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An Uncanny Yarn About Devil Worshipers

DEVIL MANOR

A Complete Novelette

By E. B. JORDAN

"Where is it?"

"Under the stone."

"Where is the key?"

"She has it."

"Where is she?"

"In the gray house in the vil-
lage."

"What must you say to her?"

"I am a Norseman."

"WHAT does it mean?" asked the lawyer.

"That," said Eric, "is just what I was going to ask you."

"You don't know?" inquired the lawyer.

"I do not. Every birthday since my sixteenth year I've had to repeat the thing. It was a family secret and nobody would tell me anything about its meaning."

The lawyer looked deeply interested.

"My instructions," he said, "were to have an interview with you here in New York on your thirtieth birthday and acquaint you with these facts: a large property was left in trust for his oldest grandson by Colonel Thorvald Ericsson, your grandfather; you cannot receive this property until you have placed in my hands a certain object."

"What object?"

"I'm forbidden to tell you."

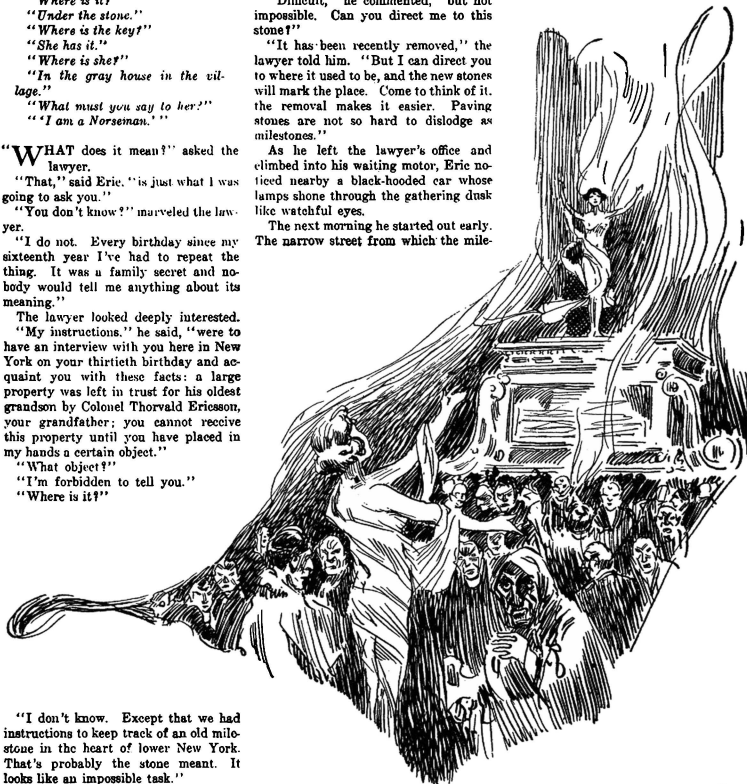
"Where is it?"

"Difficult," he commented, "but not impossible. Can you direct me to this stone?"

"It has been recently removed," the lawyer told him. "But I can direct you to where it used to be, and the new stones will mark the place. Come to think of it, the removal makes it easier. Paving stones are not so hard to dislodge as milestones."

As he left the lawyer's office and climbed into his waiting motor, Eric noticed nearby a black-hooded car whose lamps shone through the gathering dusk like watchful eyes.

The next morning he started out early. The narrow street from which the mile-



"I don't know. Except that we had instructions to keep track of an old milestone in the heart of lower New York. That's probably the stone meant. It looks like an impossible task."

stone had been removed lay between two rows of giant warehouses, whose main entrances fronted on larger thoroughfares. Even at ten o'clock in the day there was only a watchman and a few loungers to observe Eric as he stopped his car at the curb, and began to walk slowly up and down the middle of the street, pausing occasionally to bend down and examine certain stones.

Overcome with curiosity, the bystanders held a consultation and delegated the watchman to get some explanation of this eccentric behavior.

He approached rather uncertainly, for Eric was a big, determined-looking individual with an air of knowing thoroughly what he was about.

"Mornin', Boss!" The watchman's tone was genial. "What's the trouble?"

Eric glanced at him in an absent-minded way.

"There isn't any trouble—yet," he observed briefly.

The man moved back a step. "Thought maybe yuh'd lost something," he ventured.

"Did you?" asked Eric. For the first time he seemed to perceive the interested group. His brows drew together. Then he tried to whisper in the watchman's ear, which unaccountably receded from him.

"Listen," said Eric, stepping forward. "I'll tell you who I am."

Curiosity overcame caution. The watchman listened.

"I am a Norseman!" whispered Eric. "Is that all?" asked the disappointed watchman.

Eric frowned again. "Did you want anything more?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied the watchman promptly.

Repeating this conversation to his incredulous companions, the watchman was accused of concealing facts. During the ensuing altercation Eric found the new stones, marked them, and went his way. This time he failed to notice the black car following him.

That night when Eric's car slid silently into the little street, the only person in sight was the policeman on the beat. Eric went straight to him.

"Officer, I want you to help me out," he said.

"What can I do for you?" asked the officer, returning Eric's friendly smile.

"I am an entomologist," confided Eric. "You know what that is, of course?"

"Sure," said the officer, who had a vague idea that it was some kind of Eastern religion.

"I happened to hear last night that an old milestone was removed from this

street some weeks ago," continued Eric, "and that the soil beneath the stone is full of a kind of insect called *Ectobia Germanica*, which is of inestimable value to collectors, as you know."

"Sure," agreed the officer.

"I want to dig up some paving stones and get a few of these specimens."

"You'll have to have a permit."

"Haven't time. Leave for South America tomorrow. I will replace the stones exactly as they are."

"Sorry, but I couldn't allow it."

Eric's hand slipped into his pocket.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind keeping this for me?" he asked, holding up something that was green and that crackled. The officer looked at it shrewdly.

"I am afraid I'd lose it," he murmured, "it's so small."

Eric increased its size.

"Perhaps you'd better see what's going on at the corner," he suggested.

"That dance-hall will bear watching."

"Thanks; I guess I will do that. Of course you won't try to dig them stones up while my back is turned?"

"Certainly not!"

So the officer turned his back and Eric dug up the stones. They came out easily and for a while he had no trouble in removing the soil beneath. But when the hole was about two feet deep, the earth became almost unyielding and he realized that he had now reached the foundation on which the milestone had rested.

For an hour he worked steadily. Occasionally a burst of noise came from the corner dance-hall; occasionally the policeman cast a side glance at what he firmly believed to be a harmless lunatic; once a long black motor flashed by the end of the little street; but there was nothing to disturb Eric as he worked.

After a while he almost forgot that he was digging for anything in particular and was startled when a flat tin box was brought to light. He put it in his pocket and methodically refilled the hole and replaced the paving stones.

Then he took leave of the policeman and started home. It was characteristic of him that he drove no faster on account of the mysterious box. He could always wait for what he wanted, though he seldom considered it necessary.

Examining the box in his own room, he found that the metal held firm in spite of the rust of years. He managed to pry open the lid and disclosed a flat silver box, elaborately carved and firmly locked.

"The key!" he wondered. "Ah, she has it, the girl in the village."

The gray house in Greenwich Village looked very dignified and exclusive in the bright sunshine. Even Eric felt he

should have been introduced to the old brass knocker before presuming to use it.

"Who would you like to see, sir?" asked the maid who opened the door.

At a loss for a moment, Eric gazed thoughtfully at her. Then he took a chance.

"Your young mistress," he told her easily.

"Come in, sir."

"So there is a young mistress," he congratulated himself as he followed the maid into a shadowy hall, through a curtained doorway, and, it seemed, into another century. There in the room was the spinning wheel, the hautboy, the spinnet, the round work table, all the traditional Colonial setting.

Then he heard quick footsteps. A moment more, and the doorway framed in a quaintly charming picture the very spirit of the room. The flowered muslin, the buckled shoes, the high-coiled hair above the little pointed face and long-lashed wondering eyes, were all so redolent of a vanished past that Eric bent his blond head in a bow as ceremonious as the courtesey she swept.

"I am a Norseman," he announced briefly, and awaited results.

They were instantaneous. Her face went white and her hand flew to her throat and drew out a chain and a little silver key.

"Where is the lock?" she asked breathlessly.

Eric produced the silver box. She gave a little cry and held out her hands for it, but Eric returned the box to his pocket and calmly took the hands.

"First," he said, "I want a little information. Who are you, and what is it all about?"

"I am Senta," she informed me. "But I only know that I've lived in this house all my life with Mother, and when I was sixteen I was given this little key and every year had to repeat this:

"'Where is the lock?

He has it.

Where is he?

He will come.

What will he say?

"I am a Norseman.'"

"Why, that just fits mine!" exclaimed Eric, and repeated his. "But go on."

"Well, that's all. I'm twenty-six now and I thought you would never come. Tell me about yourself."

When he had told her she took him to her Mother, whose interest was as breathless as Senta's when Eric turned the key in the lock of the silver box.

Then all three stared in amazement. There was in the box only a little slip of yellowed paper.

"Oh, is it all a silly joke?" cried Senta, on the verge of tears.

Eric unfolded the paper and read in a bold but faded handwriting these words:

*"It lies in the heart of the Manor.
No irrevrent eyes may find it. Pray
for me!"*

"The Manor?" mused Eric. "That must be the old Ericsson Manor in Rock County. But no one has lived there for twenty-five years; not since my grandfather died."

"Maybe it's haunted!" gasped Senta.

"I believe there was a story to that effect. I remember as a child I once heard a countryman call it 'Devil's Manor.' Shall we let the ghost have the treasure?"

"No," replied Senta. "Let's go right now."

"I should say not," declared Eric. "Do you think I am going to let you go off with me like this when you've only known me an hour!"

Senta and her invalid mother both looked at him in innocent wonder.

"But you're the Norseman," protested Senta.

"That makes no difference. You don't know anything about me. We won't go until you've met some people who can at least vouch for my respectability. I have traveled around so much I haven't any very close friends here, but I guess I can find somebody. It isn't as if your mother were well enough to go with us."

For the next three weeks the rebellious Senta was forced to receive visits from various eminently respectable business men who had been friends of Eric's father and had kept track of the son's adventurous career.

"You're so careful about your references," complained Senta one day, "anybody would think you were applying for a position."

"So I am," replied Eric, with a gleam in his cold eyes. "May I consider myself—engaged?"

"No," said Senta, snippily. "You don't know your place."

"Just for that," retorted Eric, "we will go to Ericsson Manor this Friday instead of next Monday, as we planned."

Nor could all Senta's superstitious warnings change his decision.

A tenderly reminiscent smile was still on his lips as he climbed the many stairs to his old-fashioned apartment. The rooms were dark and still, but as the door closed behind him, he stopped suddenly, warned by that queer presentiment of danger common to men who have lived and fought all over the world.

Almost before the feeling became a thought he whirled and grappled with

the man who sprang at him from the darkness.

Back and forth they swayed and strained. Eric's arms closed like steel bars around the other's waist, crushing the breath from him. His ribs almost cracking, the man twisted suddenly and sank his fingers into Eric's throat. Eric's eyes bulged. He relaxed his grip and tore the clutching fingers from his throat. The intruder sprang away, his hand flashed out. Eric felt a sharp pain in his arm and the warm trickle of blood.

He lunged, twisted the knife away, and kicked it across the room. His assailant kept an arm's length away. They were using their fists now, and the unknown was snarling in a beastlike way. Eric broke through his guard and again seized his enemy in that terrible grip. He pinned the man's left arm to his side and forced it down and back.

They writhed and struggled, but slowly Eric's great strength forced the arm back and back until he listened for the bones to crack. In a final effort, he moved forward, his foot slipped in a little pool of blood on the polished floor. Before he could recover his balance his enemy broke from him.

There was a dreadful crash and Eric went down into utter darkness.

WHEN he recovered consciousness there was not a sound in the room. He lay still a moment, trying to recall the late happenings and listening for some sound to betray an alien presence. At last he dragged himself to his feet and stood a moment swaying dizzily.

He felt his way to his desk and lit the lamp. His head still rang from the blow that had stunned him, and his arm was stiff and sore from the knife cut. This proved to be only slight, however, and his head was rapidly clearing. He rather wondered why his assailant had left him alive, for the man had betrayed a bitter hatred.

It was therefore no surprise to discover that not a single valuable was missing, though the rooms had evidently been systematically searched. His desk in particular had been turned inside out and his papers and letters scattered over the floor. He went through them methodically, but was puzzled by the discovery that the only letter missing was a note from Senta, written two days before and appointing Monday as the day for the expedition to the Manor.

There was a faint rattling sound near the window that opened on the fire-escape. The wind was blowing the curtains and some metal object caught in their folds was dragged to and fro. Eric disentangled what proved to be a flat

medal or charm. He turned it over in the light, and a Devil's Head leered at him from the polished copper surface.

His hands clenched spasmodically and his mind went back to a never-forgotten incident of his childhood. The mysterious Ericsson Estate had always fascinated him, the more so that his elders would never talk about it. The child had spent long mornings in the road, peering through the bars of the high iron gate, half-hoping, half-fearing, that he might see some ghostly visitant in the deserted grounds, something to justify that whispered name "Devil's Manor."

And one morning he had found a little metal charm like the one he now held. He had carried it to his father, who flung it into the fire as if it were a poisonous thing.

"Forget you have ever seen it," was the only answer to the child's eager questions. "And never go near that place again."

Eric had been sent away to school soon after this, but the memory had come back to him many times during his adventurous life.

On Friday he and Senta made an early start, and by nine o'clock had reached the entrance to the old Ericsson Estate, which lay far off the main roads. The rust-covered iron gates screeched desolately as Eric forced them open. What had once been a broad carriage-way was now so choked with debris that the car had to be left just inside the gates.

They stumbled silently along. Tall, dark trees interlocked their branches above the road, increasing its gloom. They were almost at the house before they saw it.

A large house was Ericsson Manor, with a high tower in the middle and a wing on each side, all of massive stone. The blinds had long since fallen from the deep-set windows, which stared like empty eye-sockets. Here was no warm and ivy-mellowed old age; instead, the stone was covered with splotches of sickly lichen, as if the old house were slowly dying of the loathsome diseases bred of an evil life. Rust and ruin were everywhere, and the silence of utter desolation.

Senta's cold little hand trembled in Eric's warm clasp.

"Let's go away," she begged. "There's something evil about this place."

"Little coward!" teased Eric. "Come along."

As they made their way forward, long, drooping branches caught at them like cold fingers trying to hold them back.

CHAPTER TWO

With great difficulty, Eric pushed open the heavy door in the left wing and they entered a square hall. The dust of a quarter-century lay thick everywhere, except where the storms of many years had beaten in at the ruined windows.

They entered the library just off the hall and the ohill gloom crept to meet them like a ghostly presence. Their breathing sounded loud in the absolute stillness.

Suddenly they heard a sound. Far off and faint at first, it swelled into a solemn chant that seemed to come from the floor under their feet. Then it died, and the deathlike silence closed round them again.

"It was the wind," said Eric reassuringly.

"It was not the wind," said Senta, pale with superstitious fear. "It was voices—many voices, all together. Let's go away."

But the adventure-love was roused in Eric.

"Let's see if we can get into the Round Tower from the hall," he suggested.

Senta refused to explore.

"Then you wait for me here," he proposed. "There is no other door or exit from this room, and I'll be right in the hall."

"Will you promise not to go out of sight of this door?" she asked.

"Need a man promise to guard his dearest treasure?" he asked.

In the security of home, Senta would have vigorously resented his proprietary attitude, but now she had no retort ready.

There were many rooms opening off the hall, and Eric opened door after door, to find, in varying degrees, the same ruin and neglect. He did not cross the thresholds, for he did not want to lose sight of the room in which he had left Senta. But clearly none of these rooms connected with the Round Tower.

"We'll have to get to the Round Tower from outside," he stated, re-entering the library. "Come—" he stopped short.

There was the big chair in which he had left Senta: there was her little handkerchief, lying beneath an old portrait: but Senta herself was not in the room!

Not for an instant had he lost sight of the only exit to the room. But Senta had vanished.

And once more beneath his feet the strange chant swelled up and died away.

ERIC pulled himself together. There was no reason for alarm: Senta had found some secret door; old houses were full of such things.

He stooped to pick up her handkerchief and struck his head against the frame of the portrait. He pulled at it sharply and it swung outward, revealing a large dark opening in the wall behind. He stepped through into a narrow hall whose walls were hung with some heavy sombre material. The floor, too, was padded and his steps made no sound.

As he walked away from the lighted entrance he found himself in total darkness except for the occasional flare of his pocket flashlight, and as the passage twisted he had a queer feeling that somebody or something had just rounded the turn ahead of him. He was almost beginning to think that Senta was playing a joke on him when the floor sank beneath his feet and he was carried downward as if in an elevator.

It stopped with a jerk: a light glared suddenly in his face, and he saw in front of him two tall figures covered with shapeless black robes, their heads and faces hidden in black head-dresses, half cowl, half mask. He could see the gleam of their eyes through tiny slits in the masks, and grew restive under the silent scrutiny.

"What's the idea?" he inquired impatiently. "What are you, anyway? A blooming moving-picture outfit?"

His voice rang through the heavy silence as incongruously as a laugh in a tomb. The strange pair made no reply, but each laid a hand on his arm and pushed him forward.

Possessed with the feeling that it was all a silly masquerade, Eric roughly shook them off. Instantly a hard and extremely convincing automatic was poked into his ribs, while a cloth drawn closely around his jaws effectually gagged any vocal protest. Eric had been in tight places before, and therefore wasted no time in futile resistance.

The prodding revolver intimated that he was to walk forward, and he walked forward—through a massive door, down another long dark passage and into a small square room. In the middle of the floor was a trap door, and through its open lid there streamed a glare shot with films of smoke. There was a sound of footsteps, a deep human groan and two black-cowled heads rose suddenly above the trap, coming gradually into view as if ascending steps.

Two more followed, and they finally stepped into the room carrying between them a limp figure from whose lips burst

another agonized groan. The bearers threw him roughly on a bench and Eric saw that his clothes were scorched and ragged, his drawn face black with smoke, and his feet terribly burned. One of Eric's captors spoke in a sibilant whisper.

"Did he give the information? And did he recant?"

"Of course."

"How long did he stand it?"

"Half an hour."

"What is to be done with him now?"

"He is to be exhibited to the Worshipers and when they have finished with him he will be dead. He is almost dead now."

Eric's guard shrugged. "He has done the like to others. Now it is his turn. This one," he prodded Eric with the automatic, "is to endure it for an hour."

The others turned and looked at Eric. "An hour! Will he live that long?"

"He looks strong," replied the other indifferently. "Sebastian hates him."

"Oh! If Sebastian hates him he will not have an easy death."

"None of us will if Sebastian finds us chattering here," snarled Eric's other guard.

His companions glanced uneasily over their shoulders. Eric had just resolved to risk a struggle when a deep gong sounded over their heads, and at the signal the six men threw themselves upon him and almost flung him down the steps into the room below. The trap was closed, and with a rattle of chains the stairway was drawn up like a draw-bridge till it hung against the ceiling under the door at least five feet above Eric's head.

He looked around him. It was a small room, its ceiling, walls and floor of sheet iron. And the iron was warm. There was nothing in the room except a heavy suffocating odor, but, remembering the tortured man, Eric had little doubt as to the fate in store for himself.

He listened to the receding footsteps in the room above. They died away, but presently other footsteps came, and he heard a clicking in one corner of the ceiling; he saw a tiny opening, and through it an eye stared at him; the aperture clicked shut; there was a confused murmur. Then these footsteps receded, too.

If they had not locked the trap door there was just one chance for escape. He measured with his eyes the distance between himself and the drawn-up staircase; fortunately he was a trained athlete and the room was long enough to allow a running jump. Already the air was stifling, and smoke was beginning to curl from under his shoes. (The tor-

turel man's shoes had been burned away, he remembered.) The wall was scorching hot when Eric backed against it.

"Now for the Douglas Fairbanks stuff," he remarked with a grin smile.

The next moment he was hanging by his hands from the stairway. He crawled over it, and crouching under the trapdoor, thrust his powerful shoulders suddenly against it. The abruptness of the movement saved him. The trap door flew open, sending the guard, who had been sitting on it, sprawling to the floor. It did not take Eric long to secure the automatic, with the barrel of which he quite coolly knocked the man insensible. He then stripped off the robe and hood, and put them on himself, bound and gagged the senseless man and rolled him under the bench. He closed the trapdoor, and automatic in hand, cautiously opened the heavy outside door. Instantly a wave of sound rushed to his ears and he realized that with the door closed the little room had been sound-proof.

Somewhere ahead of him there was a pandemonium of yelling voices, frenzied laughter, and gusts of wild music. He felt his way along until he stepped through a half-screened doorway on to a high alcove like a stage box, and looked down on an immense hall, lit by low-hung lights a pallid green and sickly blue.

The vast place at first suggested a church with the dim lights flickering on long stained-glass windows; niches where candles burned before shadowy images; a huge organ, and the silent black-robed throng clustered around a high altar at the far end of the hall.

Yet there was a discordant note somewhere—a sense of the abnormal. The lights flared higher and the lurking evil was revealed. The images in the shrines were crouching, goat-horned creatures with leering faces; the stained-glass windows depicted scenes and figures of incredible depravity and horror. And there was a low moaning in the center of the black-robed group.

A tall figure rose suddenly above it and stood beside the altar.

"Back to your places!" commanded this one. "Let the renegade recant before he dies."

There was a rebellious murmur from the crowd as it pressed closer around its victim. The man beside the altar broke into furious cursing. He snatched up a thick whip and unmercifully lashed the heads and shoulders just beneath him. With screams of pain, they scattered, sinking to their knees in a semi-circle half a yard from the altar.

The man with the whip looked down at a moaning something that sprawled at his feet. It lifted a ghastly drawn face and Eric saw that it was the tortured man.

"Mercy—Sebastian—" gasped the victim.

Sebastian seized the half-dead creature by the throat, dragging him to his knees. "It is hard to believe," he said mockingly, "that a few days ago this whimpering broken thing in my hand was Schuyler Van Tassell!"

Eric suppressed a gasp. A week ago at his club he had seen Schuyler Van Tassell, looking bored and dissipated as usual, but as usual conventional and sleek.

"Before you die," Sebastian went on, "you shall renew your vows of allegiance to our great Master, Ruler of the Dark Invisible Empire, Prince of Fiends, Our Sovereign Lord, Satan. Repeat the Creed."

Cringing and moaning, the thing that had been Schuyler Van Tassell began:

"I BELIEVE—IN OUR LORD
—THE DEVIL—RULER—OF—
E A R T H—A N D H E L L—
WHOSE—"

The blasphemous words died in his throat.

"Oh, God!" he sobbed. His head fell back and Sebastian dropped a dead body across the dark altar.

The kneeling people swayed in sudden relief from tension.

"The fate of all renegades," said Sebastian, who made an obeisance before the altar and stood looking upward into the shadows.

Following his gaze, Eric's heart almost stood still. For he found himself looking into an enormous dark face. Such diabolic malice glared from the glittering eyes and wide sardonic smile that it hardly needed the little pointed horns to proclaim it an effigy of the Devil himself. This same face in miniature Eric had seen on the copper coins. He noted the shadowy sweep of vast wings, the hovering trend of the gigantic figure looming menacingly above its worshippers.

Sebastian stooped over the altar and seven jets of green flame sprang up around it. Higher and higher they leaped, licking out toward the still figure lying there. A heavy smell of incense rose on the air. Swaying back and forth, Sebastian began to intone. His voice sing-songed through some kind of long ritual, evidently well-known, for he paused at certain intervals for responses from the worshippers.

The words were gabbled so quickly that Eric could not distinguish their meaning. But the monotonous deep voice, the regular chorus of responses, began to have a strangely soothing effect on his excited mind. He felt himself swaying slowly, as the worshippers were swaying.

The intoning died away and from somewhere there came a distant chanting. Little colored lights flashed out from the walls, the ceiling, the altar, twinkling and sparkling and confusing the mind with their restless brilliance. The rich deep chant swelled higher as the singers approached, and the big organ added its rolling harmony to the voices.

A lurid glare flared suddenly behind the Devil statue, outlining the monstrous form with hideous distinctness. From somewhere back of it two lines of scarlet-robed figures marched into the hall. Their faces were hidden in scarlet cowls and each one carried a tall candle which cast a deep red light.

The lines moved slowly around the altar, turning and twisting, winding and intertwining. The little colored lights were twinkling; the red lights and red robes were twining and turning; the organ and voices were rising and falling; the kneeling throng were bending and swaying, in the warm, heavy, incense-laden air.

Eric was bending and swaying, too, struggling feebly against the lethargic spell.

Like the crack of a gun, the quick beat of a drum crashed through the music. The lights went out: the music stopped. There was not a sound in the hot, perfumed blackness.

Then, like the tick, tick, tick of an eight-day clock the drumbeats came. In Eric's brain the short, dull thuds tapped raw nerves. He held his ears: the sound beat through. He tried to count:

"One-two-three—one-two-three—one-two-three."

What came next he did not know. He could not think. It was not a drum. It was a bell—a thousand bells—all the dismal bells of all the world. Wild alarm-bells, dreary prison bells, sinister temple gongs, funeral death-bells—clanging and tolling till the vast hall reverberated with discordant sound.

Silence again, an almost unbearable hush. For the first time in his life, Eric felt a wave of fear sweep over him, emanating from the kneeling people. What did they fear? A wan light began to glimmer down there, flickering over the thrownback heads and gleaming eyes. Eric glanced sharply up and the wave of fear swept over him again. The

colossal Devil figure was strangely luminous.

Down in the blackness the chant rose softly. The words were of an appalling and deliberate blasphemy, but the rhythmic cadence was sweet in the hot perfumed darkness—and surely the huge luminous figure was moving?

Yes, it swayed, and the head was bending down. He was looking at his Worshipers. Now the glittering eyes looked into Eric's and Eric sank to his knees. The eyes moved past him but still he knelt there, his brain on fire. The wild dark strain in the Erlsson blood was uppermost in him at last.

The air was vibrant with malignant, unseen presences; there was a sense of hurrying, a rustling and murmuring as if a crowd were pressing across some barrier. He knew at once when the barrier went down. Mad laughing things fled past him in the blackness: soft cold fingers brushed his cheek.

He felt a spiritual pollution as the evil-charged atmosphere surged about him. Swarms of dark clouds swirled around the luminous Devil figure, whirling away into semi-transparent shapes that gathered solidly as they rushed down to the black human mass that opened to receive them.

The hush was shattered by an outburst of howls, screeches, and crazy laughter. The red lights glimmered on a yelling, leaping crowd of men and women. Led by the organ, they broke into frenzied song, and began a violent dance, which yet had some semblance of order, as each one in turn genuflected before the Devil figure.

They had torn off their hoods now, and the tossing, upturned faces were a dreadful sight, every countenance marked with vicious degeneracy or habitual depravity. The dance grew faster and more furious. Here and there wild figures flung themselves out of it to kneel before the shrined goat-gods and shout vile prayers.

Only Sebastian stood aloof, his back to the seething mob, his uncovered face raised toward his Master. Below his gleaming blond hair his face showed, hideously disfigured by deep scars, but his cold passivity had no trace of the hell-fire inflaming the mad dancers. Eric felt a strange sense of kinship with the still figure. This man's devil-worship, he divined, was a sin of the intellect, a highway to occult powers. To this subtle temptation Eric's reckless ambition responded eagerly.

The Sardonian Devil-face seemed to soften, to invite, to promise strange revelations and secret knowledge. Its lurking evil no longer repelled, but presented

only the necessary challenge to an adventurous spirit. Right and wrong were arbitrary terms, the stumbling block of weaklings, who dared not pass the bounds of normal human experience.

Like an insidious poison the imperious dream thrilled through him; he saw himself wielding strange powers over the forces of evil, mastering the ancient secret lore that had lain hidden through countless centuries. Only a few had braved its perils, but of those few it had made gods—his hand clenched abruptly and closed on something soft in his pocket.

Mechanically he lifted it to his face, peering at it in the dim light. Instantly he was aware of the fresh, clean fragrance of lavender. It was Seuta's handkerchief. *Seuta!* Like a bracing wind the thought of her swept the unwholesome mists from his half-hypnotized mind. From the time of their first meeting she had never been absent from his thoughts—never until the devil-music had cast its spell upon him.

Almost sick with spiritual revulsion, he leaned against the wall, the little handkerchief pressed against his cheek. Where was she? In what corner of this abode of devils was she hidden, frightened, perhaps tortured?

He groaned in impotent fury and stifled a wild impulse to leap down upon Sebastian and force him to give her back. But if they killed him there would be no help for her.

He became conscious that the uproar had died down and a single voice was speaking. It came from a man who stood at the foot of the altar, facing Sebastian in an attitude of defiance.

"I tell you the hour has struck," this one declared solemnly. "What better time to settle it than this—when our Infernal Master has turned his face to us—when our dark brothers from the spirit-world have crossed the gulf and mingled with us? Not one of our band is missing tonight, including that!" (he glanced at the body sprawled across the altar) "therefore the traitor is among us. Find him, you whose power is only second to the Arch-Fiend himself!"

Sebastian answered in the mocking voice which seemed habitual with him: "How do you know there is a traitor, Julius? And what if there is?"

"What if there is?" exclaimed the other. "You can ask that! Have you forgotten that during the last two months enormous blackmail has been levied upon various ones of our 'respectable' members? Have you forgotten that Steiner and Howard went to the electric chair only because the police had secret information of their hiding-place,

information that was sold to them in a roundabout way? Yet you ask me what of it!"

"Steiner and Howard were small loss," commented Sebastian. A growl of protest went up from the hall.

"They rebelled against you," said Julius, "but you subdued that, and they were the only ones who could bring us girls for the sacrifice."

"Yes, yes," cried several voices. "We have had no sacrifice for months. Where are the victims, Sebastian?"

Ignoring the clamor, Sebastian kept his gaze fixed on Julius, who stepped back a little as if he found the steady stare alarming.

"Schuyler Van Tassel knew of these betrayals—I think that frightened him into 'reforming,'" went on Julius. "And he and I managed to get so close on the trail that we saw the traitor."

Sebastian bent forward.

"I knew Van Tassel had been close to him. But you saw him, too?"

Julius moved back another step. "We trailed him together," he said, somewhat uneasily. "It was just a glimpse—a big, fair, handsome man. I would recognize him if I could see him in a good light."

Sebastian laughed.

"And you think I will break that most essential rule that no member shall uncover his face in a good light except to me? You think I will declare a man a traitor on your unsupported word?"

His head thrust forward like a snake about to strike as he continued silyly:

"You, who say you have seen the traitor and let him escape—you, who have acknowledged yourself the intimate of the renegade Van Tassel—you, who wish to violate our protective secrecy—*where were you when we were betrayed?*"

Julius recoiled before the venomous question.

"I'm no traitor!" he protested in terror. "I can prove it—with witnesses—give me time—as God is my witness—"

Sebastian laughed triumphantly.

"He calls on God!" he jeered. "He, an acolyte of our Lord Satan! Another renegade!"

"No, no—" stammered the terrified man, "it was just a habit of speech—"

"Habits can be broken," replied Sebastian, with a meaning glance at the dead man.

Julius fell on his knees.

"I swear I am no renegade!" he screamed. "I believe—" he began to stumble through the infamous creed.

"Silence!" commanded Sebastian.

Turning scornfully away from the cowed man, he almost hurled his words at the muttering crowd:

"And silence, too, you scum of Gehenna! Most you learn again that I am your master, High-Priest of our supreme Lord, who has withdrawn in anger at your profane murmurs!" (Indeed there was only a vague, monstrous shadow in the blackness where the Devil figure had glimmered.)

Sebastian's voice rose higher and higher; his manner grew more and more frenzied:

"Though I know that every one of you, human or spectres from beyond the grave, is stained with every ghastly vice and crime, you cannot frighten me! I alone dare show my face to all!"

He caught up a torch and threw its light upon his wild, scarred face.

"Look at me!" His eyes blazed with fanatic excitement; his form seemed to vibrate to some strange gust of passion. "In me," his voice dropped to a low and solemn tone, "there lives the reincarnate soul of that dread Master-Fiend, Gilles de Retz, the great medieval founder of our faith!"

A long sigh swept over the spell-bound listeners. They sank slowly to their knees. Sebastian leaned forward. His eyes glittered insanely in the red light, he spoke almost in a whisper.

"I have plunged into the blackest gulf of Hell and sat among the souls forever damned."

The kneeling people fell on their faces before him. The sight seemed to infuriate him.

"Yes, lick the dust," he shrieked, "for I hold your worthless lives in my hand! I can send your souls hurtling across the gulf to join the demons waiting for you there!" He spoke with such absolute conviction that Eric felt a chill. A low moan went up from the prostrate people.

Sebastian seemed to go quite mad.

"I will, I will!" he screamed, "I will blot you from the earth; Now!"

He threw out his hand toward the altar, groping furiously for something. Suddenly a tall, masked woman stepped from behind the Devil-statue and laid a hand on Sebastian's arm. He whirled with upraised whip; but, at sight of her, the whip fell to the floor. The madman died out of his eyes and his face was illumined by a smile of exquisite tenderness. He lifted her hand to his lips with a reverent love that seemed to lift him to a purer plane.

They stood a moment, looking into each other's eyes. Then he put her gently to one side and faced the throng with all his former coldness and mockery.

"As for the traitor, I have him and will produce him in my own good time. But you asked for a victim. Behold!"

And stepping to one side of the altar he jerked aside a curtain.

A clear light shone down upon a narrow doorway, and in the focus of the light stood Senta.

She was dressed in a straight white robe and her long dark hair hung over her shoulders on each side of her little white face. Her hands were clasped rigidly on her breast, but her dark eyes were wide with horror as she tried to see what lay before her in the half-lit room. Eric, his hands clenched on the balcony rail, knew by the shrinking of her little figure, the dilating of her lustrous eyes, the exact moment when she saw the mass of frightful faces staring at her.

They gazed in silence a moment, then broke into a chorus of snarls, shouts and laughter, instantly stilled by the voice of Julius:

"Remember the Law, Sebastian! She must be willing!"

"And do you presume to teach me the Law?" Sebastian asked with a scornful smile. He turned to Senta and said icily:

"You, who are to be honored in the service of our Master; it is the Law that innocent blood must be sacrificed from time to time, that the strength of our dark powers may be renewed. But it is also the Law that no victim shall be offered to the altar either by threats of torture or of shame. Answer truly by the God you worship; have you been personally threatened or ill-treated?"

Senta's voice trembled a little, but her manner showed that she was fully mistress of herself.

"I have not been ill-treated or threatened," she answered clearly. "I offer myself as a willing sacrifice."

CHAPTER THREE

WHEN Eric left her alone in the library, Senta sat very still, glancing nervously around. Startled by a slight sound, she was amazed to see a portrait swing out from the wall. A tall figure stood in the shadowy opening, its blond head half-turned away.

Thinking that Eric had discovered the door to the Round Tower, she obeyed the beckoning finger and stepped into the passage. Her hand was seized in a strong grasp and she was hurried along so quickly that she could not be sure that her breathless questions were heard.

Her guide swerved abruptly around a corner and led her down a number of steps. Indignant at Eric's ignoring her questions, Senta balked on the last step, but the man simply picked her up and carried her into a room near by. He

dropped her unceremoniously upon a chair, said briefly:

"Keep her here, dearest, till I come back," and was gone.

Senta jumped up angrily and saw a tall woman coming to her from the back of the lamp-lit room. The woman's every movement was of exquisite grace, but her face was so ugly as to be almost grotesque. There was something about the odd, clever countenance that stirred Senta's memory.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, before the woman could speak. "You are—you are Judith Dangerfield, the great violinist who disappeared three years ago!"

The woman turned white.

"How do you know! I—I have never seen you," she stammered in a voice that had the low sweet resonance of a 'cello.

"I went to your last concert," explained Senta. "And I've kept your picture pinned to my wall. Where have you been all this time?"

Judith Dangerfield raised her head proudly.

"I have been here," she replied, "with my husband." Evidently shaken by the unexpected recognition, she seemed to feel the need of justifying herself. "I had to disappear from the world because my husband is Sebastian, the High Priest of the Devil Worshipers."

"What in the world are they?" Senta asked wonderingly.

"A very secret and powerful association composed of the most vicious intelligences of every class," Judith said briefly. "My husband is its head, as were his father and grandfather before him."

"But surely you don't belong to it?"

Senta asked incredulously.

"Yes!" said Judith.

Then, as she saw the shocked surprise in Senta's face:

"Oh, I don't believe in it!" she exclaimed, scornfully. "I don't believe in anything—except our love. But whatever my husband does, good or bad, I do likewise. Then if there should happen to be another life or eternal punishment, we will face it together." Her voice vibrated with feeling and she threw out her arms with a passionate gesture. "If I were good, it would separate us—and how could I be happy in Heaven unless he were with me there!"

Senta looked at her sorrowfully, but said nothing. With a quick abrupt Judith changed the subject.

"What are you doing here!" she demanded. "Since you didn't come for the sacrifice?"

"Oh—" Senta came back to herself with a start. "Why—where is Eric? Why did he leave me here?"

"Eric? Did Eric Ericsson bring you here?"

"Yes. Do you know him? Oh!" Senta remembered suddenly. "He called you 'dearest'!"

"Nonsense, child!" said Judith impatiently. "That was Sebastian who brought you to this room. Yes, I know he looked like Eric, but you didn't see his face, did you? Well, then! Is Eric your lover?"

"I—I think so," Senta stammered, blushing. Then, as Judith smiled rather contemptuously, she added firmly: "Yes, he is. And I love him, too."

Judith looked at her in a troubled way. "I'm very sorry," she said.

"Why?" asked Senta. "Is he in any danger? Oh, what is it all about?"

Before Judith could answer a firm, quick footstep sounded outside and Sebastian entered. In height and coloring and general bearing he was surprisingly like Eric. But the likeness ended at his face, which was twisted and seamed with a number of deep scars.

"I have him!" he told Judith exultantly, adding, as she made a quick silencing gesture: "Oh, the girl has to know about it."

He turned to Senta and said coolly: "You are to be a sacrifice to the Devil, but first you must go before the Worshipers and say you are willing."

Realizing from Judith's expression, that this was no idle threat, Senta tried to meet it bravely.

"You can kill me," she said in a shaky little voice, "but you can't make me say I'm willing."

Sebastian smiled dangerously. "You think not?" he asked.

Judith laid her hand on his arm. "Must you take this child?" she pleaded. "She is so innocent and young."

"She will be the more acceptable," he answered. He caught her hand and drew her to him. "Judith! Do you, too, turn against me?" His voice rose excitedly. "You know how we have worked to get the hidden treasure—you know the people clamor for a victim—yet when I have treasure and victim in my grasp you turn against me!" His manner grew wilder and wilder; his face was deeply flushed; the veins stood out on his forehead. "You, my wife, my only friend, you desert me!"

"No, no!" Judith clung to his arm. "I will not oppose you. Only take her away quickly!" She threw herself into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Sebastian's unnatural excitement died down. He took Senta's hand and led her from the room. She followed quietly

and they went down the passage and into the small stone room.

"Do you wish to see your lover?" asked Sebastian.

The frightened girl nodded. Sebastian moved a small stone in the floor and pulled Senta down beside him. Looking down into the room beneath, she saw Eric, grim and pale, standing just below. He glanced up, but Sebastian pulled her away before she could speak and pushed the stone into place.

"What was he doing there, and why was there smoke in the room and under his feet?" she asked.

Sebastian smiled cruelly.

"There was smoke," he said, speaking slowly to insure her comprehension, "because the iron walls and floor of that room are hot and will go on getting hotter until they are red-hot. And Eric is imprisoned there and shall stay there until he burns to death unless—" He paused to watch her as she leaned against the wall.

"Unless?" she faltered, sick with horror.

"Unless you are willing to become a sacrifice," he replied.

"What have we ever done to you that you should be so cruel!"

"I hate him!" cried Sebastian, his face convulsed with rage. "All our lives he has had what should be mine! And I'll strike at him through you! Quick! Decide! Will you let your lover die by slow torture, or will you give yourself to a quick, easy death to save him?"

Senta sank down to her knees. Until the coming of Eric her life had been a quiet and pleasant dream. His love had aroused her to realities and awakened her womanhood, which now attained its full growth in these moments of agony. All the unselfish devotion of her warm young heart and all the ideals and traditions of her race and training nerved her to meet this supreme demand. She rose to her feet and faced her tormenter.

"I will do it," she said. "But you must let him go free—before I die you must let me see that he is free and unharmed."

He promised solemnly and led her back to Judith, who received them with a hopeful look which vanished when her husband said:

"She has consented. Prepare her for the sacrifice and bring her to the door." He went out.

"Child, child, why did you consent!" cried Judith despairingly.

Senta told her and Judith wrung her hands in impotent anguish.

"If I had only known you were coming I might have saved you," she

moaned. "But he only told me about Eric and we didn't expect him until Tuesday, when the Devil Worshipers would have been gone, scattered among their homes. Well, we must get ready. If I can find any way to save you, I will."

She loosened Senta's hair and helped her put on a white robe.

"I have dressed many girls for the sacrifice," said Judith somberly, "but you are the first one I have wished to save. Yes," she answered Senta's horrified glance, "all of them were tainted with this Devil Worship and I was glad they died before they could sink any deeper in the mire. Besides, you have recalled my old life to me—I would kill my husband and myself if I were only sure we would die together. But something might go wrong—one of us might live, without the other—"

Senta forgot her own tragedy in her pity for the unhappy woman.

"Can't you change him?" she asked.

"He promised to disband them and take away as soon as he got the treasure," replied Judith. "But what peace can we have! What good will the disbanding do. They will find us again. They are all moral lepers who spread evil wherever they go. Hundreds of people are being dragged down into this all the time." She laughed harshly. "Oh, if there were really a God, he would reach down and destroy this dreadful house and everybody in it!"

"Will they—kill me—very soon?" faltered Senta, as Judith completed her task.

"Not till tonight," Judith answered hurriedly. "You are only going to be shown to them now. Come along."

"Where are we?" asked Senta as they went along the passage.

"In the Round Tower," replied Judith. "My room is directly underneath the Tower room called the Heart of the Manor where old Colonel Torvald Ericsson used to have his study. The Tower has no windows at all."

Talking along as if to divert Senta's mind, Judith took her through a narrow hall and stopped before a closed door. Senta could hear a confused murmur of voices on the other side of the door, but could not distinguish any words.

"Listen," Judith seized her arm. "If it is possible to save you without endangering my husband, I will save you. But you must follow my directions. When you see those horrible creatures, don't show any surprise or terror. All the victims are safe until the sacrifice, because they are supposed to be under the protection of Satan. And they are usually stupefied with drugs and half-hypnotized

so that they lock the part. The victim really has a kind of power over them which we may be able to use in your favor."

Through the wall came the sound of chanting.

"How beautiful!" cried Senta, as the rhythmic music swung nearer to them.

"Hush! Don't listen to it!" cried Judith in a vehement whisper. "It is the Devil's own music—it will sap your will power. I know, for I wrote it! Yes," she replied to Senta's questioning eyes, "and I believed in the Devil while I was writing it, while he helped me write it!" She shuddered and glanced back over her shoulder with a curious look of dread.

Alternately attracted and repelled by her strange companion, Senta said no more but managed to keep her thoughts away from the haunting music. It stopped at last and there was a long silence; then a burst of noise prolonged into an uproar, terminating finally in what sounded like an argument between two people. Senta saw a worried look on Judith's face.

"I don't understand this," muttered Judith. "I must go to Sebastian. Stay here."

She ran swiftly down the passage and disappeared. Senta tremblingly listened to Sebastian's fury, unintelligible to her. She heard him approach the door where she stood and tried to suppress her terror when he suddenly threw aside the curtain and opened the door. Dazed by the horror of the dreadful creatures leaping and yelling beneath her, it was only by thinking of Eric's danger that she gathered courage to offer herself as a sacrifice.

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE followed an outburst of exultant yells. Eric gazed at the shakily little figure and doubted his senses.

Surely she could not have been perverted to Devil Worship! Why, then, was she willing? But, dismissing this question as temporarily unimportant, he swung himself over the balcony rail, his plan of rescue already clear in his mind.

The black pillars supporting the balcony were fortunately in the shadow, so that his dark figure was practically invisible as he slid down to the floor. Mingling with the seething mob, whose attention was concentrated upon Senta, it was an easy matter to reach the altar, leap across it and throw his arms around the tall masked woman. Holding her powerless with one arm, he pressed his automatic against her head, just as Sebastian sprang at him with a furious snarl.

Eric jumped backward, into the shadows, dragging the woman with him.

"Keep off!" he hissed, "or I'll kill her!"

Sebastian stopped short. For a moment they glared at each other, while the yelling crowd surged toward its prospective victim, utterly unheeding the silent drama in the shadow of the Devil Statue.

Eric spoke in a sharp whisper. "I'll kill her," he repeated, "if you attack me or make a single move to betray me to those devils. But let me get my girl away and you can have yours." "You!" exclaimed Sebastian, speaking softly even in his amazement.

The woman was struggling to raise her face which Eric pressed tightly against his shoulder.

"You're hurting her!" protested Sebastian in an agonized whisper.

The sight of Senta's terror had made Eric quite merciful.

"I'll do worse than hurt her," he threatened, "if you don't help me get Senta away. Tell them the victim must be prepared for the sacrifice—but be very careful what you say," he warned, "and don't get too near Senta, either."

Sebastian turned abruptly and his imperious voice compelled the attention of the frenzied creatures.

"You have seen the victim," he told them, "now she must be taken away to be prepared. Go back to your places, and pray our Master to accept the sacrifice."

The Worshipers swarmed back to their places and knelt, with their heads bowed almost to the floor.

Still holding the woman, Eric attained the doorway and pushed Senta through it. She went quietly, but Sebastian caught at the woman in Eric's arm.

"Give Judith to me!" he demanded in a fierce undertone.

"We haven't escaped yet," Eric whispered. He lifted her across the threshold and slammed the narrow door in Sebastian's furious face.

But the door had no lock and Sebastian tore it open and pursued them down the passage. Eric knew that even if Sebastian had a gun he dare not shoot for fear of wounding Judith. He therefore held her fast in one arm. Pushing Senta before him he took the first turning that offered and found himself again at the door of the stone room above the torture-cell. A glance showed him that the guard still lay under the bench.

Eric released Judith and turned to bar the door. But Sebastian had already stepped inside and slammed the door. Eric found himself looking into the muzzle of a pistol.

Before Sebastian had time to say: "Hands up!" Eric dived and, "tackling" in football style, he knocked Sebastian's feet from under him. The gun exploded harmlessly in the air and Sebastian went down. His head crashed against the stone floor and he lay motionless.

With an anguished moan Judith threw herself down by her husband, but Eric pushed her gently aside, lifted the unconscious man and laid him on a bench.

"He is only stunned. It isn't serious," he told her, adding mentally: "More's the pity!"

Judith lifted tragic eyes to Eric's face. "If he dies," she said, "you will have killed your cousin."

"My cousin!" exclaimed Eric. He leaned over and studied the quiet face.

"Sebastian Ericsson," he said thoughtfully. "I heard he was dead years ago. But even without the scars I wouldn't have known him. We were never together at all, except for a week he spent with us just after his father died. We were only boys at the time, but we hated each other even then."

"And his hate has grown with the years," said Judith somberly.

"While I had almost forgotten him," remarked Eric.

"My father tried to befriend him, meant to adopt him, in fact. But he was such a treacherous, sneering, malignant brute that I think we were all glad when he disappeared. He acted as if we had done him a mortal injury."

"You had!" cried Judith with flashing eyes. "Your father had stolen the inheritance. Why should Torvald Ericsson leave his fortune in trust for Sigismund's son, Sigismund, who denounced his father and would have nothing whatever to do with him? Whereas Eldred was high among the Devil Worshipers, and was his father's faithful helper and companion till death."

"And from what I've heard of Uncle Eldred," Eric commented grimly, "Torvald Ericsson's death was probably hastened by his faithful companion. There was no love lost between them."

"Eldred was a good son to him," she maintained, "and yet his son was disinherited." She laid her hand tenderly on Sebastian's head.

"Well, my dear girl, there's no good arguing about it now," remarked Eric smiling. "Anyway, Lord knows I've not a cent in the world that I didn't earn myself!"

"But you will have!" she cried, quickly. "You are thirty!"

"O—ho!" said Eric, "So that's the explanation of all this mixup. Our friend here learned something one of

those times I caught him listening at keyholes, while he lived with us."

"It was his right to know!" she flashed.

"He thought anything he chose to do was his right," Eric replied. "He didn't know the meaning of loyalty—he stopped, as a startling thought occurred to him.

"By Heaven!" he cried, "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's the traitor those Devil Worshipers are trying to discover. It would be just like him."

Judith's ghastly face showed that his guess had hit the mark.

"Hush!" she gasped. "They would tear him to pieces if they knew! Julius suspects already, but is afraid to say anything without more proof. I begged Sebastian not to do it, but he wanted to get more money so we two could go away. You won't betray him!"

"Not unless I find it necessary for our own protection," he answered coolly.

The soft thud of a gently-closed door broke through their preoccupation. Eric whirled around, his eyes seeking the guard under the bench. The guard was gone. Eric flung open the door and heard someone running swiftly down the passage.

"But he must have heard everything," cried Judith when he told her. "He has gone to tell them. Only Sebastian can control them, and he is unconscious—Oh what can we do!"

She wrung her hands. Then she looked intently at Eric.

"You are very much alike," she said, half under her breath. "I believe we can do it. We will have to risk it. Pick up Sebastian and come with me."

Realizing that for the moment their interests were one, Eric obeyed. Judith led them to her own room, and while Eric placed Sebastian on a couch Judith went into an inner room from which she brought a small square box.

"This is a make-up box," she said, opening it, and taking out a number of little jars and brushes. "We use it in certain ceremonies. Sit down!"

Eric sat down in the chair she indicated. It was placed close beside Sebastian's couch, and at last he began to guess at her purpose.

"You think I can pass for him?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes!" declared Judith. "You have the same build and coloring and your voices are alike. Now, be still while I paint the scars on your face."

Swiftly, but with infinite care, her long clever fingers worked on Eric's face. With brush and grease paint and flesh-colored court plaster, she reproduced Sebastian's dreadful scars, line for line,

gash for gash, twist for twist. And as she worked she instructed Eric in the ritual for dismissing the Devil-Worshippers to the long sleep that always intervened between the orgy and the sacrifice. The ritual was short and Eric mastered it just as she completed her task.

She led him up to a long mirror and his doubts of her plan left him as he gazed at his reflection. He would have sworn that it was his cousin who faced him in the mirror.

Judith detached from Sebastian's hand a strange ring of some flesh-colored metal, wide and thick like an old-fashioned wedding ring, with no stone or setting.

She slipped it on Eric's right hand where it seemed to become invisible, so closely did it resemble the human skin.

"If you cannot manage them, pass your hand through the altar fires and seize their leader," she told him. "But mind you must touch the devil-fire first."

Concluding that she, too, was tainted with all these evil terrors, he promised lightly.

Then she handed him Sebastian's heavy whip.

"Be violent," she warned, "Rage and storm and carry things with a high hand. That is how he keeps his hold on them. When you have dismissed them, come back here and we can plan to get out."

"What about Senta," asked Eric.

"We will hide in a place I know," answered Judith. Putting her arm around Senta, she looked straight into Eric's distrustful eyes. "If anything should happen to you, I will get her out of this place at any cost," she promised earnestly. "They shall not have her. Indeed, you can trust her to me."

"I believe I can," said Eric, clasping her hand.

Senta clutched his arm.

"If you're going into danger—I want to go, too. Oh, take me with you!" she implored as he caught her into his arms.

He kissed her once and put her down. "That's impossible, sweetheart," he answered. "It would only increase the danger."

Making sure that his pistol was ready to hand, he closed the door behind him and went down the passage as Judith had directed.

The vast hall was in an uproar. The mob surged this way and that, some calling for one course of action, some for another, but all joined in execrating Sebastian. The very chaos was in his favor, Eric realized, as he stood unnoticed in the shadow of the Devil Statue. It behooved him to act quickly, before Julius or another could assume the leadership and wield all that disorganized

malevolence into one death-dealing purpose.

With a swift leap, he cleared the now blazing altar fires and was standing upright on the altar before the frenzied hordes knew he was near. There was an instant, deathlike silence. Those nearest the altar fell back.

Above the leaping flames, Eric gazed down into the sea of vicious faces, and watched their flushed hatred fade into cringing fear. For the first time he considered the faces individually, and with difficulty repressed a cry as he recognized in a creature with streaming hair and swollen features, a pretty débutante with whom he had danced a few nights ago. Several of the men he knew, too. Clubmen and men about town, like Schuyler Van Tassel, whose mutilated body now lay at his feet. The very common-placeness of their outward life made him realize how appallingly far the dreadful stream of pollution had run.

While they were still under the spell of his sudden appearance, he began the ritual of dismissal that Judith had taught him.

For a moment he was not interrupted. Then, with a yell in which hatred and fear and rage were equally blended, Julius sprang out from the crowd and stood in front of the altar.

"The flames of Hell cannot shield you!" he shrieked, "Death to the traitor—slow death!"

"Death!" howled the Devil-worshippers, surging forward. Eric laughed.

"Death!" he cried, in Sebastian's mocking tone. "Is that your worst? Then see what Satan's High Priest can inflict!"

Still closely imitating Sebastian's rather grandiloquent gestures, he swept his hand through the flames, seized Julius by the throat and jerked him up to the altar.

The agonized screech that burst from Julius, surprised Eric as much as it terrorized the Devil-Worshippers. He had merely been playing for time—bluffing, in fact—and he knew his grasp had not been sufficiently hard to cause such pain. For the man had fallen on his face, twisting and clutching his throat, but after that first cry, making no sound except a strangled whimper.

Forgetting his role, Eric set Julius on his feet, but almost dropped him at sight of his face. For he was smiling—a dreadful vacant smile. His hands fell away from his throat and he began to play idly with Eric's fowing sleeve, the whimpering merged into a hoarse tuneless humming.

The horrid abruptness with which the passionate, purposeful man had changed

into this driveling creature almost destroyed Eric's self-control.

As for the Devil-Worshippers, they flung themselves face downward, shrieking:

"The Judgment! We have seen it before! I have mercy, Sebastian! Have mercy, oh most dreadful Lord Satan!"

But Julius went on smiling and humming and watching the leaping flames.

Eric managed to pull himself together, again began the ritual of dismissal, and this time pursued it to its close.

But as he paused on the last words a sudden cry went up from the kneeling people. He turned. At the foot of the altar stood Sebastian. The Devil-Worshippers stared dazedly from the Sebastian on the altar to the Sebastian below it.

"There is the traitor!" cried Eric. But they only stared stupidly.

"Drag down that impostor," Sebastian commanded furiously.

It is a well-known fact that conflict of authority incites rebellion. The Worshippers, at first almost ready to believe that Sebastian's dreadful powers had enabled him to materialize another body, took courage at this sign of discord.

In vain Sebastian raved and stormed and quoted the devil ceremony to prove his identity; in vain Eric threatened and lashed at them with the whip and repeated the words Judith had taught him.

They crowded around the two sinister figures. Eric was standing beside Sebastian now, ready to bluff it out as long as possible.

"Don't you see?" shrieked the debutante suddenly. "One is really Sebastian—the other is the traitor!"

"But I tell you Sebastian is the traitor!" growled Carlos, the guard.

"He can't be," she pointed out. "Don't you remember that—Julius—" she shuddered and turned away her head—"said he had seen the traitor and would know his face?"

"But both those men have Sebastian's face!"

"Paint!" cried the debutante, who no doubt was well informed on such matters. "Wash their faces!"

"That ends it for me!" thought Eric as he and Sebastian were dragged struggling to one of the bowls of warm incense. "But why should Sebastian worry? It will put things right for him."

He was scrubbed with vicious energy and there was a cry of triumph as court-plaster and paint melted and the scars vanished from his face.

But to his amazement the cry was echoed by the group around Sebastian. It fell apart and in the midst stood Se-

bastian, his face as bare of scars as Eric's own.

For a time pandemonium reigned.

"Death! Death!" shrieked the mob.

"No!" cried a few cautious ones. "The treasure first—make them find the treasure!"

Sebastian laughed. "If I had known where to find the treasure I would long ago have sent you to destruction!" he snarled into the faces of his captors.

So great was their fear of him still that for a moment they shrank back. And in that instant's pause a strain of wild music came faintly from somewhere within the Manor. Nearer and nearer it came, strangely disturbing in its fitful rhythm, and the fury of the devil-worshippers died as if under a spell. The strains broke into a walling climax and a long sigh went up as Senta stood within the doorway. Her face was rigid and ghastly white, and her voice was strangely discordant as she chanted:

"Give me the condemned, oh ye People of the Pit. The dreadful power that fills my soul will deal with them through me."

Again there was a violent controversy. "It is ill-fortune to refuse the Victim!" clamored the debutante. "She can make them reveal the treasure, and besides, no one can escape from the Manor. The doors are guarded!"

This mingling of superstition and common sense, combined with the spell of the music, which still sounded hauntingly from the shadows, had its effect on the throng, who fell back as Eric and Sebastian walked slowly to where Senta stood. As they passed the debutante she leaned forward and hissed malignantly:

"Whichever you are, Sebastian, I'll see you tortured yet—you and that ugly Judith for whom you refused my love!"

Sebastian made no reply and the mob was silent as the two followed Senta out of the hall. Through winding passages they went without a word; and up and up a stairway enclosed by stone walls. A faint streak of light gleamed at the top; it widened suddenly, and Judith, violin in hand, stood in a lighted room. As they stepped in and the door closed noiselessly behind them they caught a glimpse of a peering malicious face, as one of the Devil-Worshippers mounted guard at the top of the stairs.

The room was round, and furnished with a couch and a chair. It was brightly lighted, but the air was heavy and stale; apparently there were no windows and the mouth of the wide tile-rimmed fireplace was covered with sheet-iron. Judith and Sebastian were engaged in a low impassioned conversation while Eric and Senta stared around the

strange room. Eric turned suddenly to Sebastian.

"We must plan some way of escape," he said.

"Oh, of course we are enemies," he went on, "and if we once get out of here I'll see that you get what's coming to you, but just now we must work together."

Sebastian nodded. "Yes," he admitted reluctantly. "You must help me get Judith out of this."

"How?" asked Eric crisply. Then as Sebastian looked blank, "Surely you know some way out?" he cried.

Sebastian's face was ghastly. "They know all the secret exits," he stammered. "I had to tell them in case of a raid, which would have ruined me. I did keep one to myself but Van Tassel stumbled on it by accident and told the others." His face was suddenly convulsed. "Blast him!" he shrieked, clutching the air—"I'll—"

Judith's tender touch calmed him instantly.

"Talk of something else for a little while," Judith entreated in a low tone. "When he is calmer he will think of something."

Eric hesitated. But, realizing that Senta's chance of escape was largely dependent on the other two, he complied.

"What is this room?" he asked.

"The Round Tower," Judith replied absently, her anxious eyes on her husband's brooding face. "The room known as the Heart of the Manor."

Eric and Senta exchanged glances. Sebastian looked up.

"The Heart of the Manor," he repeated. "Old Torvald ate his heart out in this room—the canting hypocrite!"

"And you and Uncle Eldred assisted that operation?" Eric asked incively.

"Yes!" cried Sebastian. "Oh, it doesn't matter, dearest! I'm through! We're all as good as dead—We paid him out for his 'reform' and for favoring your father—but we couldn't get him to tell about the treasure—but you know!" He roused himself suddenly and faced Eric. "Where is the treasure?"

"The treasure be damned!" cried Eric, almost beside himself with anxiety for Senta. "We've got to find a way out!"

"There is no way out—but one! And when we take that way, all in this accursed house will go with us! I know that way—we planned it years ago. Judith, my wife, we'll go that way together."

Judith stood beside his chair and pressed his head against her shoulder.

"I've been trying to think of some way out for you two," she told Eric. "But

"I'm afraid—take off that ring!" she exclaimed suddenly as her glance fell on Eric's hand.

He looked down at the thick lead band. "Why?"

"It is poisoned. Heat releases the spring and when the poison is pressed into the throat it causes instant insanity."

Eric hastily drew off the ring, with a shuddering memory of Julius, and thrust it into his pocket.

"If you would only give up the treasure," urged Judith. "That would hold them off until we could think up something."

Eric fairly gritted his teeth. "I tell you I don't know where the treasure is!" he almost shouted. "I don't even know what it is. Doesn't he know?"

"Not where it is," replied Judith. "He found out through a spy in your lawyer's office, you were to inherit when you were thirty and found the note in your room, but that's all we know. Oh!" she cried piteously. "I wanted him to give it up and go away. None of those creatures would have known him without the scars—but he wanted the treasure for me, only for me." She pressed Sebastian's head closer against her shoulder. He seemed sunk in apathy and noticed nothing that was said. "He is always like this after those violent fits," said Judith, "and they are more and more frequent. He would be quite insane before long. I am glad we are going to die together while he still knows me." Her low, beautiful voice went on talking as if she were glad to unburden her mind. "In each generation there is always one Ericsson tainted with insanity—a very madness of wickedness, dating back to that wild sea-captain of the Chinese trading ship who learned devil-worship from his Eurasian wife."

The tragic monotone of her voice wrapped Senta in a kind of dream, but Eric was reloading his automatic.

"There's bound to be some way out," he began, when Senta clutched his arm.

There was the sound of many feet outside, the door swung open and a throng of devil-worshippers surged into the room. With a cry, the debutante pointed out Sebastian, who had thrown himself defiantly in front of Judith.

"That's Sebastian!" shrieked the girl, "Take him first!" The madness had vanished from Sebastian's face and his blue eyes shone with a fighting-joy that found a swift response in Eric. For the second time he felt his kinship to Sebastian; the clan-call was strong in both of them as they stood shoulder to shoulder, strangely alike, facing their common enemy.

The next moment something black and glowing descended over Eric's head. He fought furiously, but many hands forced him down, binding his arms to his sides. From the confused sounds of tramping, thudding blows, groans, and the snarling laugh Eric had heard before, he knew Sebastian was giving his enemies a lively time, and he writhed in fury at his impotence to help.

A door slammed; the noises receded, and Eric felt his bonds give way. But when he sprang up like a steel spring released, he found only Senta and an empty room. He threw himself against the door, but he could not wrench it open. Then, more calmly, he turned to Senta.

"They dragged him away and Judith followed," Senta told him, shuddering. "They said they would come back for us later."

"They'll try to get the secret from him first," said Eric, "in which case they'll finish all of us at once. But they probably expect him to play some trick, and they're afraid to tackle us together."

"If we're going to die," said Senta, quietly, "let's not think of those dreadful creatures any more. Eric, he called this room the 'Heart of the Manor.' Let's try to find the treasure."

"How!"

Senta thought a moment, her gaze traveling slowly around. Suddenly her glance focused. She ran across the room and knelt before the tiled fireplace.

"Look!" she cried.

Eric bent down and saw with amazement that on every tile was carved a Biblical quotation. The letters were chipped and broken as if they had been wantonly defaced.

"Probably put there by Torvald Ericson in one of his remorseful fits," mused Eric, "and defaced by Eldred or Sebastian."

Senta was earnestly deciphering the texts.

"It lies in the heart of the Manor. No irreverent eyes may find it," she quoted softly.

Eric knelt beside her.

"You think this is the hiding place?" he asked with quickened interest.

Too absorbed to reply, Senta lingered over a small corner tile so near the floor that it had escaped the defacing hand.

"Seek and ye shall find," with difficulty Senta made out the tiny dirt-encrusted letters. "knock and it shall be opened unto you."

Tense with excitement she knocked three times on the little tile. But nothing happened. She gave a cry of disappointment, but Eric, struck with a sudden idea, took out his knife and carefully

scraped away the dirt wedged around the edges. As the last fragment fell, the little tile slid out like a drawer and in the hole behind it was a long slender green box. When Senta brushed it clean of dust Eric saw that the box was made of pure jade, inlaid with rich red stones.

"Pigeon-blood rubies!" exclaimed Eric, whose adventures had given him a knowledge of jewels.

A breath of strange perfume was wafted to them as Senta lifted the lid. A narrow bundle of yellowed satin, a slender red-tipped rod, a roll of paper covered with writing—it looked somewhat disappointing. They caught up the time-stained paper whose faded writing was like that in the silver box. It seemed to be a kind of diary, though there were no dates, except the first twenty-five years back.

"Eldred is killing me," it began.

"He began two weeks ago, when he learned that I was struggling to free my soul of the monstrous bonds that drag it down—I will serve no more,

that I am resolved—but I do not hope for salvation—Salvation! Even the word is strange to me. This accursed house is like a plague-spot; it breeds death and ruin. As long as one stone stands upon another my soul must drag its awful weight of crime and misery. Eldred is giving me slow poison and he thinks I do not know. He is stupid; Sebastian is cleverer, though he is a boy—a vicious boy—how different from the sweet-faced little Eric. Oh, Sig-

mund, my splendid son! If I could see you only once again! If your mother had lived I could have fought the curse—but I was lonely and Eldrad's gypsy mother was a devil, too. But Eric must not suffer. He must not marry wrongly. I have arranged it all for Eric. Senta is a mere baby now, but her grand-

mother was Sigmund's mother's dearest friend. It is good blood, clean and honorable. They will think Sigmund's mother left them the gray house, they are poor and romantic and so will accept the queer conditions. The search will bind the two young things together. They will lift the Curse.

Is there a Curse? Somewhat, in the long hours I have spent here where Eldrad has imprisoned me, I've come to know that the curse was not hereditary madness, but the madness that comes of violence and lack of self-control. Eldrad wants the treasure. He knows I have hidden it, but he does not know that

while he thought he had me cooped up here I've made all arrangements with my lawyers and have hidden the silver box under the guide-stone! He wants the wand—but he shall never have it. Yet I dare not destroy it. I am afraid of it—I touch it and the old mad lust for power surges up in me. Eric! Eric! Destroy the wand before it wrecks your life!

It destroyed mine, and my father's, and his father the sea-captain, who had it of that beautiful accursed woman who has been the bane of our House. I have seen her in the devil-dances—she comes back to gloat over the evil she began—just one wicked half-breed witch-woman from an island of the sea. From her the stream of pollution has spread and spread. My repentance is too late, but Eldred shall not have the wand."

Eric stopped reading, reached for the narrow crystal rod, and examined it curiously. It was triangular and through its center ran a line of red, ending in an enormous ruby in its tip. As it grew warm in his hand Eric felt a tingle and glow like a contact with electricity. The transparent glass turned a smoky gray through which the red line pulsed like a fire. The whole rod was turning red and the smoky gray had spread into the room. Eric felt an upleap of the wild arrogance that had swept over him in the great hall. His brain was fired with vast shadowy visions of evil powers; out of the gray mists that seemed to swirl about him, he saw a face emerge.

Beautiful, alluring, challenging, it bent over him and he noted without distaste the sinister slant of the lustrous eyes, the yellowish tinge of the round face, the cruel curves of the full red mouth. Suddenly the smiling face darkened into a furious scowl! at the same instant Eric felt a cool touch on his burning hand.

"Eric!" cried the voice he loved best. "Eric! Destroy the wand!"

In the ensuing minute it seemed to Eric that opposing forces were tearing him to pieces. With a mighty effort, he dashed the wand to the floor and ground it to fragments under his heel; he seemed

to hear a far-off clang as if some great door slammed; the gray mists swirled away, and he found himself kneeling before Senta, his hot face buried in her little cool hands.

"Did you see—it?" he gasped.

"There was nothing," she told him gently, "but your face—oh Eric! The look in your eyes!"

"It will never come again," he promised earnestly. Then, to shake off the spell (for the heady perfume still floated up from the shattered rod), he caught up the bundle of soft satin. It unrolled with a jerk and there fell from it a great rope of many-colored jewels; almost six feet long, it stretched its shining length along the floor. The satin wrapping settled into a soft heap from which a dazzling flame flashed out. Eric hastily shook the yellowed folds and caught up the glittering thing that fell from them. It was a narrow hoop of gold set with a diamond of such marvelous lustre that a shimmering roe-fire seemed to flame and glow within it.

"The Ericsson Rose Diamond!" gasped Eric. "My great-grandmother's engagement ring." He unrolled a slip of paper twisted through the ring and read: "'Show this to my lawyer.' It is worth a fortune itself," commented Eric, "and so is that rope of jewels. No wonder Sebastian—"

Senta clutched his arm.

"Eric, how did your grandfather slip out of here to see his lawyer!"

Eric dived for the manuscript and rapidly turned the pages.

"Perhaps he mentions the secret way," he explained. "Yes—listen! 'I escape at will from the Round Tower room, but I always go back—I want to die, yet dare not kill myself. The secret way is found by pressing the tiles third from the top and second from the bottom on the side where this is hidden. Pray for me!'"

Eric dropped the manuscript and pressed the tiles described. Slowly and gratefully, the entire chimney-piece swung out from the wall. Stuffing the jewels into his capacious pocket, he caught Senta's hand and hurried her into the dark opening. Down a long flight of steps they went, and through a seemingly endless tunnel, then up more steps until Eric's tall head struck against some kind of roof. His groping

hands felt the outlines of a door, then a big iron key, which was very difficult to turn.

He succeeded at last and by an effort that taxed even his great strength, he forced open the door. A gust of sharp fresh air rushed in and a faint light filtering through bushes and vines. He tore these obstacles aside and crawled with Senta out of a door in the hillside and into the road that ran past Ericsson Manor.

So utterly had they lost all sense of time that it was hardly a surprise to find that the day was over. The autumn twilight was closing in; a chill breeze blew, and in the darkening sky a crescent moon was shining. The two who had just escaped from the inferno of that dreadful house, stood hand in hand, silently breathing in the almost holy serenity and peace of the scene.

Suddenly the air was shattered by an appalling detonation. The old Manor House far down the lane of trees rocked and swayed, then tumbled in on itself and crashed to the earth; the air was filled with smoke, hurtling stones and flying masonry and uprooted trees.

Eric and Senta were thrown to the ground, but Eric managed to drag Senta back through the hillside door and in the shelter of the tunnel they crouched until the storm of missiles was past.

When they ventured outside at last the place where Ericsson Manor had stood so long was only a deep pit in the midst of a bare plain piled with jagged stones.

"Sebastian set off his mine," said Eric.

"Poor Judith," whispered Senta, tears running down her face. "But they went together as they wanted to go—and that's all that matters."

Eric caught her closer to him.

"To be together—that's all that matters," he repeated. He slipped something on her finger and Senta saw the glow of the Rose Diamond.

A little later Eric found his car, which he had parked in the road outside the big gate. It was battered and bent, but he managed to make it go, and in the starlit dusk they drove away.

Devil Manor was gone, with all its evil horde, and perhaps old Thorvald's soul found rest at last.

THE END

