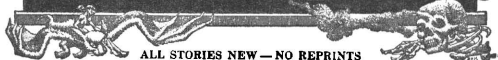


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1950

Cover by Frank Kelly Freas

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Grotesquerie

BY HAROLD LAWLOR



Heading by Vincent Napoli

*The tenth dweller in Paradise
Alley was the most horrible of all.*

EXCEPT for the undertaker and his assistants, I was the only one to attend the funeral. I was the sole mourner present, but I didn't grieve. All through those depressing services at the

graveyard, in the cold gray slanting November rain that held for me promise of sinusitis or pleurisy, only one thought, one question, really troubled me.

For seventeen years I'd known the com-

ponents of Vera Witmack's tragic story, yet the one essential element, the clue that would have tied them all together for my understanding persisted in eluding me. Not that I had sought so very hard to find that clue. To the contrary. I had endeavored *not* to think about it.

For there are some things that the mind rejects in horror.

But now as I stood there in acute discomfort, conscious of the wet ground underfoot and the unspeakably bleak dreariness of the cemetery on a day like this, I felt the answer very near me.

And I was right.

Just as the casket, its silvery sheen dulled with raindrops, sank through the dripping evergreen branches that shrouded the grave, I suddenly understood everything in one of those momentary flashes of lucidity that come so rarely in one's lifetime, but are not to be disputed when they do.

I knew now why Vera Witmack had sent me here. For it wasn't Vera Witmack being buried this day. She was still living, though she had died so long ago in her heart. I knew the reason for the curious alteration in her personality, and why she had so strangely repelled me for seventeen years. These questions were answered me too, for I understood at last the answer to that greater question—just how she had made of Martin Cox the horror that he had been.

VERA WITMACK was twenty-nine years old on that day, some twenty-three years before, when she'd first come to see me.

Miss Dorney, my secretary at that time, a thin acidulous spinster, came into my inner office, disapproval writ large on her narrow face.

"There's a woman to see you," she announced.

The plangent whine of her voice was so much more marked than usual that I said instinctively, "What's the matter with her?"

It developed that Miss Dorney's antipathy for my visitor had its origin in the fact that she was heavily and opaquely veiled. It was not a day when veils were a modish article of feminine apparel, and while Miss

Dorney may not have known much, she did know one thing (sniff!): Here was a woman who would bear watching.

Miss Dorney's devotion to me was apt to be a bit trying at times. Veiled ladies were scarcely in my line, and I suspected my crabbed secretary had been reading a bit too much in Oppenheim.

Hiding annoyance as well as I could, I said, "Well, send her in. If she makes a pass at me, I'll set fire to the draperies."

Miss Dorney permitted herself another contemptuous sniff for my levity before throwing open the connecting door.

"Mr. Burnett will see you now," she announced acidly to the visitor yet hidden from my sight. And she held her skirt back eloquently, as if from contamination, as the visitor passed her.

It is true that the woman who entered wore a veil so thick that her features could not be discerned. Yet somehow, despite it all, she gave the illusion of beauty. Perhaps this was due to the glint of golden hair curling softly around the back of her hat, or the grace with which she moved, or the perfection of her legs sheathed in smoky chiffon of the sheerest.

When the door had shut behind Miss Dorney's ramrod back, I waved my visitor to a chair.

"I'm Vera Witmack," she said, when she had settled herself. Her voice was low and pleasing, thrilling to the ear as the soft throbbing music of marimbas. "I was referred to you by Mr. Alvin Purgis, of the Purgis and Stoneman shows."

I'm an investment counselor, and I number among my clients a great many people of the theatrical profession. My acquaintance among them has always been wide, for my father, when he was alive, had owned several theaters here in the city.

I knew Purgis, of course, though he wasn't strictly "theater."

"The carnival man," I said, to put her at her ease.

She nodded. "Until three months ago, I ran a mitt camp with one of his shows." She laughed, and translated unnecessarily, for I was familiar with the argot, "That is, I read palms for a living."

"I see."

Though her eyes were invisible to me through the veil, I felt that she was studying her black-gloved hands resting in her lap. They tightened on the purse she held now, from which involuntary movement I somehow deduced that what she was about to say next would be at the cost of some mental anguish to her.

In this assumption, I was correct.

On a hot July day three months before, she told me, a leopard escaped from its cage, terrorized the Purgis and Stoneman Carnival Shows, and killed a four-year-old boy not fifteen yards from where Vera's tent was pitched.

She was reading someone's palm at the time, but she ran out of her tent when she heard the screams of the child and snarls of the animal. The screams stopped abruptly, and the child lay ominously still in the hot, dry dust of the midway. The snarling beast crouched above him, worrying the rag-doll form.

Vera didn't hesitate. Courageously, if mistakenly, she went bare-handed to the rescue of the little boy. He was already dead, but she didn't know that. The leopard turned at her approach, and sprang in all its lithe, terrible beauty. Its weight knocked her from her feet. It clawed her face and upper body hideously before its keeper came belatedly running with a gun and killed it.

For weeks Vera lay in the hospital in a drugged stupor, and they despaired of saving her life.

"But, unfortunately, I recovered," she said now, with a gallant, rueful little laugh that robbed the remark of any hint of self-pity. "I must go on living, which brings me to my problem. I'm not married, and I must support myself. There are few positions one can hold in which one may go about heavily veiled without being an object of ridicule. And I certainly can't leave the veil off. Once this problem is settled and I can be sure of an income of some sort, I never intend to go about in public again, save at night after darkness falls."

I suppose I thought that she exaggerated, that she was suffering more from a

psychic blow to her pride and vanity than anything else.

"Are you sure that's so necessary, or your problem so insoluble?" I asked gently. "You mustn't grow embittered, or unduly sensitive. Give people a chance. Believe me, they can be kinder and more understanding than perhaps you think."

SHE laughed again shortly. "I'm afraid it's hardly a question of mere kindness from anyone. Look!"

Before I knew what she was about, she lifted her veil.

I caught only the briefest glimpse of that ruined face, yet I winced and hastily averted my glance. I hated myself for it. My face and neck grew red with shame. Worse, I knew it wasn't just a moment's involuntary reflex that I could overcome with time. I knew that if I saw her face daily for fifty years I should never be able to view it without shuddering.

Strangely it was she who comforted me. "There, Mr. Burnett. You mustn't mind. I

don't. I shouldn't have done it, I suppose, but I wanted you to understand how hopeless it was."

She touched my hand gently. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that she had let the veil fall again. And again I hated myself for the craven relief that knowledge brought me.

I said thickly, "I'm sorry. I'm really dreadfully sorry, Miss Witmack. Forgive me, but I couldn't help myself."

"It's quite all right," she said casually, and I knew from her tone of voice that she had recovered possession of herself again. "But now—to this problem of earning a living. Mr. Purgis said that you would think of something, that you could help me if anyone ever could."

She moved forward and sat there eagerly on the edge of her chair. The blind faith in me implicit in her hopeful attitude was so great that I could scarcely bear it.

I got up and went to the window to raise it, that I might hide my feelings.

I know that the emotion I felt for Vera Witmack in those early days was never love, but pity is so closely akin. I had to help her somehow. But how? To offer anything that might be construed as charity was unthinkable.

I stood there thinking, fiddling with the curtain cord, watching the hordes of people moving ant-like on the busy avenue below.

Perhaps that's what gave me the idea. Certainly I wanted desperately to help this unhappy woman. Quite apart from the pity with which she filled me, I liked her. I liked her very much.

I said tentatively, "There's one thing—" "Yes?"

I turned to face her. "Have you any money at all?"

She mentioned a sum—not large, but not inconsiderable, either. It consisted of her savings, and a sum that Mr. Purgis had settled on her, over her protests, after the accident.

I said, "That simplifies things then. The fact that you have a little capital. Miss Witmack, have you ever thought that in a great city the size of this one, there must be many other people like yourself desirous of living

with a maximum of privacy and a minimum of embarrassment?"

"You mean—injured people?"

I nodded. "Often, late at night, I walk my dog. And I seem to see people about that I never see in the day-time. People badly crippled, and others who shield their faces with their arms as I approach. Why not use your capital to buy an old house, and take in boarders like these?"

The idea excited her, I could tell. I could see it in every eager line of her body as she leaned forward.

"But that sounds like a wonderful idea!" she cried. "Why didn't I think of it myself?"

"You wouldn't mind living with others afflicted like yourself?"

"Mind? Of course not. I'd not only be earning a living, but I'd have companionship. I had been resigned to the thought that I must live my days in loneliness." But a moment later, she drooped. "Still—what about neighbors? Surely they'd be curious about such an establishment? They'd pry, and ruin everything?"

But I had an answer for that, too.

"Many parts of the city close-in are becoming industrialized," I pointed out. "I often pass great old houses surrounded by light manufacturing plants, business places, garages. People come there only in the day-time. There are no neighbors in the real sense. If we could find such a house, situated in such a way that the ground would have no value for business, thus making the price prohibitive, why—"

She was eager again. "I've seen such houses, too. Oh, you'll find me one?"

And I promised that I would try.

SO IT WAS I, then, who found her at last the house in Paradise Alley, that street mis-named if ever there was one.

It wasn't a street at all, really, in the true sense of the word—just a short spur leading off one of the main arteries that fed traffic to the suburbs. There was a factory on one corner where lampshades were manufactured, and on the other corner a warehouse. The warehouse was so constructed, and the street itself such a *cul-de-sac*, that

the two high-stooped, mansard-roofed old houses behind it were impossible of conversion to business purposes. But they could be thrown into one by the simple expedient of knocking out the party wall between them, and what money Miss Witmack had would just cover the purchase price, furnish the rooms inexpensively, and take care of such repairs as could not be postponed.

After that, it would be up to her.

She bought it, and I'm happy to say that she did quite well. In the six years ensuing, she not only recovered her original investment, but more than doubled it, turning over her monthly income to me to re-invest as cannily as might be to yield the greatest return.

Oh, it had been slow for her at first, of course. It was a year before she had her full complement of eight borders besides herself. And God knows where she ever found them, at that. She certainly never advertised publicly, but I suppose news of the strange boarding-house that she kept in Paradise Alley spread by word of mouth. Such things have a way of getting around.

Those six years cemented our friendship, but it seems odd to confess how little I really learned about her in all that time. I knew her father had been a German from Milwaukee; her mother a gypsy of Magyar descent. That was all. But in the light of what happened later, I suspect it was from her mother she must have learned those black arts that she possessed.

Of the eight boarders, the only one I ever grew to know fairly well at all was Andy Scholdt, the right side of whose face was one vast keloid from nose to ear. All the others, at my approach, scuttled away from me in the darkened halls, purposely kept dimly lighted by Vera that they might escape embarrassment.

Of these, two were freaks, I knew, retired from the Purgis and Stoneman show. There was a woman whose face had been horribly burned by acid, hurled by a jealous wife. There was a man without ears. There were—but why continue? To persist in the grisly catalogue of their infirmities savors too much of the morbid. To me they were only vague shadows, dimly seen, and the

effect was decidedly eerie on those frequent occasions when I called at the house in Paradise Alley to discuss with Vera matters of business.

Andy Scholdt, too, had been chary of me at first. But we came to exchange salutations in time, though he was always careful to keep the damaged side of his face scrupulously averted from my eyes. Later he grew used to seeing me about, and as we talked more and more on every visit, gradually his shyness wore off.

I assure you that on the occasion of the first time he let me see his face in its entirety in the full glare of the electric light I felt immensely flattered, as if I had been awarded an accolade. For I had sensed something of the sort was going to happen eventually, and I had trained myself to show no trace of pity or horror when it did.

I flatter myself that I succeeded. For Andy never again showed the slightest embarrassment in my presence, and we became friends.

I am particular in thus describing Andy for it was he who unwittingly precipitated the tragedy.

I LONG had thought that I was the only visitor, called normal, ever to appear in Paradise Alley. But it seems that in this belief I was wrong.

At quarter to two one morning, my alarm clock went off, rousing me wearily from a deep sleep. I went to the bathroom, splashed cold water on my face till I reached a semblance of wakefulness, and then, drawing on a robe, I went to the living room of my apartment to pace impatiently while I awaited the mysterious visit of Andy Scholdt by appointment at two o'clock.

Andy had telephoned me the evening before, and his voice had sounded distressed. Could he see me? And since he went out only late at night when the streets were deserted, should I mind very much if he were to come to my apartment at two o'clock in the morning?

"It's about Vera Witmack," he added, as if afraid I would refuse to see him for his sake alone.

Of course I said that he might come.

He rang my bell now, just on the stroke of the hour. Tactfully I'd left only one small lamp burning, over on the desk at the far side of the room. We sat together on the sofa in the semi-gloom, after he'd refused my offer of a drink.

He sat there nervously dry-washing his hands in silence for some minutes, but I was completely unprepared for the question he asked when at last he spoke.

"Has Vera some money?" he wanted to know.

I was surprised, and a little annoyed by what seemed mere inquisitiveness. I said noncommittally, "Some."

"Enough—enough for a bum who never had a dime to try to get it away from her?"

It seemed no breach of confidence for me to nod.

He put his hand on my knee, urgently. "Irv—Irv, I want you to be very careful of Vera's money!"

I said somewhat stiffly, "I assure you—"

"No, no!" he interrupted me. "You misunderstand. I'm not implying any carelessness on your part." He bent his head, and clenched his hands nervously, and said miserably, "I guess I'd better tell you. No one ever comes to the house in Paradise Alley. No outsider, I mean, except yourself and—and my nephew, Martin Cox."

I was surprised. "I didn't know you had any family."

"He's my sister's son. His father died when he was a little boy, and I always felt a great sense of responsibility for him. But, Irv—he's no good. He's just no good!"

The anguish in Andy Scholdt's voice was so great that I sought to console him. "He can't be too bad, Andy. You said he comes faithfully to see you?"

Andy's smile in the dim light wasn't a pleasant thing to see. "Oh, but not out of affection! I give him money. Really a great deal of money. I've never been able to deny him. Funny thing, I can see through him easily. I know he's no good. But he can talk me into anything. I think he could talk anybody into anything. He's a very smooth customer. Irv, glib and persuasive. Make no mistake about that!"

"But what has all this to do with Vera Witmack?"

"He's shining up to her, too. Oh, I've never caught him at it, but I'm sure he is. Irv, I'll tell you something. After every time that Marty has been at the house, I hear Vera singing. Singing, mind you! Vera! You know as well as I do that she's always been a desperately unhappy woman. Then why all the happiness now? Happiness that moves her to song? Unless—" He broke off, shook his head rather despondently.

Personally I thought he was making a mountain out of a mole-hill.

"Well, suppose you're right," I said at last. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"I thought I'd better tell you," he said. "So you can be on your guard if Vera comes to you with any sudden demands for her money. Don't hand it over without an explanation. Don't hand it over at all, if you can possibly avoid it, unless you're sure she wants it for some legitimate purpose. If Marty is mixed up in this, as I fear, I don't suppose we can save her from heartbreak. But we ought to be able to see to it that she comes out of it with her money intact."

HE STOOD up then, having said his say, and I assured him I'd be careful, that I'd keep his warning in mind, and would do everything I could to dissuade Vera Witmack from any rash action she might propose.

But I'm afraid I didn't take any of it too seriously, for I knew that handicapped people, living in isolation, were prone to develop suspicious natures and to see danger where none threatened.

Early the next morning, my inter-com buzzed and Miss Dorney's thin voice grated on my eardrums.

"Miss Witmack and a gentleman calling to see you."

"What!"

To my certain knowledge, Vera Witmack had never appeared on the street in daylight for six years, once she was safely ensconced in the house in Paradise Alley.

Miss Dorney patiently repeated her in-

formation, and I recovered enough from my surprise to tell her to send them in.

Naturally I thought at once of the early-morning conversation with Andy Scholdt, so I wasn't too amazed to have Vera Witmack introduce her escort to me as Martin Cox.

Well, he looked all right. I'll say that much for him. None of this obvious eyes-too-close-together business—that description so beloved of authors in delineating villainy. He was big and blond, with a seemingly frank, open face and a manner that was bluff and hearty. Perhaps just a shade too bluff and hearty. I have ever been wary of glad-handers, and the suspicion crossed my mind now that no one was ever so glad to meet anybody as Martin Cox was to meet me.

I had sense enough to see that if he were to be an opponent at all, he'd be a dangerous one.

Inwardly I sighed.

Vera was veiled as usual, of course. She had never again permitted me to see her unveiled, after that one brief glimpse six years before. But happiness radiated from her, just the same. It hung about her like an aura.

She lost no time in acquainting me with the object of her visit. It was just as Andy Scholdt had feared. She wanted me to liquidate her assets, and turn the proceeds over to her in a lump sum.

"You see," she said, her voice softer than ever with love, "Martin and I are going to be married. Martin has a chance to get a franchise to operate a tire and automobile accessory store, and I'll not only be helping him but I'll earn a greater return on my money than I'm getting at present."

I drummed the edge of my desk with my fingertips. There were things I wanted to say, but Cox's presence made it a little difficult.

He was clever. He was either very sure of her, or else completely lacking in ulterior motive. I couldn't be sure which.

For he stood up, and his hand caressed Vera's shoulder briefly. "Honey, I think you and Mr. Burnett ought to discuss this alone. After all, it's your business." He

overrode her protests, and patted her shoulder gently. "I could do with a cup of coffee, and I'll be in the cafe downstairs."

He shook my hand again genially before he took his departure. It was very gracefully done. If he felt any slight tinge of resentment at my caution and general lack of enthusiasm, he hid it completely.

With him out of the way it was easier, of course. I pointed out to Vera that she didn't know this man very well.

"I know him well enough," she said softly. I heard the hint of amusement in her voice that suggested she knew him far better than I ever could.

"I'm not saying this accessory store idea isn't all right," I went on. "But don't you think I ought to investigate it for you first?"

"Martin has already looked into it," Vera said. "And he assures me it will pay me eight percent, which is far more than my money is earning now."

I was patient. "But there's the factor of safety, Vera. As I've invested your money, the return may be smaller, but it's as secure as anything ever can be in this world."

"Quite apart from the question of return," Vera said, "my main consideration is the fact that I'd be helping Martin."

I tried a more personal attack. "I know you love him, my dear, but can you be sure he loves you?"

It was cruel of me, I suppose, for I think she winced, though through the veil I couldn't be sure. Certainly, though, she drew back a little in her chair.

"I know what you mean," she said, low. "My face. But Martin says he fell in love with my voice and my personality. He says it doesn't matter to him at all that I've been injured. Oh, I admit that I wasn't easily convinced. But in the end—" She spread her hands in a little rueful gesture. "After all, is it so highly improbable that he could love me? For instance, mutilated or not, I've always felt that you liked me."

"Child!" I touched her hand. "Of course I do."

"Well, then, don't you see? If I could inspire liking in one man, why not love in another?"

It was the logic of a woman who was

herself in love. He had persuaded her, but perhaps not so much as she had persuaded herself. But, at any rate, I felt that it was useless to go farther on that tack. But I didn't give up. For fifteen minutes more, I tried to sway her, using every argument at my command.

In the end, she only grew annoyed.

"Mr. Burnett," she said at last firmly, "our business relationship has always been very pleasant. Please don't make me do something now to spoil six years of friendship."

From which I inferred she meant to sue me for her money if all else failed.

I had done what I could. It was her money, and I couldn't withhold it from her if she were so set on having it. Besides, I began to wonder if I were right. Who was I to play God, to be so sure that I knew what was best for Vera? I remembered Martin Cox's gentle hand on her shoulder. Perhaps he did love her. Even if Andy Scholdt were right, and Cox had never been any good, perhaps Vera was just the woman to change him. Love had worked miracles before.

As for my own vague distrust of the man, I recollected that I had vaguely distrusted a number of married men I'd met who were probably ideal husbands to their wives, no matter how I felt about them.

I sighed, still feeling troubled. But in the end, I promised to start selling Vera's securities. And she was quite satisfied when I told her it would probably take a few days to clear every thing up.

THAT was a Thursday.

I got busy at once, and by the next Tuesday I had a cashier's check covering every penny of the money that belonged to Vera, as well as a statement fully explaining all transactions. I sent the papers to her late that afternoon by registered mail, and then phoned to tell her they were on the way.

"Thank you, Mr. Burnett," she said. "You have been a good friend to me, and I'll never forget it. Martin and I will be married very quietly here next Saturday morning, and of course you must come to the wedding."

I promised that I would.

I spent a bad twenty-four hours then. Perhaps I sensed what was coming.

Andy Scholdt telephoned me at my apartment late Wednesday night. He was scarcely coherent at first.

"You promised me! You promised me, Irv!" he said over and over, reproachfully.

Strangely I knew what he meant. "I'm sorry, Andy. I did what I could, but it was no use. Besides, there was always the chance that we were wrong, and Vera right."

He laughed hysterically at that. "We were wrong? Wrong? And Vera was right?" He stopped then for some seconds, getting hold of himself. When he spoke again, it was more quietly, his voice heavy with despair. "You'd better get over here at once, Irv. Trouble."

And he hung up in the midst of my agitated questions.

Andy let me in when I reached the house in Paradise Alley. No one else about the place stirred, but there was an almost sentient atmosphere of breathlessness about the house, as if its inmates knew that something was terribly wrong and they had hidden themselves away from the danger, awaiting its outcome. You sensed them there waiting, listening apprehensively behind their closed doors.

Andy drew me into the parlor, and closed the sliding walnut double-doors behind us.

I'd always hated that parlor. For some reason known only to herself, Vera had chosen to hang a murky copy of Van Gogh's gloomy painting, *The Potato-Eaters*, over the Victorian black marble mantel. Its somber colors seemed to set the key-note of melancholy for the whole house.

"Well, Andy, what's the trouble?"

"Vera endorsed her check over to Marty this afternoon," he said baldly. "Two hours later this came along to her by special delivery."

And he handed me an envelope, raggedly torn open at the side. I drew out the short folded note it contained.

It's seventeen years since I read that note, and I don't remember it verbatim. I don't think I wanted to remember it. But even today I can still feel some of the shocked

disbelief I felt then at its unmitigated venom. It was not enough that he told her he was leaving town, and wasn't marrying her. It was not enough that he told her he didn't love her. He had to taunt her cruelly, besides, with her ridiculous vanity in believing that *anyone* could love her.

She, he wrote, was a monstrosity who should hide herself forever from the eyes of men.

The loss of her money was bad enough, but this gratuitous brutality sickened me. I remember asking Andy in bewilderment, "But why? He had the money. Why did he have to do this—destroy the last vestiges of her pride?"

Andy made a grimace. "I told you he was like that."

"And Vera?"

He jerked his head upward. "In her room. She won't let me in. But I thought perhaps you—?"

I stuffed the note in my pocket, and went to the staircase in the outer hall. Andy trailed after me disconsolately. Together we ascended the stairs.

Vera's room was the large one at the front of the house. I knocked on the heavy walnut door. There was no answer.

"Vera," I called softly. "It's Irv Burnett. Please let me in."

Again there was no answer. I tried the door, and it was unlocked. I opened it, and looked in cautiously. Then I threw the door wide open, and went in, and again Andy followed me as if he were helpless to do anything else.

Vera, fully dressed and veiled as usual, was sitting bolt upright in an arm chair. She had the air of one who had been sitting there for hours, who would sit there forever if nothing happened to disturb her.

We went over to stand uncomfortably before her.

"Vera," I said, "I'm awfully sorry. Perhaps it isn't too late to do something."

She didn't answer.

I turned to Andy. "Where was Cox staying? He may still be there, for there was no real reason for him to rush out of town, as the check has been properly endorsed over to him."

Andy told me the name of Cox's hotel. "I'll go there now," I said. "Perhaps I can force him to turn it over to me."

Andy brightened a little. It seemed a forlorn hope to me but at least it enabled me to persuade myself that I was doing something.

VERA spoke for the first time. "The money is unimportant," she said tonelessly. "The house is paid for and I can make more."

She spoke as the dead might speak.

With a deliberation that was frightening she lifted her veil and draped it back from her face. I don't know whence came the strength to enable me to conquer the almost overpowering impulse I had to turn my eyes away.

I stared at Vera. She might have been a woman carved of stone. Her one undestroyed eye gazed straight before her, obviously seeing nothing.

She said, "Marty shouldn't have written that note. I would have forgiven him anything else but that. I intend to take care of Martin Cox. You may leave me now. I have things to do."

It was obvious that for her we had ceased to exist. We left the room, Andy and I, awkwardly enough, closing the door quietly behind us.

I waited till we were down on the lower floor again before telling Andy, "I intend to go to Cox's hotel, just the same. But Vera frightens me. Stay in the upper hall, will you, and listen for anything wrong?"

"You think she plans to harm herself—or Marty?" Andy asked.

"In the condition she's in, there's no telling what she might do," I said. "Don't let her leave the house till I get back. I don't want her getting into further trouble. Keep an eye on her."

Andy promised faithfully that he would.

After telling me the name of the hotel, he had given me Martin Cox's room number, too; so that I was prepared to slip past the desk clerk and go directly to the fourth floor. But the desk clerk wasn't at his station, as it happened, and the lobby itself was deserted at that early hour.

It was a small hotel with only one elevator, and the cage was not at the lobby floor, either. I didn't ring for it, but took the stairs.

When I opened the steel door giving onto the fourth floor corridor, I knew at once that something was wrong. Here were the absent desk clerk and elevator boy, holding a confused colloquy outside a door from behind which came muffled screams, curses, and moanings.

Back of them, farther down the corridor, the heads of two or three guests protruded angrily from their rooms.

The clerk looked up at my approach, as I came down the carpeted hall, and in his agitation he must have mistaken me for a guest, too.

"One of the guests has been taken ill, sir," he said, indicating the door through which the muffled noises were coming. "Just go right along to your room. Everything will be taken care of. We—"

He was babbling nervously.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked. "Isn't that Martin Cox's room?"

"Some ten or fifteen minutes," the clerk said. "The occupant of the next room phoned the desk to complain. Are you a friend of Mr. Cox?"

I nodded.

"We can't imagine what is wrong. We've been afraid to go in because the noises don't—don't sound human, sir." The clerk wiped his forehead. "I didn't like to call the police for fear of giving the hotel a bad name. So I called the Psychopathic Hospital, and they've promised to send an ambulance and attendants to remove the—the gentleman."

I WANTED to see for myself what was going on behind the closed door of 418. I didn't believe that Vera Whitmack could possibly have reached here before me, even if she had been able to elude Andy's vigilance, but—

"Give me your pass-key," I ordered the clerk brusquely.

He handed it over without a word. I opened the door of 418 and walked into the brightly lighted room. Encouraged by my

boldness, the clerk and elevator man followed me.

It was a perfectly ordinary hotel room—until I saw the writhing thing on the bed.

It was emitting those hoarse, agonized cries we had heard. It may have been in pain. Or it may only have caught a glimpse of itself in the mirrored closet door opposite the bed. I suspected the latter.

I say it.

But I knew who it was. There was only a travesty of a resemblance left in the hideous, freak-like thing that it had become.

But it was Martin Cox.

I heard a thud behind me. The desk clerk had dropped to the floor, ashen-faced. The elevator boy was nowhere to be seen. He must have fled precipitately after his first glimpse of that horror on the bed. And then I heard him being sick in the bathroom.

I acted now. My paralyzed muscles permitted it. I moved forward, head averted, and covered the thing on the bed with the sheet. It continued its writhing beneath it. The incoherent babbling it was making followed me as I went to the telephone on the desk.

Swallowing back sickness, I called the house in Paradise Alley. Andy must have been waiting, still faithfully guarding Vera. There was a telephone extension in that darkened upper hall. He answered in a minute.

"Vera," I said, "has she left her room at all?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"Positive. I've heard her moving about ever since you left."

"I must talk to her," I said. "Call her at once."

I thought perhaps she'd refuse to come to the phone, but it was only seconds before she spoke to me. "Yes?"

It was only a word. It was only a voice heard over the telephone. But there was a change, a dreadful change. Cold thrills prickled my spine. I shrank back a little, looked at the telephone I held, as if it were responsible for the metamorphosis.

"Vera?" I asked doubtfully.

"You've called to tell me that something

has happened to Martin Cox," she stated. It definitely wasn't a question. And again I was repelled by that nameless something in her voice. Apathy? No. Something worse. Something worse than indifference, worse than lifelessness.

"How did you know?" I asked stupidly.

She didn't answer that. "Bring him here," she ordered.

Two men in white coats carrying a stretcher came into the hotel room behind me.

I said guardedly into the telephone. "I don't know if that will be possible, Vera. Martin isn't dead. He—"

"I know," she said.

How could she know?

I said again, "There are ambulance men here from the Psychopathic Hospital. They are supposed to take him there."

"Bribe them," she ordered me. "I want Martin Cox brought here to me."

She laughed then, if you could call it a laugh. Icy-footed mice scampered up and down my back at the sound.

And then she said the strangest thing of all.

"Surely now he has all the necessary qualifications to become a dweller with the rest of us in Paradise Alley?"

I heard the receiver click at the other end of the line.

WELL, I managed it. In all that welter of confusion, bewilderment, horror, I managed it somehow. It was not easy.

"Gee, buddy," the larger of the ambulance men said. "We can't do that. Take him to a private house."

"It's his home," I stretched a point.

"We were sent here on an emergency call. We can't go back with an empty ambulance."

"Tell them it was only a drunk," I suggested.

It was fortunate that I always carried a large sum of money with me at all times. Eventually I won them over. I swore I'd be responsible, that there would be no repercussions for them. And the money turned the trick.

They went over to the bed. Their be-

wilderment equaled my own. They looked at the small size of whatever it was that was writhing beneath the sheet. When one of them stretched out a hand to turn the sheet back, I stopped him.

"Leave it covered," I said sharply.

"Is—it is human?"

"It was," I said. "Put it on the stretcher just as it is. I'll ride in the ambulance with you."

I scarcely remember how we left the hotel with our burden, or any detail of the following ride through the dawn to the house in Paradise Alley.

Andy was waiting, and let us in. "Vera says to bring him up to her room." His eyes were wide with curiosity.

In the confusion of maneuvering the stretcher up the narrow stairs, I whispered to him, "You swear Vera didn't leave her room at any time?"

In a way, it was a ridiculous question. For even if she had, how could she have wreaked such damage on Martin Cox?

Andy had been regarding with puzzled wonderment the small size of the thing under the sheet. It was obvious that he could make nothing of it.

Now he shook his head, and answered my question. "I'll swear it. She was there all the time. But, Irv—there seemed to be someone with her. I could hear the murmur of voices. And I could—smell something."

"What? Smell what?"

"I—I don't know. I don't think I want to know. It was like she was burning matches, only worse. It smelled awful."

He shuddered.

The ambulance men transferred the stretcher's burden to Vera's bed, and left hastily, muttering between themselves. God knows what they made of it all.

We were left alone in Vera's room, she on one side of the vast Victorian walnut bed, Andy and I on the other.

It wasn't only Vera's voice over the telephone that repelled me. There was something about her now that made me glad the width of the bed was between us. I couldn't understand it, for I had always liked Vera. But now I could scarcely tolerate being in the same room with her.

It sniffed. Andy was right. The air was still faintly redolent of some unpleasant odor.

Vera lifted her veil, drew back the sheet covering the thing on the bed, and looked down on it. I wish I might have prepared poor Andy in some way. I heard him moan, and I knew that he had immediately recognized it, despite its appalling change.

As for Vera, she accepted it calmly. I tell you, she *knew* what Martin Cox was going to look like when he was brought to her! She seemed visibly to grow taller, Jovian, as she stood there looking down at him. There was a strange unfathomable iciness in her only eye.

He was a tiny thing, shriveled, hideously malformed. He swayed there crab-like on the white sheet, his screams long since died to fretful whimperings. The tiny bulging eyes looked up at her imploringly.

Vera spoke, in that new awful voice.

"I'll take care of you, Martin," she whispered. "I'll take care of you until you die. And that won't be for a long, long time, Martin."

The thing's whimperings rose to a muted frenzy.

It amused her. She smiled. The horror of that smile in the ruined face!

"But I wouldn't dream of marrying you now, Martin," she almost crooned. She reached down and touched the thing gently. It quivered under her hand. "You know why, don't you, Martin?"

It looked at her.

Somehow Andy and I managed to get out of that terrible room with its terrible occupants.

Somehow Andy and I got out of that terrible room with its terrible occupants.

For Vera was worse than the thing on the bed.

I SAW VERA only once after that. I could hardly bear to go near her. It wasn't her destroyed face that repelled me now, though she never again wore the veil. No. But there was something zombie-like about her, and the revulsion I felt never faded. It wasn't so much that something had been added to

her personality as that something had been taken away.

Such business as it was necessary to transact, we handled by mail. I know she knew how I felt, for she never again pressed me for a personal interview or asked me to come to see her. You see, she knew the reason for my revulsion, even though I didn't.

I wondered, of course, what had made Martin Cox that which he had become. But I speculated really surprisingly little about it, for, as I said in the beginning, there are some things that the mind rejects in horror.

Andy Scholdt left the house in Paradise Alley, and went to live in a cabin he bought in an isolated spot far north in Wisconsin. He made no explanation of the sudden move either to Vera or me. And none was necessary.

It was seventeen years that Martin Cox lived, if you can call it *living*. Seventeen years that she tended him. Seventeen long years before Vera's voice over the telephone urgently besought me to attend the funeral. She herself would not go. She had not in all those years left the house in Paradise Alley.

I thought it passing strange that she asked me to go. But as I stood there in the November rain, watching the casket slowly lowered into the clay, I thought I had the answer. She had loved him. Loved him terribly all those years, so that she had not wanted him to go to his grave alone, consigned to the devil as he probably was.

The devil.

And then I knew. Of course. I had the answer that had always eluded me. And because some of the horror had faded in the seventeen years that had passed, I felt only a sick pity for that lonely woman in the house in Paradise Alley. That woman who would not live so very much longer now herself, I was sure.

What had she to live for, now that Martin was gone?

She had nothing. Nothing at all. Not even the soul she had bartered to Satan to aid her in making Martin Cox the tenth dweller in Paradise Alley.