

# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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## TWO FULL-LENGTH NOVELS OF EERIE MYSTERY

- Necklaces for the Dying.....By Frederick C. Davis 8  
*Claire Forester feared the rabid passion that stared at her from out the stone-cutter's lust-filled eyes—feared, too, those fabulously strong hands, which some whispered, shaped ghastly necklaces for the dying. . . .*
- Brides for the Beast.....By Wayne Rogers 40  
*A lust-mad scientist whispered secrets concerning her lover's birth to Minna Talbot—while a mad thing, whose origin was unknown, brought terror to that mountain wilderness. . . .*

## TWO WEIRDLY REALISTIC MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

- The Embalmers.....By Garry Grant 76  
*Was Marmon truly mad as he stood grim vigil beside the white, still body of his beloved—protecting her from perils which only the living should fear?*
- Convicts from Hell.....By George Alden Edson 104  
*Thousands of volts of electricity swept through his quivering body—but Nan Raymond feared that his grisly promise to return and wreak ghastly vengeance upon her would be kept!*

## SHORT TALES OF GRIPPING TERROR

- Death's Warm Fireside.....By Paul Ernst 34  
*Through strangely clinging snowdrifts Malcolm Slade tardily returned to a lost love.*
- Bedfellow from Hell.....By Larry Moore 67  
*Leona awakened to find her bed invaded by one whose grisly passions were not of this earth!*
- Locked in With Death.....By Dale Clark 95  
*Girls, whose beauty condemned them to horrible death, cowered in their homes—where their danger was greatest!*

—AND—

- Dark Council.....A Department 122

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By Paul Ernst  
(Author of "Embrace of the  
Fire God," etc.)



## DEATH'S WARM FIRESIDE

*Malcolm Slade was coming home. Through biting cold and heavy, strangely clinging snowdrifts he was returning, tardily, to the girl he had loved and lost.*

OVER the lights of Newton a mile away an evening star glittered like blue ice with a lamp behind it. Blue-black was the early night sky; blue-white the thick drifts of snow that mantled the open countryside. That same

snow crunched under Malcolm Slade's feet like singing particles of glass as he cut across the woodlot at the south end of the Slade farm and walked wearily, unsteadily, toward the house.

God, it was cold! It was blue-cold to

the eye as well as paralyzingly chill to the senses. He shivered and thrust hands he could scarcely feel deeper into his coat pockets. He hunched his shoulders higher so that his coat collar should fit more closely around his neck.

Cold, cold, cold! And the house would be cold too—shut up and unoccupied for a little while, as it had been.

He shrugged philosophically. Well, that was his fault. The house wouldn't be shut, untenanted, if he hadn't lost that quick temper of his. With the passage of a little time he was ready to admit, now, that Claire had been right. He'd been a fool to fling himself angrily out of the house and leave her to go to her folks.

But he could see how still and black and drear the house looked across the white-drifted fields. And that hurt. The house had been so homely and comfortable looking just a short while ago, before he had quarrelled with Claire. Now it looked. . . .

"Never think it had been lived in," Malcolm Slade muttered laboriously. He felt that if he didn't talk aloud, do something like that, he would sink into the drifts and float off in the sleep that precedes freezing.

"Never think it had been lived in. But just a little while ago. . . ."

**I**T had been in the late fall that he'd left, scarcely six weeks before this period, the height of winter. The last of the leaves had been eddying in cheery piles before their porch. The big fireplace had been singing its message of warmth and benevolence for those fortunate enough to live in the old farm home.

Slade got to the meadow fence, with the black, bleak farm house only a hundred yards away. He climbed the fence, fell heavily on the other side in the snow. He had to fight his cold-drugged senses to make himself rise. And he groaned as

he thought of what the house would be within. An empty house in winter always seems even more bitterly cold than the temperature outside.

Well, he'd light fires, get the thing going again. Then, he thought hazily, he'd get in touch with Claire and they'd pick up where they had left off. It was a nice little farm; they had proved that a good living could be taken from it. And it was perfect for the boy they were going to have. . . .

"Fool!" he mumbled, biting his lips to keep his eyes from closing. "We have everything right in our hands, Claire and I. And I tossed it away. . . . But she'll come around. She won't let a few weeks break our whole lives. I'll tell her it was all my fault. . . ."

He went past the barn, staggering a little. And now he was so cold that his eyes were playing him tricks. He thought he saw the outlines of the old barn waver; thought he could see the stars through it in places.

"This is getting serious," he told himself, throwing his weary shoulders back and taking his hands from his pockets to beat them together. "God, I wish I was coming into a warm house instead of a freezing one. . . ."

And into a home instead of a bleak shell that looked, in the eerie moonlight, like a great, empty tomb, his mind went on with his thought.

He went to his knees in a drift near the front door of the dark house, got up again.

"Claire." he called, tongue thick, voice hoarse.

Then he got a grip on his wavering senses. This wouldn't do! Calling to Claire like that! As if, at his call, she would open the door and he would see her as he had seen her so many times in their life here: in a trim house dress, face flushed with heat from the coal range but

beautiful nevertheless, arms opened to him. . . .

"But she'll be back again soon," Slade muttered. "I'll get the house warm, and things straightened again . . . place can go to pieces in a few weeks . . . she'll come back. . . ."

He climbed the porch. There were only three steps, but they were a hard struggle. He took them a step at a time, and leaned against a porch post and panted for a full minute after he had accomplished them.

Leaning there, he saw lights across the road, a few hundred yards away.

"New house," he muttered in surprise. "Well! Old Gleason got it built, did he? Put it up in a hurry when he did get started. Nice for Claire and me to have closer neighbors."

Mechanically, senselessly, he tried the door. It was locked, of course. Claire wouldn't leave it unlocked when she left, after his abrupt and angry departure. And the other doors would be tightly fastened, too.

He walked along the porch to a window. It was one of the living room windows. He tried it with almost frozen fingers. It did not budge. Nailed shut, probably.

For a moment maudlin self pity seized him. Coming through the freezing night like this, alone and cold, to a house that was nailed and locked against him, and that would be freezing within anyhow. . . .

"Hell," he muttered. "It's your own fault it's like this. Now get in there and go to work."

There seemed no way short of violence for him to get in. He took off his felt hat, wadded it around his right hand, and smashed it through the window. Then he picked out the sharp pieces that clung to the sash, and slithered through.

**I**NSIDE the living room he stood blanketed in total darkness.

Cold inside? Yes. But in this house

that had known no heat for a time the cold ate into his very heart. It sent ice needles through his flesh; attacked him like a living, bitter thing.

He searched through his pockets for matches, found them at last. Two dropped from his stiff fingers, but the third he managed to hold. He stared around in the dim light it cast.

He could see practically nothing, and he wondered for an instant if his eyeballs had frozen. He had heard of such things. But that was preposterous; the kind of thing that happened only in Arctic cold, not the zero weather of Ohio. The match threw a poor light, that was all.

Nevertheless, he shrank from the shadows its yellow flame produced; shadows that seemed to creep slowly toward him from all four sides of the room, hemming him in, poisoning as though to leap.

He shuddered again, and now not entirely because of the cold. Then he started, and dropped the match stub. Had that been a step upstairs?

He listened in the darkness, and heard it again: a distinct creak as if a person's weight had been pressed against a board in the big bedroom.

For an instant a wild hope seized him. That was Claire! He was here! She. . . .

"Fool! Here in this icy place with no light on and no fire going? It's a board creaking with the cold, that's all."

He walked toward the stairs off the little hall between living room and dining room. He didn't bother to light another match. He knew the way perfectly. He went slowly only because there might be some piece of furniture out of its accustomed place, between him and the hall.

The place was alive with memories of Claire. He kept seeing her in this hall doorway, calling him to dinner. He kept visioning the living room, warm and cheery, as she had furnished and arranged

it. He kept seeing Claire and himself sitting before the leaping flames in the fireplace, talking of the boy that was to come. . . .

His steps resounded in the bleak house like giant drum-beats. He tried to walk on tiptoe, appalled by the noise. But he was too shaky with cold, and weariness from the distance he had walked, to make it. So he shuffled over the bare floor of the little hall and noisily climbed the stairs.

The second floor was, if anything, colder than the first. He realized that at last the bitter chill was really getting him. But even as he realized that, he found himself sinking to the top step.

He sat there, leaning against the newel post, chin on his chest.

"Got to get up," he said thickly, aloud.

But he made no move. It was so pleasant to sit, to give in for just a moment to his lassitude. He'd get up in a minute and get some fire going. With the living room stove red hot and the fireplace going, the first floor would warm up in a hurry. Have to get some wood in.

A sound from downstairs penetrated his stupor. And as he really heard it, he straightened quickly. This was not a fancied sound, nor one made by cold-contracting boards! It was real, and startling!

It was the sound of flames, the crackling of fire!

"My God, the matches I lit—" Slade thought.

He started drunkenly down the stairs. The little hall was already bright with the rosy glow of naked fire. He stumbled into the living room. . . .

There are moments too big, too marvelous, to be borne. And this one, as Slade stood in the living room doorway, was one of them.

Mouth open, eyes wide, he stared at the transformed room.

The fire that had sent its light into the

hall was from the big fireplace; a great pile of wood was roaring there, with logs atop to send out even heat when the kindling had burned. The stove in the center of the room was already black-hot, and laving him with warmth. The bright lamps on the table near the front door were lit; and on the stove a pot was steaming that Slade knew contained hot rum.

And beside the stove stood Claire.

Her blue eyes were alight as she stared at him, though they were suspiciously moist. Her red young lips were half parted. Her heart was in her face, and staring at it, Slade knew he was already forgiven.

"Surprise—" Claire called, tears spilling from her eyes.

But Slade's knees were folding under him. He slid to the threshold and lay with his head inside the living room and his feet in the little hall.

SLADE'S head was in Claire's lap when he again became aware of things. She was holding him to her, calling him all the endearing terms they'd thought up during their five years of married life.

"Darling," she whispered, when his eyes opened. He saw fear in her own eyes, saw it fade into gladness when he looked at her.

"Mal! I was afraid. . . . You looked almost as if you were dead!"

"Kind of a shock," whispered Slade, staring at Claire's face as though he could not get his fill of it. "I didn't dream you were here too. It looked like no one was here. All cold and dark, like it was."

Claire's eyes, expressive as open books, lighted again.

"I wasn't here when you broke in, Mal. I was at Mr. Gleason's. I've been staying there, watching, waiting for you to come back. I saw a light in here—"

"I struck some matches to see my way around."

"I saw the light, dear, and came over. I came in as quietly as I could, and lit the fires. I wanted to surprise you."

Slade sat up. He didn't want to take his head from its comfortable position, but he was afraid Claire would think him ill or feeble from the cold if he lay where he was any longer.

"It was a surprise, all right!" he told her. "The most gorgeous one. . . . But it kind of knocked me out. So far from what I expected, and everything. . . ."

They looked at each other for a long while. Then their two bodies, that had been so close so many times, swayed toward each other. They kissed, eyes closed, all quarrels melting in the wordless agreement.

"So you were waiting for me," marvelled Slade.

"I was waiting for you," nodded Claire. "It seemed a very long time, Mal."

"Well, now I'm home and we'll carry on. I'll get to work tomorrow and clear things up. . . . Claire, what did we quarrel about?"

She shook her head, smiling.

"I can't even remember. But it doesn't matter anyway. We won't quarrel again. You've come home, and so have I. Without the two of us, the place is just a house, cold and bleak and deserted. With us, it is a home again."

The flames in the fireplace leaped and roared. The stove behind them hummed with heat. Slade felt a little drowsy.

Claire handed him a glass of the hot rum that had steamed on the stove. He sipped at it. Floundering through snow drifts toward a house as cold and empty as his own heart had been since he left? Yes, he had been doing that, and only a little while ago. But it seemed years ago, now, in the light of his present warmth and comfort.

He was so warm, so comfortable! He

let himself drift into a sort of dreamlike state, with Claire warm in his arms.

"You're kind of wonderful," he whispered to her.

And it was then that their bodies drew closer still, and he knew again the poignant sweetness of the woman he had married, and had been stupid enough to leave awhile ago.

Outside, a frigid wind began to moan over the blue-cold world. But the only effect it had in the warm room was to make the raw flame in the fireplace leap higher, and the warm stove hum more loudly.

"You've missed me?" he whispered at last, greedy for the look on her face to be translated into words.

"So much," she whispered back, running her young, smooth hands lightly down his stubbled cheek. "But now you're here. And I know you'll never leave again."

CURIOUSLY, now, a little chill stole down his spine. Her words were natural; the kind of thing she would tend to say. But there was something about her tone that struck him as a little odd. It had such extreme conviction in it. She *knew* he would never leave her again! She had said it as though he were now chained to her by some circumstance stronger than earthly will.

But the uneasy feeling faded soon. Why shouldn't she have conviction in her tone? She was right, wasn't she? He never would be separated from her again. Not while he was in his right mind!

So warm and comfortable before the fireplace. . . . So contented with Claire again by his side, in his arms. . . .

Malcolm Slade felt himself slide again into a sort of dreamlike trance.

"Kiss me," whispered Claire.

Dreamily, he kissed her.

"So glad I'm home," he said finally,

eyes sagging closed as though weights pulled down the lids. "So glad. . . ."

He dimly saw Claire smile. There was everything in her smile a man dreams of getting from a woman.

"You're sleepy, darling, aren't you? I don't blame you. The cold outside, the bitter, bitter cold inside before I got the fires going, your long walk, now this warmth. . . ." Her voice was a lullaby, closing his eyes more securely still.

"Sleep, Mal. Sleep. And know you'll never be away from me again. Sleep. . . ."

The fire was sending dim red even through his closed eyelids, carrying him off to unconsciousness with the feeling that all was right in a world that had not been too kind to him of late.

"Sleep. . . ."

Crackling fire, Claire, everything slipped into a slumber as comforting as it was profound.

**T**HE rather creditable Newton fire engine panted in the snow-packed lane beside the farm house. Its hose was out, and the volunteer firemen, half a dozen of them, were helmeted and in rubber slickers ready to attack the roaring blaze that soared through the roof twice as high as the house it was consuming.

But there was no way for them to attack it. There was no water in the well

behind the house, and the nearby creek was frozen solid.

"Have to let 'er burn," said one of the men. "No loss, anyway."

A sedan slid up through the snow and stopped behind the fire engine. A man got out; the Newtown doctor, Allen Lutz.

"Bill, you phoned there was a man here who needed me," he said.

The man he addressed shook his head a little.

"No work for you now, Doc. The guy died a few minutes after I phoned from Gleason's, without ever coming to."

The men parted. Lutz bent over a stark figure on a heap of coats in the snow. He felt the figure's chest.

"Dead, all right. Who is he?"

One of the others shrugged.

"Just some old tramp. None of us has ever seen him before. We found him lying in the burning house."

"In there?" said Doctor Lutz, staring incredulously at the almost demolished building. "In the roofless old ruin?"

"Yeah. I can't figure out why. I shouldn't think even an old drunk like this bum would try for shelter there. The house has been falling to pieces since I was a kid—ever since Mrs. Malcolm Slade died after her husband deserted her thirty years ago."

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