, and a little side-road winding past. It was a mile from an up-state village.

It was secluded enough; but how could I run away from a thing like this when the horror of it burned into my brain, and all my tortured thoughts, my dreams at night, held nothing but the pathetic, tragic memory of Alan Carter's face, and my conjured vision of how he must have looked, dying in convulsions?

And how shall I describe my despairing conviction that never again would I see John Wallace. I loved him now more than anything in the world. But stronger than that love was the terror of surrender to him. Love and marriage, I would never have them because I was cursed.

The first two days I lived in a nightmare, fearing that I might weaken and send for John; by night I lay drenched in sweat, filled with the ghastly horror that I might cast aside all restraint and claim the love I knew he felt for me. . . . Then the shadows were closing in on me again—grim shadows with leering, lurking menace; accusing shadows of Alan and Tom Thorp who were dead—whose blood I had congealed from the white heat of passion into the festering of the grave.

That third night I stood at my window. There was only blackness outside: Blackness and strange sounds of the lonely night. A premonition of ghastly horror was upon me. Once I thought I would rush to the phone and call John to come and save me. Save me from what? I did not know. There was a chill dankness in the air, but my fevered face welcomed it.

My brain was on fire. My body was on fire; throbbing—longing for John. And that fierce grisly terror persisted, rising up like a great monster, ready to spring and devour me.

Peters came into the room almost soundlessly. She spoke to me, but I hardly heard the words. That voice of Peters—there had always been something vaguely, queerly reminiscent about it. As though in some former incarnation I might have known her—as a friend, or an enemy? And the timbre of her voice stirred me tonight—stirred me so that I trembled.

"What—what is it, Peters?"

"Your supper, Miss Manya." She placed a tray with food and my usual sedative beside my bed. I ignored the food, but took the sedative because I knew that I must sleep or I would die of this torture. Then when she was gone I switched out my light, stripped off my clothes almost in a frenzy and went back to the window, feeling the air strike my nude body with a cold, chilling hand.

I do not know how long I stood there. Finally, in exhaustion, I went to bed and lay uncovered, with my throbbing body nude. Then, at last, I must have drifted to sleep, and I thought I was dreaming. I felt arms about me, protecting and loving. I struggled to get away.

Gradually my senses were returning; I was regaining consciousness. Vaguely I felt the arms tightening about me; and now a voice was murmuring to me.

It was John's voice!

A TERRIBLE lethargy was upon me. I wanted to cry out—to tell him not to kiss me, not to caress me, because if he did it would mean death to him. But I could not arouse myself. And then I heard his words:

"Manya—little Manya—"

The moonlight—I could see now its silver sheen as it struck in through my bedroom window and upon his face. It

made him look ghostlike, sitting there. . . .

"Manya, why did you run away? Dr. MacArthur was so good—he told me where to find you."

"John—you—you—" My hand held him off. I must get him out of here. Then dimly I remembered—

"John," I gasped. "You didn't—didn't kiss me just now, did you?"

"Kiss you?" He leaned toward me. "Why, there's nothing wrong in that, is there?"

His face came down, but I wildly shoved at him.

"John—my God—"

At my wild look, my face, pallid in the moonlight with God knows what look of terror on it, he drew back. And suddenly his hand went up to his face.

"Good Lord—" he muttered. He seemed for the second dazed.

"John—" Horror choked me. Sentinels of death were crowding us.

"I guess—I guess I don't feel very well, Manya," he murmured. He tried to laugh. "How idiotic. What—what were you saying, darling?" He sat on the bed, swaying. "I'm afraid there's something the matter with me, Manya—"

Dear God—the end

I leaped up, with my disheveled hair streaming down on my shoulders and breasts. John had staggered from the bed; he was standing confused.

"I'm—sick," he muttered. Then he seemed to realize he was terrifying me. "Oh, I'm all right—just feel—queer. My head—and I'm trembling."

His outstretched hand was shaking as though palsied. Dear God, he was so pallid, his eyes wide with startled wonderment and a growing terror. Forgetful of my nudity, I leaped from the bed, clung to him.

"John—you don't realize—" I could only laugh wildly—laugh and sob and cling to him. "You're going to die, John. Oh my God, you're going to die and I've

killed you! Murderess—that's Manya Corot—murderess—"

He was gripping me now—staring at me—trying to collect his scattering thoughts. And his face so pale with the sweat pouring out on it.

"Die, Manya?"

He staggered as he tried to clutch me. . . . The end. Oh, why would I stand here like this, with the man I loved dying before me? A doctor—we must phone a doctor. Or phone to a hospital—there was a hospital over at White Cap Mountain, ten miles away.

I must have been babbling it. "Yes—a doctor—a hospital," he gasped. "I guess you're right, Manya."

My telephone was out in the living room. Together, clinging to each other, we started for it. Then a low moan abruptly sounded in the dim and silent bungalow! We rounded a corner of the little hallway, stood frozen. Peters! My maid lay here on the floor! Peters, in her black dress and the stab wound in her breast a crimson horror!

"Peters!" I gasped. "Oh, Peters—"

Her agonized eyes focussed on me. "You—damn you," she faintly murmured. "Murderess! You killed my boy, Tommy—damn you—"

Tom Thorp's mother! The woman of the hospital who had stridently cursed me for the death of her son! If only I had caught a glimpse of her that day in the hospital!

"**D**AMN you, Manya Corot," she was faintly gasping. "I had my vengeance, didn't I? Drugging you—" She seemed to see the staggering John as he swayed, numbed, dazed, with me supporting him. "The man you love—" The dying woman tried to laugh, but it was only a ghastly gurgle of blood in her throat. "He'll die! You can't save him—he'll die from the accursed kiss you've given him—"

She was dying. Who had killed her? Had she committed suicide? The ghastly sight of her blurred before me, as for that instant I clung to John. My head was whirling beyond rational thought. . . . A hospital—a doctor—John was dying—we must get help. . . .

I realized that I was stumbling forward—nude, half maniac woman no doubt—holding the dazed, stricken man I loved—trying to get to the telephone to summon help—

“Manya—where are we? I can’t see much.”

God, how he was twitching now! Like Alan Carter! . . . He collapsed into a chair. “You know the name—of a doctor—near here?” he mumbled. “Or you better call the police. Tell them to send a doctor—or an ambulance—”

I found the telephone. My teeth were chattering; my whole body bathed in sweat as I lifted the receiver.

“Put that back!” At the sound of the grim voice, I dropped the receiver back on its hook, stared numbly at a shapeless figure that rose up from the shadows beside me. “I’ll be the one to call the police, Manya—the police, and a doctor and an ambulance which will be too late.”

Dr. Frank MacArthur! The handsome physician stood here leering at me; his hand at his side clutched a knife still dripping crimson! A changed Dr. MacArthur from the man I had known so many years—his hair disheveled—his face contorted with the lust for killing mingled with his triumph. A madman? His glittering, leering eyes burned at me. But there was a shrewdness in them—a glittering, calculated triumph—the triumph of a rational scheming villain with his purpose at last accomplished.

“That’s better, Manya. I’ll be the one to do the telephoning. Mary Peters is dead—or she will be in a minute.” He chuckled. “She did her work well; but I couldn’t take a chance that she would

always say the right thing when questioned—”

Like a panting maniac I must have been staring, with the room whirling around me—blurred, numbed so that I hardly heard the damnable villain’s gloating, leering words. Then I saw him sweep a contemptuous glance at John—who was collapsed in his chair, twitching horribly now, staring with distended eyes that seemed to see nothing of the grisly scene around him.

“He’s dying, Manya.” Again that fiendish chuckle. Then his leering triumphant gaze swung back to me, roved my nude, shaking body. “God, you are beautiful, aren’t you?” he muttered. “I never quite realized how beautiful. A mad, beautiful murderess. What you’ll try to say won’t make any difference, my dear. A madwoman. Mad with lust—murderess of Carter. And this fellow Wallace. A poisoner—a Borgia. They’ll say you stabbed your poor maid.”

With his dripping, crimson knife at his side, he stood appraising my sweat-bathed body so pale in the moonlight. I may have screamed, but I can’t remember. I was barely conscious of what I was doing—numbly staring at him, trying to scream with my choking throat so that it only made him laugh.

“Get away from the telephone, Manya. I’ll call them. You’re going to a sanatorium, my dear. My sanatorium, where I’ll have to keep you locked up because you’re a murderous maniac. Oh, it will be highly profitable for me—”

DRIPPING poison from her lips. . . . In all the chaos of my roaring brain, the words suddenly were etched as though with lines of fire.

I was aware that at his leering gesture I had staggered to my feet, away from the telephone. Vaguely I saw that John was trying to climb from the chair—

And suddenly raging, as though in truth

my mind were unhinged, I staggered forward and flung myself upon MacArthur. The impact of my body caught him off balance. He stumbled backward, with his arms around me as I fell upon him.

"Why—" he gasped. "Why, Manya—"

"Love me!" I panted. "Hold me close—you've made me a creature of desire—hold me close because I love you—"

In that startled second, with my body close to him, my face against his, the instinct of his passion seized him.

"Why—Manya." In that second he was off his guard.

And then my mouth found his—found his and clung, madly kissing him. . . . Lips that dripped poison—lusting with a mad kiss of death.

Then I was aware that he was struggling with terror. His face jerked away and his man's strength heaved me off so that I staggered to my feet.

"I've killed him, John! Look at him—I've killed him with my kiss!"

The dim moonlit room was a swaying phantasmagoria with John on his feet here beside me, clutching at me. And on the floor, the stricken MacArthur lay in a paroxysm. He had tried to climb to his feet, but had fallen again.

My raging, lustful kiss had been so very different from the gentle caress John had given me. John was still on his feet—but MacArthur was dying in a convulsion. For a moment or two he struggled. Then like an animal gasping its quivering last breath, his twitching muscles stiffened. And then he was gone. . . .

Vaguely I remember John swaying dizzily as he sat at the telephone. Then everything went black as my legs buckled and I fell in a little white heap in the moonlight at his feet. . . .

JOHN was only in the hospital a day or two. But I was there for months. And so was Peters—Mary Thorp, her right name. She made a full confession

before she died, from which most of the details of MacArthur's fiendish plot can be pieced together. The man was irrational, of course. But he was a coldly scheming villain too.

As a young physician he had attended my widowed mother when still I was a child. It is obvious that even then he was scheming to get her fortune. My mother was a tragic weak figure. A strong neurotic strain had come from her Austrian forbears. She feared it—feared perhaps insanity for herself—or for me. As a child I was neurotic, nervous; and that terrified her. Always she had had great confidence in Dr. MacArthur. Dying, she had left her will with provisions that Freeman and his Board of Trustees were to tell me nothing that would frighten me; that at twenty-one, or when for a year I had been happily married to a trustworthy man, the money was to be turned over to me. And meanwhile, for Dr. MacArthur there was a fifteen thousand a year fee as my physician—to guard my physical and mental health. He of course prompted that will—his lavish yearly fee so that if I never married—if I should be declared mentally incompetent, Dr. MacArthur would care for me, trustee of my fortune . . .

It was a stake indeed worth playing for. And so the scheming villain determined that I should never marry—that in the end I should be committed, mentally incompetent, into his care for life. Tom Thorp's mother was a nurse; MacArthur was a doctor. They met; she became his mistress and, hating me, was easily persuaded to become his willing tool in the diabolic plot against me.

We think, too, that he had a reason for wanting Alan Carter dead. He had contrived that young Carter meet me—for my own good, I had thought! But now it transpires that MacArthur was connected with the photographic business of Alan's father. He had embezzled some

of its funds. Alan, after his father's death, with the alertness of youth, was investigating. MacArthur quite evidently realized the danger—and so poor Alan, through me, met his death. . . . John Wallace had found me in my seclusion. That was not a coincidence. MacArthur had contrived to let him know where perhaps I might be found—and MacArthur had followed him up to me for the climax of his weird and gruesome villainy.

During my months at the hospital, there were many nurses and doctors—and once or twice, the police—who tried to explain to me the medical details of what had been done to me. Shuddering details of strange alkaloidal compounds with weird lethal names . . . Cyanides in compound; cuarite—other deadly drugs. . . .

To me, just grisly words. I only knew that for months my poor body was wracked with the tortures of the damned as the harrassed physicians experimented upon me to find the nature of the drug with which my system was loaded—to give it to me in lessening doses until at last I was free of it.

The reverse of what MacArthur and my maid had done to me all those ghastly months and years. Mary Thorp had also given me aphrodisiacs, the reason for that ghastly torturing desire which always had been upon me. And she had fed me, in tiny but increasing doses, upon the deadly drug so that at last what would instantly kill a dozen men, my system absorbed.

Typhoid Annie. . . . One of the grim young doctors at the hospital mentioned her. . . . There were, he said, many known precedents of my condition. Dispenser of death. . . . The very moisture of my lips—my salivary glands. . . .

I can only shudder as I set it down; I have no heart to detail it. . . . Grim and ghastly horror, so rational. . . . There was even a police precedent—a “poison kiss” murder famous a few years ago—the transference of death in a kiss!

John and I are happily married now. We try not to think of the horrible past. But often—though not for all the world would I mention it—that curse of the necromancer, Prahar, recurs to me. And I wonder if MacArthur himself might have been merely the worldly tool of the malevolent dead mystic—just the instrument to help with the fulfillment of the curse. With MacArthur dead, will the leering venomous spirit of Prahar find some other way?

I am free of all taint of the drug, of course. But sometimes, in the darkness of our bedroom as I lie beside John, it seems that over me there is a leering horrible presence. And when John kisses me—when my own wifely love and passion thrill me into response—often I am shuddering with horror. I wonder if some time when I have fallen asleep, surfeited by the passion of our kisses, I will awaken to find John dying in a ghastly convulsion beside me!