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*They struggled, the girls, through the
Gate of Life and Death, and from Limbo
came the shrieks of the damned*

GIVE ME MY BODY!

By PAUL W. FAIRMAN

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

THE room was dim and quiet. What light there was, seeped in around drawn shades and there were faint sounds of traffic from the street twenty floors below.

The girl who lay on Doctor John Logan's couch was under hypnosis. She was rather pretty, lying there relaxed with her eyes closed and a look of empty peace on her face. At intervals, her mouth tightened, a constriction appeared on the surface of her smooth throat, and the hands lying lax on her abdomen tightened into fists.

But she was under deep hypnosis and there was little physical reaction.

Doctor John Logan sat in an easy chair beside the couch with a pad and pencil in his hands. He looked rather

young for the success his Park Avenue address and luxuriously furnished suite indicated. He was a thin, handsome man with deep brown eyes and a sensitive mouth—impressive looking—but if anyone had read the notes on his pad in search of a clue to deep psychiatric truths, they would have been disappointed. His notes read: *Rachel March — 25 — female caucasian — possessions? — dual personality? — off her rocker but good.* And below the notes were some doodles of little girls in pig-tails marching over the pad.

Across the room, in a starched white uniform, stood a second girl. She waited beside a white cart on which lay a primed hypodermic needle on a sterile white



Dinah screamed out in rage and terror as Dane thrust her toward the fire.

cloth. She looked alert, efficient, and well able to use the needle.

Doctor John Logan had been sitting silent for several minutes. Now he raised a finger and the starched nurse came forward and leaned closer. There was—in addition to her subtle perfume—the even more subtle and heady aroma of vital womanhood which would have been definitely enjoyable to Doctor Logan if he hadn't had more important things on his mind.

He spoke in a whisper. "She's as deep as I dare go, now. I'm going to start questioning her. If it doesn't work, I'll bring her out quick and you be ready with that hypo. And don't get far away. You may have to help me hold her down."

The nurse stepped back a couple of paces and waited.

Logan waited, too; for a brief time during which he debated as to whether or not he was doing the right thing. Perhaps he should have called in consultation. He'd considered that and decided against it, not because he had any great confidence in his diagnosis. That was impossible. He didn't have a diagnosis. But he felt consultation in the field of psychiatry was differ-

ent than in medicine. Here—groping about in uncharted depths of a human mind there was so little to go by; very little in spite of the professional confidence exhibited at conventions; irregardless of the high-sounding terms banded about so casually.

With this the case, about all a man had to go on, when the chips were down—or rather, when the patient was on the couch—was his own confidence in himself. If he couldn't go forward without the bolstering-up of three or four other opinions, he'd best get out of the profession and make a living somewhere else.

So he was going ahead on his own and there was no further excuse for delay. He reached over and snapped on the tape recorder at his elbow and said,

"Are you quite comfortable?"

"Not—comfortable."

"That isn't true. You are comfortable. You're lying on a soft bed and you feel light as a feather."

"Light—comfortable."

"What is your name?"

"Rachel March."

"Where do you live?"

"Larchmont, New York."

"Who do you live with?"

"Aunt—uncle."

"What are their names?"

"Aunt Lucy—Uncle Will."

"Are you happy?"

"Not—happy."

Doctor Logan paused. The identification seemed strong enough. But at this stage it had been strong before. He said, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five—years old."

"But you weren't always twenty-five. Once you were a little girl and now we're going back to that time."

The limp hands tightened. "No. Afraid."

"There's nothing to be afraid of. I'll go with you. We'll go together."

"Afraid—"

"Now you are fifteen years old. You're excited and happy because you're going to take a trip to Marchwood where your mother and father and big sister lived."

"Marchwood — The Blue Cottage—Fury Creek. I—"

Now an amazing transformation took place. Rachel March stopped talking and began to giggle. Adulthood had obviously slipped away from her, but that which took its place was not the logically expected childhood toward which Doctor Logan had pointed her. The giggle, the high-pitched chuckle, was juvenile in timber, but there was more to it—a chilling

overtone of hatred—a nerve-tightening oral wave-length that could be described only as obscene, indecent—an intangible gibbering that stank of dark places and evil things.

Doctor Logan straightened in his chair and laid the pad aside. He raised a finger as a signal to the nurse, but this was not necessary. She was leaning forward and her professional aplomb slipped to the extent of a muttered, "My God—"

It was cut off by a thin, taut scream from the patient as her teeth were suddenly bared and she appeared to be fighting the battle of Michael and Lucifer as she lay there on the couch. "No—no—it's mine! You can't have it! No—no. It's mine—mine!"

Well aware of the risk involved in sudden return, Doctor Logan snapped on a strong spotlight that stood at the head of the couch. It blazed down against Rachel March's eyes as Logan snapped his fingers close to her ear. She had been preconditioned for this return, but Logan's heart hammered in his chest as the blue eyes opened wide. Then Rachel's throat tightened and he knew she was conscious.

Then it came again—the agony of ego-rocking terror,

so strong there seemed to be an animal odor to it, and Logan seized Rachel's arms and leaned across her body. It took every ounce of his male strength to hold the slim one-hundred-ten-pound girl on the couch.

"Quick," he said.

The nurse came forward and there was another scream, a single, sustained note of pure terror, as the needle plunged home. The hypo was calculated to be swift but even the brief span before unconsciousness exhausted every muscle in Logan's straining body.

Finally he fell back in his chair and looked up at the wide-eyed nurse. "Did you think I was kidding?"

"Good lord! I've never seen anything like it."

"Neither have I."

"The fright—the fear in her eyes—in her face. There was agony, as though she were being tortured on a rack."

"Neatly put. But she's under now. I've got a bottle out in my desk and I need a drink . . ."

After a shot of rye, Doctor Logan was able to smile. "That was what I bumped into the last time—alone. When you were on your vaca-

tion. And it was touch and go until I got a needle into her arm."

"I'm surprised you risked it again."

Normally such a remark by a nurse to a doctor would have been impudence bordering on sacrilege; nurses are not supposed to question a doctor's procedure. But Marcia Adams had been with Logan for some time and there is a natural informality in a two-person operation. Also, Logan wasn't a stickler for the rules.

"Perhaps I shouldn't have, but I did some probing in between. I worked through her later years and while the keynote to the whole thing is some kind of terror, it didn't get out of hand."

"At least you learned where the critical point lies."

"Somewhere between the age of twelve and fifteen years. But at that time she was going to school, her home life was peaceful and completely normal. What could have happened to her?"

"Is there anything exceptional in the background?"

"Yes and no. She's a March, and the clan itself is quite interesting. It goes back unbroken to before the Revolution. They've got a huge estate up in New England. A place called Marchwood

where Rachel's father and mother and twelve-year-old sister were killed."

"An accident?"

"Two accidents. Rachel's father, Thomas, fell off a horse and split his skull on a rock."

"Did Rachel see the accident?"

"No. She was less than a year old at the time. The death of Thomas March hit Rachel's mother, Joan, pretty hard. There were two other March brothers and William and his wife Lucy, took little Rachel to live with them in Larchmont. Until Joan recovered from the shock of her husband's death, they felt one daughter would be enough for her to take care of."

"And then Joan March and the older daughter were killed?"

"Yes—about six months later. There isn't much known about their deaths. They lived in a rather secluded place called Blue Cottage, back in the woods beside a creek that ran between high stone bluffs. The mother and daughter were found on the rocks below. It was decided that they'd been walking hand-in-hand and someone's foot slipped. With no witnesses, that was as good an explanation as any."

"You said there were three brothers."

"That's right. The third one, Dane March married a girl named Penelope Higgins. They stayed at Marchwood and they're still there. Do a little farming and keep the place together."

Marcia Adams corked Logan's bottle and put it back into the drawer. "A tragic family," she said, "but it's hard to see how it could have affected Rachel. She wasn't around for any of it."

"Lucy March took her back only once—when she was fifteen years old, but it didn't work out. The child woke up screaming the first night and got hysterical. She had to be taken away."

"It seems the answer might lie at Marchwood regardless. What's the girl's past history?"

"Nothing too rough until lately. Nightmares — the screaming kind—up through the years, but her aunt was inclined to attribute them to high-strung sensitivity. They subsided for a while and then Rachel got herself engaged and things started all over again. More of the same, and worse. Until she broke off her engagement and refused to see the young man. Quite re-

cently, she began having spells of terror she doesn't remember after they pass. Yet, even when normal, there's a vague fear that tells her she shouldn't marry. The only answer is to get down into the subconscious and see what's frightening her. We have to reach the initial trauma.

"You tried that today and the result was close to disaster."

"Right. But I think we've got to move ahead. If we stand still, we face complete inner breakdown. There are some strange angles relative to Marchwood."

"Such as—?"

"She knows far more about the place than she ought to. Under questioning, she's mentioned the Blue Cottage, hollyhocks in the backyard, an elm-tree split by lightning. Yet her aunt assures me they've been very careful never to mention anything about the place or any details of the accidents; only the barest explanations as were necessary."

"That's still not proof that she hasn't had access to the information."

"Of course not, but I've got enough to convince me that, as you said, the answer lies at Marchwood. And I think

we've got to go out there and see if we can't come to grips with the core of the thing."

Marcia Adams shook her head doubtfully. "We saw what happened in there on the couch. If the psychic wound is as raw and dangerous as it appears to be—"

"—then drastic surgery may be necessary. She should be coming around shortly. Look in on her, will you?"

Logan sat thinking for some time. He valued Marcia Adams greatly. She was a fine sounding board against which to bounce ideas in order to get their true ring. And as a result of this particular talk, he made his decision.

He and his perplexing patient were going to Marchwood . . .

Penny March read the letter to Dane after supper; after the chores were done and he was half-dozing in his easy chair from which he would soon rise and go off to bed.

The beginning of the letter didn't interest him greatly; the formal self-introduction of a man he never heard of; a psychiatrist—filled no doubt, with silly ideas about what went on in people's heads. A Doctor John Logan; probably with a funny beard and thick-lensed glasses like

the comedy characters in the old movies on television.

So Dane was already nodding as Penny droned on, peering at each word through her steel-rimmed glasses as though in disapproval.

But somewhere past the middle, Dane perked up—about where Penny read:

“—and so, with your permission, I would like to bring Rachel to Marchwood. Only for a short visit, I’m sure, and we would do everything possible to avoid interrupting your routine.

I truly believe the visit might—”

“Hold up, now,” Dane said. “What’s he want to bring the child here for? Last time, she woke up screaming her head off.”

“Dane! She’s not a child anymore. She’s a grown woman, now.”

Dane pondered. It had certainly been a long time. Took a thing like this to make a man stop a minute and calculate his years. “Let’s see, Sam took little Rachel away in ’32, wasn’t it?”

That’s right. She was a baby, then.”

“She’d be around 25 or 26 now. Hmmm. Time sure kites by.”

“It does. You’re an old man

and I’m an old woman but the point is—how do I answer this letter? This doctor wants to bring Rachel here.”

“What for? Is she sick?”

“Dane, you haven’t heard a word of what I read. He says, no. She’s going to get married and—”

“Then why doesn’t she? What’s she want to come here for?”

Penny’s stern blue eyes had softened and she was off on a memory-train of her own. “Rachel was such a sweet, quiet little thing. And so frail. A body wondered how those spindly little legs held her up.”

Dane got up from his chair and walked over to stare into the flames of the small fire Penny had laid in the big fireplace. It was late summer and the nights were a bit chilly. Soon, they would close off ninety percent of this huge monstrosity called Marchwood Manor and huddle for the winter in the four little back rooms. Silly to heat space where no one had lived for more than a generation.

He turned and faced his wife. “Maybe it’s about time we quit futtering around and spoke right out with what we’re both thinking.”

“Maybe it is.”

"Seems to me if there's something out of line with little Rachel—"

"Not little anymore, Dane. I told you—"

"All right—with big Rachel—this would be the last place in the world to bring her."

"Well, evidently the doctor doesn't think so. Twenty years is a long time, Dane and she was only a baby when— Penny hesitated. "—when it happened."

Dane frowned and grumbled deep in his throat. "Guess, we can't turn 'em down. After all, Rachel's got a right to be here if she wants to come. Any member of the March family's got a right to come."

"Then I'll get a letter off to this doctor."

"Uh-huh. You get a letter off. I'll get to bed . . ."

Doctor John Logan smiled at the girl who sat beside him and said, "We're flying over Marchwood, Rachel."

The girl, startled out of a reverie, smiled back and looked down out of the cabin window. Below, lay a panorama of rolling green. "It's beautiful," Rachel said. "I can see Fury Creek—clear over there where it empties into the Basin River."

"It is beautiful. Look. Those yellow patches. Some of the trees are already turning."

"There's March Manor."

Logan, even while appearing to be interested in what lay below, had been watching Rachel March with veiled keenness. He looked down, now, and saw the huge, sprawling roofs and chimneys that marked the manor house of storied Marchwood.

"They could billet a regiment in there," he said.

Then he turned his whole attention back to Rachel as she grasped his wrist with sudden convulsive strength in her grip. "Over there! I can see it! Deep in the trees. That open spot by the creek!"

"What can you see?"

"The Blue Cottage!"

"Rachel!" Logan spoke sharply, but when Rachel looked around she saw only a casual smile on his face. "It's been a bumpy ride. These small charter planes bounce around like toy balloons. But we'll be setting down shortly."

There was sudden bright fear in Rachel's eyes. "Maybe we shouldn't have come."

"Nonsense. You should be looking forward to it. Why, the March name is legend. You should be proud. That's

your ancestral home down there and you're coming back for a visit. Your aunt and uncle will be waiting."

"Doctor — what's wrong with me. Why am I frightened?"

"You're no doubt awed by the vastness of it. Remember, you haven't seen it for a long, long time."

"But it seems only yesterday."

"I wish you'd tell me about it — about Marchwood — it's background."

"But I have told—"

"Tell me again. I'm like a kid who enjoys hearing a favorite fairy tale over and over."

And it was with the unthinking trust of a child that Rachel slipped her hand into his. "Marchwood was originally a grant from the English king before the Revolution," she said, her tone indeed that of a story-teller. "My great-grandfather Isaiah March lived to be almost one hundred years old. He was a very remarkable man. He fought with Lafayette and after the war he was one of the few men who managed to hold onto a royal grant and obtain recognition of his ownership. There were Marches before him of course, but we always think of

our family as starting with Isaiah."

"He must have been a real old fire-eater."

"He was. He built Marchwood Manor and the whole thousand acres of Marchwood itself stands intact to this day. The wills of the succeeding sons required it. They were patterned almost word-for-word after the original, iron-bound document of Great - Grandfather Isaiah. Many Marches were born here. Some died. Most of them profited from the strong blood of old Isaiah and made honored names for themselves in many parts of the world."

Logan was aware that Rachel's recital was directly from a summary by the March family historian. He had heard it before and it was a trifle boring but it had served its purpose here—that of diverting Rachel's mind—and now the plane was dropping onto a field on the far side of Marchwood; several miles from the manor, but this was the only place where the hilly barony offered level, ground sufficient for a plane.

The pilot, a pleasant-faced, blonde young man, seemed reluctant to leave them in this wilderness until a battered station wagon rattled out of

the forest along a narrow road and a white-haired, somber old man got stiffly out and stood with one hand raised as a shield for his eyes against the lowering sun.

Damnedest, gloomiest place I ever saw, the pilot thought. Why in hell would anyone want to come here? Oh, well, each to his own.

Actually, the overall gloom was an illusion easily cast upon anyone used to open country and city streets. So far as John Logan was concerned, the gloomiest part of the arrival was Dane March's lack of welcoming warmth. He was civil enough, but he had a hard time drumming up a smile. Was he also afraid? Logan wondered.

The drive back to Marchwood Manor was pleasant enough, but Logan was beginning to doubt his own wisdom in bringing Rachel here. He'd been justified, however. No matter what transpired, it would be no more objectionable than the mental disintegration that was so clearly indicated.

As they approached Marchwood Manor, he leaned close to Rachel and asked, "Does it all look familiar to you?"

"I was here before. Not out to the Blue Cottage, though.

And yet that's clearer in my mind, somehow."

"You were less than a year old when you last saw the Blue Cottage."

"That may be. But there are times when I'm back there—standing in the front yard—deathly afraid of—"

"—Afraid of what?" He'd blocked her off from discussing it before the plane landed, but with her mind turning stubbornly back to the house beside Fury Creek, he let her expand on the memory—if indeed that's what it was.

But now she veered away as though in fright. "I don't know—I can't think. But there's something terrible—"

She broke off when they pulled up to a door of the Manor where a gray-haired woman shaded her eyes and waited. "Rachel!"

"Aunt Penny! It's so wonderful to see you."

"And seeing you is a positive revelation, child. Such a spindly little ghost you were last time. But now look at you."

"Aunt Penny. This is Doctor Logan."

He took her hand. "I'd like it to be John—or at least plain *mister*. *Doctor* makes me feel stuffy and bearded."

"It was so nice of you to bring Rachel up here to a pair

of lonely old folks. The good Lord'll bless you for it. And now let's get inside. I've got a pot of strong tea brewing."

Logan noticed that Dane March hadn't said a word during the whole time of introductions. He'd eyed the proceedings in silent glumness. This didn't prove anything, though. Logan might well be doing the old gentleman an injustice. You couldn't tell about strangers. Dane March's seeming hostility might be an entirely characteristic trait; it could easily be an illusion created by shyness and stiff, Lincolnesque features.

Dane March said, "I'll put the car away."

"Hurry," Penny said. "The tea will get cold. And now you two come right on in."

John Logan followed slowly, his eyes wandering over the huge shell of former glory named Marchwood Manor. What ambition had goaded Isaiah March into building such a place? Perhaps the urge to have his name live after him; to put the mark of his personality on the land.

This was not important, however. The vital issue was whether or not the secret of Rachel's strange terror could be found in this place. Or whether she was fated to

plunge finally into the darkness that was closing around her mind . . .

"Now that you're here," Dane March said, "I suspect you'll want to roam around a little and look the place over."

He made this statement the following morning, his attention on Rachel, with only side glances at John Logan.

Rachel felt the full impact of his deep-set eyes and curled her feet tight back against the rung of her chair. Aunt Penny was a dear, but Uncle Dane seemed to be angry about something. Didn't he want her at Marchwood Manor? He seemed so cold—so unapproachable. How did you go about telling an uncle you hadn't seen since you were a child that you wanted him to be your friend?

Rachel wanted to put her arms around his big shoulders and ask him, but instead, she sat very still and said, "If it's all right with you, Uncle Dane."

"Nothing wrong with it at all if you're careful and don't go in the wrong direction. There's plenty of woods to see west of the house and down southward toward the river. East is all right, too, except you won't be able to get over

the rock ridge that cuts across below the orchard. What I want to warn you about is stay away from the north direction. It's bad up there. I could get lost myself in those thickets and gorges along Fury Creek. Ain't been a human foot set down in those wilds for twenty years and if you got lost even a helicopter wouldn't be no good at finding you. So mind my warning."

"Yes, Uncle Dane."

"And now I'll say good-bye to the both of you for a while. We ain't retired, here. Penny and me raise some chickens and farm a little on the flat land and the work don't wait on visitors. You're both welcome here, though, long as you stay out of trouble."

After Dane strode from the room, he pushed his great head back in to say, "The sky tells that there'll be a bad thunder storm sometime this afternoon, so if you go anywhere you'd better plan to be back in the house by twelve."

After he left there was a moment of silence as though his going had left a vacuum that had to fill itself. Then Penny bustled around the table and gave Rachel a brisk kiss.

"Now don't you pay him any mind, child. All the

March men sour up in their old age. We're just a pair of grouchy country bumpkins set in our ways. But we want you to like us."

"I do like you, Aunt Penny. I like you both."

Penny paused suddenly as she was turning away. Oblivious of Logan's alert, searching eyes, she looked down at Rachel and said, "Land sakes, child. You've got the body of a woman, but there's moments I'd swear you haven't grown a day older—not inside."

She regretted her frankness instantly and began furiously clearing the table. Logan got to his feet and began filling his pipe from a leather tobacco pouch. Rachel had covered her reaction well, but Logan caught it and patted her shoulder. "Think I'll stretch my legs a bit," he said.

He left the dining room. Penny had also vanished—kitchenward—and Rachel was alone. She sat motionless for a few moments. Then, trying to drive Aunt Penny's words from her mind she hurried from the room and out of the house.

The eastern sky was clear blue, ablaze with summer sun, but over the western treetops stood a line of black clouds; a dark, menacing ridge that

Rachel sensed as being somehow akin to the darkness in her own mind.

She moved across the lawn, then stopped and stood motionless, fighting. But fighting what? She didn't know. And she knew that Doctor Logan, for all his books and apt phrases and glib names for everything, didn't know either. That was the most frightening part. The sense of being all alone. Even in the midst of those who loved you and wanted to help, you were still alone. That was when the terror became almost unbearable; when it made you want to scream and run out into the street and cry, *Help me, somebody. Please — please, won't somebody help me?*

But of course you didn't do that because now you were grown up and going to be married and how would it be if your own children found you weren't anything more than a frightened child yourself?

Suddenly, Rachel's whole body quivered. There was something; something new; a change; a promise; as though she had finally defeated whatever lay in the black dark and that it had conceded defeat and fled off into a terror of its own.

A new feeling. Warm, strong, confident. And wonderful. A beckoning and a promise. She laughed. A treasure hunt. That was what it would be like. But the search would be for a different sort of treasure. A power, invisible, but stronger than anything on earth. Even though, still far away and but dimly sensed, it was making her understand how ineffective and contemptible were the people who didn't have it. Uncle Dane, Aunt Penny, and —yes, even Doctor Logan.

A new power. And she had only to follow its call.

So it didn't seem at all strange to Rachel that she ran swiftly and confidently into a place she had never been before; into the big, white barn that towered among the lesser buildings around it, second in size only to the house itself.

It seemed entirely natural that she thread her way among pieces of rusted and forgotten machinery until she found a small, narrow stairway stretching away into upper dimness.

She climbed it with confidence, with a breathless tingling that rang through every nerve. And when the dimness turned to pitch-black darkness, she still went confidently

on, stepping off into emptiness, but finding a stoutly-anchored catwalk beneath her feet. And on, along the whole length of the barn, to open a door at the exact spot where she knew it would be. She laughed and clapped her hands, having known it would be like this.

A tiny room high against the ridgepole of the barn.

Covering one wall, were several iron wheels, each with a handle protruding from its rim. They were thick with rust and long-unused, but Rachel touched them confidently, knowing exactly what they were for. This one opened half the small ventilator-windows along the ridgepole. This one, the other half on that side. There were two other wheels for the windows on the opposite side of the ridgepole, but Rachel gave them little attention.

From one corner, she picked up an object thick with dust and beat it against the wall until it could be seen for what it was. But even before she cleaned it, she knew what the object would be—an old calico doll with one leg gone.

She tossed it aside contemptuously and stood for a few moments looking out the tiny round window at the

scene below. From here, everything looked small, like a lot of doll houses, even the trees appearing as miniature decorations on some child's panorama.

But she turned away from the window quickly. She hadn't come here for the wheels or the doll or to look down on the estate from a high perch.

She had come here because the power had beckoned and directed her; had drawn her as surely as a magnet draws a steel scrap. And it had not betrayed her because here it was even greater in intensity. Here, it was more defined and was able to direct her more articulately toward the greater goal.

The greater goal—the end of her long search out there in the forest . . .

She laughed again—suddenly giddy with the delight of it. That was what it had been all her life. The fear had been a mirage; a mask through which she had to go in order to follow the search for power.

Out there in the forest there would be a road, overgrown, now, with weeds and vines, but it would be there, waiting to point the way.

She went down and out of the barn and into the forest, going carefully, craftily, lest

Doctor Logan or Uncle Dane catch sight of her and barred the way.

Soon she was beyond danger of this, and deep among the trees, she found the road.

The power pulsed stronger, now, and she began to run, following the new, wild surge that came from within her own being, yet was out in front of her, laughing, beckoning her on . . .

Dane March was repairing a section of chicken wire that had been loosened by the driving wind of the last storm; resetting two posts that had been torn loose. But he couldn't get his mind on his work this morning. The comfortable routine of Marchwood had been disrupted, which was bad enough, but the disruption was particularly disturbing to Dane because of a feeling he had; a feeling that somehow the past was in danger of being raked up again. Old bones, he felt, deserved to lie buried after twenty years. What good lay in opening old crypts that had been sealed for so long? Walled away from the present, there was no call to go digging back among the ruins.

Of course, he had no proof that any such thing would occur, but that doctor bringing

Rachel here had a dangerous smell about it. Maybe things would be all right, though.

But Dane couldn't work and finally gave it up. He put his tools away and then stood facing the north. A thick barrier of trees and undergrowth stood sharp against the pasture land on that side of the out-buildings, and Dane remembered his warning. He'd told Rachel and the doctor to roam in other directions, that the north section was dangerous.

But had he been quite honest with himself in giving that warning? Had the danger been his true reason for wanting them to stay out of there?

He told himself that it had been the reason. He didn't want either of them snooping up there because they could get lost or be killed. That could happen, he told himself grimly, long before they came anywhere near the Blue Cottage.

The Blue Cottage. It had been a long time. He'd turned his back on the place over twenty years before—when the two broken bodies had been carried out.

Winter and summer—summer and winter—it had stood up there in the wild country; a terrible memory locked in

by the bluffs of Fury Creek and the thick tangles of the north acres. Perhaps it was no longer standing? Perhaps the walls had weakened and gone down under the year-after-year pounding of winter storms.

Perhaps, or perhaps not, but suddenly, Dane had to know. He had to see the place once more. He was an old man now, but the memory of the things that had occurred at the Blue Cottage when he was young and vital and the urges in a man's blood made crazy demands, stirred within him.

He had to see Blue Cottage once more.

He considered it for a few more moments, then locked the tool shed and turned his footsteps in the direction of the north forest.

The going wasn't hard; not for anyone who knew the way. The road, once wide enough for a team and wagon and clear enough to take a blooded horse at full speed, was thick overgrown, but it was still there. And a man who remembered could find his way easily—even an old man with stiff joints—while a stranger might flounder and get hopelessly lost in the ravines and rocks fifty feet on either side.

As Dane pushed his way through the knee-high grass and brambles, it seemed to him that the forest on either side had gotten thicker and more gloomy. Its silence seemed a brooding contemplation, a living mood that made incidents and events of the past fade even deeper into the morass of time.

He rounded a turn in the road and stopped to orientate. Yes, this was the place where Tom was killed. This was the turn where his horse had skidded in the mud of a sudden shower and sent him hurtling forward head first.

Dane pushed off the road and kicked around in the high grass. The rock itself. There it was, with its sharp skull-splitting edge still unblunted by the years.

Dane scowled. If Tom had minded a bit—been less wild and harum-scarum, he wouldn't have knocked his own brains out. Then none of it would have happened. One death spiralling into two and three and all the upset and misery that went before them—and after. That was how it had to be figured; Tom's mad destiny sweeping him away and those around him.

Dane walked back to the road and moved on, and be-

fore long he came to a place where the road ended in an open pocket and there it was.

The Blue Cottage.

It wasn't blue anymore. All the paint had peeled away and the shutters hung askew on bent and broken hinges or had been long-since knocked off.

The fence was down and weeds stood high in the yard and the old garden. With the silence and desolation quivering in the heat of a hot summer day.

A roar of sullen thunder drew Dane's eyes skyward and he saw that the storm was moving in from the west faster than he'd expected. The dark cloud-bank had broken into fast-punging heads and was racing for the sun.

He walked on past the front of the house and into the trees on the far side. A few more feet and he could hear the pounding water of Fury Creek and then it was there below him, a foaming chute at this point in the deep rocky gorge.

This was where it had happened; where the end of it all had come about. But had it been the end? Dane turned and looked back toward the house. He was not a sensitive man; he was a realist, stern, practical, down-to-earth. Yet

even he could vaguely sense something here; some living evil that hadn't died in the old tragedy.

Perhaps, rather, it had been born there—the potent brooding uncleanness that lay over the Blue Cottage like an invisible sickness, an undying plague.

Dane suddenly jerked himself out of the mood into which he had slipped. What foolishness was this? An old man's conscience coming back to haunt him? An overactive imagination, that's all.

Then, as he took a forward step, the hot summer scene changed as if by magic. The black thunderheads swept over the sun, blotting the day out into deep dusk as a wall of cold rain hit the forest and the clearing. Thunder split the black sky and a gash of lightning flashed down like a livid finger to point at the dark house of evil. So realistic was the transformation that Dane heard again the shrill tearing scream he had heard before—on that terrible night so long ago. Thus can a man's memory rekindle imagination.

But it was not imagination. The scream came again and as Dane watched, frozen with shock, a woman ran from the

front door of the Blue Cottage.

Her shrieks of terror were like knives slicing into his ears as he forced movement into his legs and ran toward her. She was screaming words, now, senseless words: "No—no! It's mine You've got no right. It's mine—mine. Pity me! Leave me alone! It's mine!"

Dane was beside her, and she turned and looked into his eyes and he saw the animal terror. She flung herself upon him and her voice dropped to a whimper. "Help me! Please help me. Take me away from here!"

Then it was over. The girl went limp and as he lifted her, she hung from his arms as though dead. But he could feel her breathing and the beat of her heart as he stood there with the rain sluicing down from the black sky.

Rachel March, looking so much like her mother that Dane could hardly make himself believe this wasn't a segment out of an old nightmare. He looked down into her white face, his eyes smouldering.

Why should it go on any further? Why shouldn't this be the final end? Perhaps that was how it was meant to be. Maybe he himself had been

ordained to be the tool for ending it. Why had the girl come back otherwise? Why had destiny drawn her here for no apparent reason?

He raised his head and heard the thundering Fury Creek even above the pounding of the storm . . .

John Logan was helping Penny March peel apples in the kitchen of Marchwood Manor. He sat on the edge of the table, eating more than he put into the bowl and wondering just how to go about opening the subject of Rachel March with this prim-mouthed New England woman. He was hesitant.

But Penny solved his problem by opening it herself. "And now," she said, "I want you to tell me exactly what's wrong with Rachel."

"That's rather hard to say."

"That's what I expected—beating around the bush. You doctors aren't happy unless you're making things complicated for us ordinary folk. But I want a straight answer, young man."

"I'm speaking as straight as I can, Mrs. March. I don't know what's wrong with Rachel."

"You'll have to talk a little louder. That storm against

the windows most deafens a body."

"I honestly don't know what's wrong with her. Troubles of the mind aren't as easy to figure out as measles or gall bladder trouble. All I can say is that Rachel has terrible dreams. She's afraid of something."

"Can't she tell you what it is?"

"I wish it was that simple. Actually, it's a little hard to explain. She carries a certain conscious fear in her mind all the time because she knows something is wrong, but she has what you might call spells in which she experiences a kind of terror we can have no conception of. Then, when the spells are over, she doesn't remember having had them."

Penny found this hard to believe. She looked at Logan as though she thought he was making some kind of a joke. "That's ridiculous."

"To us, perhaps. But to Rachel, it's very real and if it goes on, her mental structure won't be able to stand up under the punishment and she'll probably go incurably insane."

Penny didn't understand but she was at least partially convinced of Logan's sincerity. "But it's still ridiculous. There's nothing wrong with

the March blood. There's never been any insanity in the line."

"That's encouraging, but it doesn't solve our present problem."

"Of course there was some intermarriage long ago. I believe one of Isaiah's grandfather's married his sister—a common law marriage if that's what they had in those days." Penny frowned. "It was struck out of the family tree but it was a fact."

Logan put another apple slice into his mouth and looked out the window into the sluicing rain. It had come on very suddenly and no doubt Rachel had found shelter in one of the out-buildings on the property.

Logan said, "I thought perhaps you could tell me a little about Rachel's parents and her sister. Mrs. Lucy March told me what she knew but she and her husband weren't really very close to the Tom Marches."

"Lucy and Will weren't very close to any of the family. Not that I'm blaming them. They had their own affairs to tend to. And they responded handsomely when they were needed. Taking little Rachel."

"I'd like to ask a rather

personal question and please don't take offense."

"I don't offend easy, young man, although I might tell you to mind your own business."

"Please do if you think I have it coming. What I wanted to know was why you and Mr. March didn't take Rachel. It seems that might have been logical. You have no children and you were close, so that the child could have still been close to her mother."

Penny March thought carefully, then replied with a counter-question. "Tell me—what did Lucy have to say about Joan—Tom's wife?"

"Not a great deal. She said Joan was terribly broken up over her husband's death. That was about all."

Penny sniffed. "As long as you're getting facts they might as well be the right ones. The truth is, Joan wasn't any more hurt by Tom's death than the average wife losing a husband. Just as much and no more. The truth was that Lucy wanted a baby without the trouble of having her own. It's my opinion—but just an opinion, mind you—that there was an agreement between them when Lucy took Rachel that she could have her for good."

"I see."

"I'll say one thing. Joan did have her hands full with that little hellion, Dinah."

"That was Rachel's older sister."

"She was going on thirteen when the tragedy happened. And it may seem a terrible thing for a blood relative to say, but the child would never have come to any good. I'm sure of that. She had bad blood in her from somewhere."

"Just how did she demonstrate this—this badness?"

"In every way a child could. If an animal was hurt, I could be sure Dinah was in back of it. She was sassy, impudent, and down-right clever about it. You asked why Dane and I didn't take Rachel. That was one of the reasons so far as I was concerned. I was actually afraid for the baby's welfare any time she was alone with Dinah and I was glad when Lucy took her beyond Dinah's reach. Dinah was terribly jealous of her mother giving attention to the baby. I think the little devil actually resented Tom and Joan being husband and wife."

"How did Joan react to these objectionable traits in her daughter?"

"She wasn't fully aware of

them. To understand you'd have had to know Joan. She was no prize package herself when you came right down to it. Tom was wild, too, of course—not at all like Will and Dane—and he and Joan were a good match. But the truth was that Joan was man crazy. She didn't belong out here in the country. She should have gone to the city after Tom was killed, but—well, she didn't."

Logan looked up and saw that the storm was over and the sun was out. He had a feeling Penny wasn't going to tell him much more and he didn't want to lose her confidence by pushing too hard during their first talk. Also, he wanted to go out and find Rachel. He hadn't seen her for several hours and he was a little uneasy as to where she might be.

He dropped off the table and put down his knife. "I'm afraid I wasn't much help, Mrs. March. I ate more than I contributed to the pie."

"That's all right, young man. A woman never expects to get much help out of—Good heavens and earth!" Penny March gasped abruptly.

Both she and Logan turned as the door was pushed open and Dane March entered, car-

rying Rachel in his arms as though she were dead.

"Dane! What happened?"

"She went against my warning and got lost in the north woods. When the storm hit, she got scared. I found her up there running around in a panic."

Penny said, "Bring the poor child to her room. Is she hurt bad?"

Logan checked Rachel over. There appeared to be no injuries and he left Penny to rub her down and get her into bed. She didn't return to consciousness but when Logan went back a little while later, she was sleeping naturally.

When he came back downstairs, he heard Penny and Dane talking in the kitchen and paused to eavesdrop.

Penny was saying, "The poor child. Now she'll probably come down with a bad cold."

"There's something bad wrong with the girl."

"What's wrong with her, Dane?"

"I don't know. But there was no call to get that scared over a little thunder and lightning."

"Where did you find her?"

"At the Blue Cottage."

"That's strange."

"She was inside. Then she came out screaming to high

heaven. She thought someone was chasing her the way she carried on. Then she passed out and I brought her home."

"But why did she go there? She couldn't have remembered."

"Probably just stumbled onto the road and kept walking."

Penny appeared to be doubtful. "I don't know. That old road would be pretty hard to find."

"I'm thinking she ought to be taken home. It was just like the last time except then it happened in bed. I don't think it's healthy, having her around here."

"I grant you one thing," Penny said. "The past should stay dead and buried."

Logan backed away and left the house by another door and walked to the edge of the north forest across the lawn. He stared at the wall of ominous trees, dripping, now, with the rain from the sudden downpour.

What mystery lay beyond those trees? What terrible memory kept reaching up through the years to plague an innocent girl until her sanity hung in the balance?

And more important—what could be done about it?

He realized his feet were

soaking wet and went back to the house to change his shoes. As he came from his room, he looked in on Rachel and found her awake, lying very still, looking up at the ceiling.

He went to her bed. "How are you feeling?"

She turned her eyes on him, quiet eyes, but clouded with bewilderment. "Why am I here? I don't remember going to bed."

"What do you remember?"

"We're at Marchwood."

"That's right. We came here yesterday. Do you remember having breakfast this morning and leaving the house?"

"Yes. I felt good. Strong and unafraid and happy. That I remember."

"What did you do after that?"

Rachel closed her eyes and tried to remember. "There was a place I had to go."

"To the Blue Cottage?"

"No—no, not at first. Another place."

"I saw you go into the barn."

"I don't know—I can't remember. I only know that I don't feel that way anymore. I'm frightened. For a while it was gone but now it's back stronger than ever."

"Take it easy."

Tears were forming. "Doc-

tor Logan. I know, now! I'll never be any better. I'm going out of my mind and I want to die. I'd rather die than go crazy!"

"That's nonsense and I want you to stop talking that way. We're going to find out what's wrong. That's why we came here."

Rachel looked across at the chair beside the bed. "Why are my clothes all wet?"

"There was a storm. You got caught away from the house."

"I remember that—yes, I remember the storm. Doctor, did I go to the Blue Cottage?"

"Yes, you went into the north woods. Uncle Dane found you at the Blue Cottage and brought you home."

"But I don't remember that—I don't remember seeing it or being there."

"It will all come back in due time."

Rachel's eyes were terror-haunted as she stared at the ceiling. "I only know that I'm more afraid of the Blue Cottage than anything in the world. Yet I've got to go back there. I've got to keep going back again and again until—"

"Until what?"

"I don't know. I don't know. Oh, Doctor Logan—help me—please help me."

And Logan cursed his im-

potence; the lack of knowledge that made him a bystander at the scene of this corroding tragedy. "I'll help you," he said. "But now you must go to sleep. I'll sit here beside your bed. I won't leave you alone."

He sat there for a long time—even after Rachel had dropped off into slumber. He looked down into her sad, ravaged face and carefully put the hand that had been gripping his under the coverlet.

He got to his feet and stood looking at her, assailed by the gravest doubts he had since the beginning of the case. Was he doing the right thing? Did Rachel belong out here? Perhaps he should have kept her in the city and fought the thing with all the modern tools that were being used to combat mental illness. Shock therapy—all the rest of it.

But he'd followed his own instincts and that would have been fine if his own mind were at stake. But he was gambling with another's and any mistakes he made were for keeps.

But at least, now, he knew what was plaguing Rachel. Possession. Something was trying to take her mind and body away from her. Some live thing that had died or

something that had never lived. All her doubts and terrors and lapses added up to only one thing; something he'd suspected but up to this moment hadn't allowed himself to believe. But now he knew and he admitted the truth.

Rachel, most of her life, had been fighting to keep possession of her own body.

But fighting against whom? Or what . . . ?

Dinah knew there had been a change; knew something had occurred to end the raging monotony and forecast a finish.

In the gray place between the worlds, where she waited, there was no time nor space nor any of the things for living. Yet she lived, subsisting on the mental things—held where she was by the tentacles of evil that overlapped from the world she had known—the world that had robbed her.

Dinah was no longer a mind—that was what she sought—a mind, a structure, a tool with which she could transform into thought and into living, the terrible urge and desire that made up her conscious entity.

She was nourished and kept existent in that gray

place between the worlds by knowledge of great wrong and injustice. She knew that had been Mother, but Mother had not waited in the place between the worlds. Responding to the great cosmic laws, Mother had changed after the great, wrenching rebirth through which they had passed. She had become content, passive, waiting with all the souls in the gray place without fear or regret. In a sense, she stopped being Mother and became something else, but Dinah's memory remained—tag-ends of recollections bound her to the world she'd left and tangled themselves together to form the urge and the rage.

There had been injustice and the need to right it was a part of the urge—injustice to Mother and injustice to Dinah. The injustice to Dinah was far more potent than the other. Mother had lived and was content to take the next great step, but Dinah had not lived.

Life, for Dinah, had been wonderful, fiercely vital, ecstasically delightful, but just when she was beginning to partake of its freedoms and unfolding mysteries, it had been snatched away in a single, great tearing shock. She had been able to live and

breathe and run and laugh and hate—then it was gone and there was nothing but the gray place and a mixing with the meek and empty ones.

But Dinah had her urge, her rage, and out of its substance she had been able to form a bridge upon which to return. By dint of demand and no knowledge of space or time other than in misty vagueness, Dinah had been able to make herself an ever-existent driving force in the world to which she sought re-entrance. To the place where she'd been cheated.

From her rage and hatred she formed a picture of the lucky one. Rachel was the lucky one's name and even during the moment she'd inhabited the world of wonder, Dinah had hated Rachel.

She had hated anything or anyone who had stolen from her the loving attentions of Mother. There had been Father who did this and she had hated Father, but had gotten him away from Mother—into the gray place.

She hadn't really meant to get Father away from Mother but it had happened because of something she'd done. Father had come by on his horse, riding fast as he always did and Dinah had

risen up suddenly at the edge of the road and screamed; wanting to do this to Father because he sent her away from Mother and took Mother in his arms many times while Dinah suffered in the knowing of what they did together.

So she stood up and screamed to frighten Father, but his horse was even more frightened and Father fell off and hit a rock. Blood and a dark pulp came from Father's broken head and he went to the place between the worlds and Dinah was frightened for a while.

But she ran home and later Mother took Dinah in her arms and it was very nice with Father gone so everything turned out all right.

And she didn't have to do anything to hateful Rachel. They came and took her away and Dinah and Mother were alone and that was wonderful.

Later, she'd been afraid she would have to do something to get another—an Uncle Dane—away from Mother but that had become unimportant.

Everything was unimportant except Rachel. Rachel had been the lucky one. She hadn't been sent to the place between the worlds. She'd been given the things that

should have been Dinah's—
life, the freedom to live, a
body to use.

And Dinah was going to
take what was rightfully
hers.

She was going to live again.

It had been hard to learn
how to take what Rachel
had. In the beginning Dinah
hadn't known what to do,
even after the urge and the
anger gave her power to find
Rachel and know who she
was.

The trouble had been lack
of strength, with only a weak
ability to reach and probe.
Lying unembodied and help-
less in the world she'd quitted
after crossing the bridge of
her urge and hatred, Dinah
had had to find the places of
her own strength; the places
where Rachel weakened and
Dinah became strong and
dominant.

But this knowledge had
built up out of Dinah's own
yearning substance and now
triumph was close. In each
place Dinah had frequented
and loved in her living world,
there was greater strength
and greater weakening of
Rachel.

Twice, Dinah had taken
from Rachel that to which
she was entitled, but both
times her strength to hold on
had not been great enough.

Once it had been far from
the Blue Cottage where
Dinah and Mother had lived
and where Dinah's greatest
strength was to be found.

It had been far away in the
world-space, but Rachel had
suddenly weakened, gone
completely dormant and
empty and Dinah had moved
in.

Then Rachel had fought
and someone had helped her
and Dinah had been forced
out. Again this happened, in
the same place and again Ra-
chel was helped.

But Rachel had come closer
to the heart of Dinah's power
and Dinah was able to order
and direct and Rachel was not
strong enough to disobey. Di-
nah had tested her own
strength and found it very
powerful. She'd commanded
Rachel from the house and up
into the old playroom in the
barn. From there, Rachel was
putty and went swiftly to the
Blue Cottage, where Dinah
took her body away from her
and lived in it for a precious
moment.

But a last surge of power
had come from somewhere to
help Rachel push Dinah out.

A last surge.

There would not be another,
because now, Rachel had
no strength left and Dinah

would command her again to cross the forest and enter the Blue Cottage.

Then Dinah would live again and Rachel would be destroyed.

With a new surge of strength, Dinah greatened her rage, broke the last ties to the gray place between the worlds, and hovered free over the Blue Cottage.

Waiting . . .

"I think you're doing a terrible thing," Penny said.

"We're dealing with a terrible force," Logan replied.

It was early evening. The sun had not yet set. Logan had just come down from looking in on Rachel, who was still asleep, and had joined Penny and Dane on the front porch.

Penny said, "Be that as it may, something's plaguing the girl and it plagues her worse here than anywhere else."

"True, but there's another side to it. The abnormality has enough malignancy to destroy her wherever we go but in other places it becomes elusive. Here it assumes clearer form and gives us a chance to cope with it."

"Then why aren't you coping?"

"I'm doing my best. It

wasn't in my plans that Rachel elude me and escape to the Blue Cottage. You can charge one against me for that. But now I'm going to do my best to help Rachel through the coming battle."

Dane's deep eyes flickered. "The coming battle?"

"There has to be a crisis. It's a law of nature that these things go one way or another."

Penny was knitting furiously on a black wool sock. She said, "But how can you help the child when you don't know what's wrong with her?"

"I know."

Penny dropped a stitch, caught it up skilfully, and looked at Logan, her mouth prim and disapproving. "Then why don't you tell us?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't believe me, for one thing."

"You might try us."

"All right. I think Rachel is possessed."

"What on earth are you talking about? Possessed by what?"

"Not completely, as yet, but some entity is attacking her from the unknown—from the invisible."

Penny's eyes snapped. "Why I never heard anything so idiotic in my life."

"You're not alone in rejec-

tion. There are many people who think possession, dual personality and such, are crackpot ideas of men who try to frighten their patients or are at a loss for logical explanations of mental illness. I'll grant you that we who believe in such things haven't much in the way of tangible proof to offer. But on the other hand, we aren't witch doctors and haven't given in to the world of superstition."

"Superstition is exactly what it sounds like. Old wives' tales. Did it ever occur to you that what Rachel might need is an old-fashioned spanking?"

Logan smiled. "You can be sure that if I thought it would help, I'd be out making a paddle right now."

"Too much mamby-pamby in this modern age if you ask me. Some of the old-fashioned ideas were good. There wasn't any juvenile delinquency in my day," and Penny was off on some homespun philosophy.

Logan didn't answer immediately. It seemed to him that Penny's own convictions were not behind her words. He felt she was using this tack to produce an end. She wanted Rachel to leave Marchwood, thought perhaps this was the way to accomplish it. And if

this was true, her reasons were something other than Rachel's welfare.

Penny wanted the past to remain undisturbed. She wanted the tragedies of the Blue Cottage left below the crust of the years.

"There may be something in what you say," Logan told her. He intended to hold his ground and allowing himself to get into an argument with Penny March wasn't the way to do it. He glanced at Dane March and tried to read his eyes; to see what lay behind that almost-hostile face.

But Dane March was a hard man to read . . .

Inside the house, Rachel March sat up in bed and smiled. She'd been awake when Doctor Logan looked in but she'd lain very quiet and waited for him to leave.

After he closed the door, she lay still for a while, enjoying the sense of power that filled her mind and her body. There was nothing to be afraid of. Life was wonderful and it hadn't been created for the fearful—the timid. Life was a thing to go out and take and right at this moment the heart and soul of life was centered at the Blue Cottage.

She had to go to the Blue Cottage. She had to go now.

She couldn't wait. The power was a voice urging her, calling her out of the house, into the lowering sun, and into the velvet night that would follow.

There was little time.

With a craftiness born of the new power, she slipped from the bedroom and down the backstairs. No one was in sight and she vanished into the forest and was soon running up the old road among the whispering trees . . .

The sun went down over the forest rim and Dane March stared into its rosy afterglow. He was scarcely aware of what Penny and Logan were saying. He knew Penny was upset and was trying to get Logan to take Rachel away, but deep in Dane's mind was a feeling that it was too late; that fate, like a slow-moving glacier was pushing forward and that no force on earth could keep it from uncovering the old bones.

Penny was in the midst of a particularly heated declaration, so neither she nor Logan took notice as Dane got to his feet and left the porch.

He walked out across the lawn. Dane did the best he could at keeping the place up but the lawn had a shaggy look about it; the look of a

man who needed a haircut or a horse that needed clipping.

But it had not always been thus, and Dane's mind and memory hearkened back to his younger years; when his father had still lived and with three sons, kept Marchwood in dress-parade splendor at all times.

After the old gentleman died, things went on pretty much as before. Even after the three of them were married, Marchwood's appearance was still a matter of importance.

Will went away to build a career for himself and Tom wasn't of much help with his wildness and happy-go-lucky attitude about life in general. But Dane had been young and strong and Penny had been the kind of girl who appreciated steadiness in a man and they'd made things work; kept Marchwood a place to be proud of.

Dane's mind came back to the time and the place long enough to note that another storm was brewing; that the sky still had not vented all its wrath and would again lash the earth with its fury.

Then he returned to the earlier years, went back and faced squarely up to the memory he had been trying to avoid all the day.

Joan March.

And now he saw again as he'd seen her that first day Tom brought her home. She'd worn a light, feathery dress and as she stepped down out of the buggy, the smooth, warm expanse of an inner leg and thigh flashed into his vision and sent a wave of hot blood pounding through him.

And she had known. That, to him, had been the strange part; because with her trim high-heeled feet on the ground, her slim legs vanishing under her dress at the knees, she'd turned slowly and looked straight into his eyes and said, "Dane March. Hello. I'm deliriously happy to be here."

But that wasn't what she'd said silently, in thoughts he'd understood as clearly as if they'd been shouted out in words.

With her thoughts, she'd said, *You want me, Dane March. Not as a sister-in-law, but as a lover. You want to take me in your arms and feel my body on yours and my mouth on yours. I want you, too, and both of us will always know it.*

He'd turned away quickly, ashamed of himself; lusting after his brother's wife the first moment he saw her.

Joan had made him miserable after that. Subtly, expertly, she'd teased and taunted him and he'd wondered if she did it only for her own amusement, for the bolstering of her own confidence in herself as a woman, or whether she would actually have violated her marriage vows with a little encouragement from her husband's brother.

He never found out because he never gave her that encouragement. He was a March and the will of a March wasn't to be bent by woman however beautiful even if she boiled his blood in his veins. He could have stood out against her forever.

But Tom was killed and Joan was left alone. Even then, Dane had avoided her until one evening he went to the Blue Cottage to ask about her plans. She certainly wasn't going to stay there alone . . .

"But I am. And I won't be alone. I'll have you."

"That's crazy. You're out of your mind!"

"Am I?"

Joan was in a dressing gown and as she turned toward him the belt came undone and there was only the flimsiest of nightgowns under it. She came close and pressed

against him and he would have had to be made of stone.

"I love you, Dane. I don't know whether you love me or not but you want me and that's good enough for a while, because I want you so badly I wake up in the night reaching for you."

"Joan! No! in the heaven's name—!"

She laughed softly into his shoulder. "I could never have had you with Tom alive, but now he's dead and I'm sorry because I loved him too."

"And yet—"

"Why should I die because he died? And Penny? All right. We won't tell Penny. Not until you're ready. But you will be ready. I'm going to take you away from her. I'll be satisfied with a part of you for a while, but eventually, I want all of you. And I'll get all of you."

He hadn't been able, then, to resist Joan. She became a drug, saturating his mind, creating a demand for herself in his body that had to be satisfied.

He tried to stay away from her but when the demand got unbearable, he would sneak to the Blue Cottage like a skulking thief and take her as a thirsting man would take water.

And Joan, always waiting

for him with tender carresses and knowing smiles; letting him go when he had satisfied himself and left cursing his own weakness because she knew he would be back; knew he would come back again and again until he was ready to stay for good . . .

Then had come the night of his last visit to the Blue Cottage. He'd fought himself for a long time even after the need for Joan had become unendurable. He had quarreled with Penny, an unheard of thing, so sharp was his gnawing need, and had then gone off into the woods to fight with himself anew.

But it had been of little use and late in the night, even filled with rage at his own weakness, he'd rushed through the forest toward the Blue Cottage . . .

Dane March shivered as a cool night breeze washed in from the forest and brushed across his face. The sun had lowered but there was a moon to throw a pale radiance over Marchwood.

He sighed deeply and felt very old and deeply weary. A secret carried for so many silent years could age a man and bow him down.

He turned from where he'd been standing and walked

slowly back toward the house wondering about youth and passions and the follies of humankind.

Joan March had been a hot, demanding, vital thing in his arms, but now she was quiet dust in a forgotten grave. His need for her had been an appetite that cried through his blood to be satisfied, but now he was an old man and the forces that had driven him into wrong-doing had long-since left his flesh and blood; their urgency so long-forgotten and alien to his mind that he could look back on it now as only the wildest kind of madness.

Lust worn away by age. Passion turned into vapor, dispersed into nothing by the winds of a thousand hot summer nights.

But the guilt lived on, increasing in weight and age weakened his body.

He was on the porch now, and as he reached for the door knob it was pulled away from his hand and Logan stood there with Penny close behind him.

"Rachel is gone. She isn't in her room."

"She slipped out of the house while we were talking."

Logan had a flashlight in his hand. "You've got to show me the way to the Blue Cot-

tage. We've got to hurry. It may be too late even now. . ."

They had reached the edge of the forest before Dane realized Penny was with them. "Go back. There's nothing you can do to help and the way is too rough."

"I'm going. I may be needed."

Dane seemed inclined to press the argument, but then he turned away, cutting the darkness with his flashlight, Logan and Penny following along behind.

There was a bright moon, but it was of little help, the overhanging trees turning the roadway into a dark tunnel.

But the distance was finally covered—in complete silence as the three of them labored with the high grass and the brambles. Then they came out into the open glade with the Blue Cottage standing desolate and forlorn in the clear light of a lemon moon. Empty and forlorn, but not deserted. Penny raised a hand to her face; a gesture of protest, a reaction to horror, and cried out at the thing that stood glaring at them in the open yard.

It was Rachel.

But was it? It was not the Rachel they knew. The face had changed as completely as

rage and hatred and uncontrolled savagery could change human flesh. Half the clothing had been torn from the body. The result was not obscenity of the flesh but rather a grotesque changing of a woman's body into that of a child. The woman's flesh was there but the overall effect was one of adolescent gauntness, a child wearing the body of a woman and not knowing how to use it.

The thing that was no longer Rachel laughed and their blood chilled at the sound. Then horror mounted at the words that spewed forth in the screaming hysterical voice of a child. "I won! I got what's mine. I've come back!"

"God in heaven, it's Dinah! Penny moaned. "What heathen's working is this? God in heaven, it can't be true!"

She stood frozen as the long-forgotten voice of Dinah March spewed out vindictiveness. "You rotten hypocrites! You dirty, filthy, sanctimonious scum. Both of you acting like saints when you're nothing but stuff for the devil."

Dinah had picked up a fallen fence stave and was advancing on the trio with her baleful animal eyes burning into Penny's. While both

Penny and Dane stood frozen, Logan moved in on her. She stood at bay, crouching there for a moment, then turned to run.

"I'll kill you. I'll kill all of you. You can't stop me!"

Logan ran forward and lunged and got his hands on her. Sharp teeth bit into his arm and they struggled, moving into the trees and it took him several minutes to subdue her completely. Then when he had her arms locked tight and had maneuvered her into a position where neither her teeth nor her flailing feet were effective, Penny and Dane March came forward.

Penny moved close and looked into terrible eyes. "What do you want? Why did you come back?"

"I want to live! I've got a right to live—more than you because you killed. You killed my mother and then you killed me. You murdered us and then went back to live your life as though nothing had happened."

Penny was stunned. She stood swaying, there in the dappled moonlight, her eyes staring but not seeing. And when she spoke it was as though to herself. "I talked to her. I asked her to go away. Then I warned her, but she

wouldn't go. She said she would take Dane away from me and when I came here that night I didn't come to kill her but I wasn't quite right in my mind for a little while. I slapped her, that was all—slapped her and I don't know what happened after that, but then she was crying and running and I was running after her and she went over the cliff."

Penny swayed. Dane took a step forward but she held up a hand fending him off and he stopped.

"Yes, I killed her, but I didn't kill you. I was standing by the cliff wanting to do something and you screamed like a mad devil and came at me. I guess you had a right to do that. I'd killed your mother. But I didn't kill you. I only stepped aside, and even as you went over the cliff I tried to reach you. I tried, but it was too late."

Dinah struggled in Logan's grip. "You killer! You filthy murderer. I've come back! I've come back!"

"What do you want? My life? Is that what you came after? Will you go back to the hell you came from if I give you my life? All right. You can have it. I place no value on it. No value. I

haven't lived since that night. I've only existed and I'm glad to go."

Even Dane, closer to her than Logan could not possibly have reached her in time. She turned and took four swift steps and vanished over the cliff.

She made no outcry as she fell and before Dane or Logan could move, the sick, crunching sound came up from the rocks below, even above the angry boiling of Fury Creek. It was a frozen picture as the moon looked down through the trees.

Then Dinah laughed. It wasn't a laugh so much as an inarticulate devil's sound of mad glee and it brought Dane out of his daze.

He walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down. With a weariness of age, he turned to the left and vanished down what was evidently a pathway. Logan saw his light bobbing below cliff level and then it went out. There were sounds of scraping footsteps and he reappeared carrying Penny's body. He came over and stood before the place where Logan was still holding the raging demon that had taken possession of Rachel's mind and body.

"She's dead." Dane said dully.

"I'm glad. And you should be dead too. You were here that night. You saw her kill Mother. You let her do it!"

Dane March didn't seem surprised by the accusation. "Yes, I was here but I couldn't stop it. It happened too fast. Then when it was over, what was there to do? Accuse my own wife of murder."

"Hypocrite!"

"I guess you're right. It was because of me that Penny killed Joan. But I'm not going to die to oblige you."

Logan intervened. "We've got to get them back to the house. You carry Penny's body. I think I can force this one to go along."

"Not yet."

Dane turned away, not quite so wearily this time but still calmly and quietly and with the decisiveness of a man with something to do.

He went to the Blue Cottage and Logan saw him moving around in the moonlight. Then he knelt down and a few moments later a flame bloomed up against the wall of the house.

Dane March stood back and watched and very soon the dry wood was a blazing torch. Then he turned and came back to where Logan had

pushed the struggling Dinah out of the wooded fringe back into the overgrown front yard.

"Give her to me."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"Burn her to death."

The words were chilling in their quiet grimness. Logan said, "Have you gone out of your mind, too?"

"She must die by fire."

Dinah screamed out in rage and terror and as she struggled, Logan was brought around within Dane's reach. Dane braced himself and swung his huge right fist. It thudded against the side of Logan's head and his body went limp.

In the same motion, Dane took Dinah by one arm and then drew her, struggling, into his grip. He handled her silently, almost sadly, like a doll and holding her at arm's length he moved toward the roaring furnace that had once been the Blue Cottage.

The heat bellied out and he stopped just within its perimeter to look quietly up into the sky and say, "The storm will come and put it out. The woods will not burn. God provides."

Dinah shrieked in terror. Dane stood quietly, holding her toward the fire. "Please!

Have mercy! Have Mercy! I've wanted to live. I've waited so long!"

"Even coming back from the dead, you fear the pain and agony of death—even knowing what lies beyond you still are afraid of torture."

"In God's name—"

"I'm going to throw you into the flames. Maybe they will burn you clean before you die. Maybe it will be hard to kill you. They say in the old days, witches died very hard and you're made of more evil stuff than they were. But you must burn."

"No—no!"

"I'll throw you in and make you stay. If you try to crawl out, I'll kick you back in again until you're nothing but a lump of burned and roasted flesh."

Dinah's terrified shrieks echoed through the dark forest. Then, as Dane braced his feet and raised the stolen body over his head, there was a whimper, and it went limp in his great hands . . .

John Logan came to, struggled up on his hands and knees and shook his head groggily. He felt as though he'd been hit by an anvil hurled from the hand of a giant.

As consciousness became clearer, he realized he must

have been out for a long time. It had rained and then stopped raining and he'd been drenched and dirtied by the mud in which he'd lain.

The Blue Cottage was a smouldering ruin; a few charred and smoking beams pointing starkly up at the lowering moon. The air was a strange mixture of after-rain cleanness and the unpleasant smell of the burning from the cottage.

Logan got to his feet and conquered his dizziness. He looked around. There was no one in sight. He called out. No one answered. He found his flashlight and started back toward Marchwood Manor. . .

He found Dane March sitting on a lawn chair in the moonlight with his arm around Rachel March. There was a blanket around her shoulders and her head was on his shoulder.

He looked huge and mysterious sitting there, his face cadaverous in the shadows.

Dane said, "Penny inside—on her bed—on the bed she slept on since the first day we were married."

"I'm very sorry," Logan said.

Logan leaned close to Rachel and laid a hand

against her cheek. Dane said, "She's all right. Everything is over for her now. The evil is gone. She'll remember a little and there will be some nightmares, but she'll be all right."

"The thing that possessed her was—"

"Her sister, Dinah. We New Englanders are not without knowledge of such things. My ancestors walked this country when they were burning witches up in Salem. The knowing ones say it was all fraud and a lot of it was. Men are still open to fear and superstition, but there have been possessions before and they will come again. As long as there are rare spirits with a fierce love of life and a rebellion against the great laws of life and death."

"What happened? Did you burn the Blue Cottage?"

"Yes. For two reasons. It was Dinah's anchor in this world. She harbored all her strength there. For that reason and for a funeral pyre if it had to be that way."

"A funeral pyre?"

"There is a thing about unholy possessors. Even though they've known death, they must take what comes to the body they steal and they are still vulnerable to human

agony. The threat of death by fire drove Dinah from the body she'd captured."

"And Rachel returned?"

"She could do nothing else. She had not yet gone through death. She could only return to her body after Dinah left it and luckily Dinah was frightened out before I threw the body into the fire."

"You'd have thrown it— regardless?"

Dane nodded his great head. "It was the only way. Better that Rachel die in clean fire than wander on the wind, neither alive or dead."

Logan said, "I feel ashamed, somehow. I was supposed to be the doctor— parading my knowledge. Yet you're the one who really knew."

"You did well, but there are things the old ones know. We who are close to death learn of its mysteries and I am very close to it. I will not be here long. Penny is waiting."

They sat quiet for a while and then Dane said, "I'd like to keep Rachel here for a little while. It will be good for her and she will be a comfort to me."

"You're the doctor," Logan said quietly.

THE END