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HERITAGE of MADNESS

For three hundred years the curse had persisted, and still Elaine could not picture her husband as a spiller of human blood. Yet what can she believe when he leads her to the very maw of hell through a mirror that casts no reflection.



Like a suspended statue the girl hung in mute misery, while foam bubbled at her lips.

THE LEGEND

THROUGH some freak of atmospheric circumstance, the night seemed bathed in greenish light. It seeped through Rex Bardwell's open window; fell across the lovely face of Elaine, his golden-haired bride.

He stirred fitfully; opened his eyes. As wakefulness came to him, he beheld the moon greenly riding the somber sky. For some reason, he shuddered—although the August night was warm.

Queerly, it seemed that some presence

had been hovering close to him an instant before. Yet when he stared, he saw nothing.

He turned. Perhaps it had been Elaine, awake and moving about the room. But no. She was there beside him, peacefully asleep, with the ghost of a smile at the corners of her lips.

Watching her, he forgot all else; for a moment his uneasiness vanished. Her yellow hair was a tousled halo about the delicate oval of her face. One white arm was thrown upward; and where the covers had slipped away from her throat,

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

Rex Bardwell could glimpse the rounded contours of her body.

Her night-gown of fragile crepe de chine clung as if it were a part of her to the mounds of her breasts, enticingly feminine as they rose and fell in rhythm with her soft breathing. With gentle fingers, Bardwell touched her cheek. She sighed a little, in her sleep.

And then—

HE tensed. Again there came to him an eerie sensation that he and Elaine were not alone. He thought he heard a sound, somewhere close at hand. It was not the creaking of woodwork in the ancient house; not the scampering of rats behind the wainscoting. It was more like the steady tread of ghostly feet. . . .

With unaccountable dread, Bardwell sprang to his feet. As he stood upright the sounds now seemed to arise from the hall just beyond the room's closed door. A vague puzzlement laid hold of him; he could not understand his own fears. Moving noiselessly, so that Elaine would not waken, he stepped out into the corridor.

"Jason!" he whispered in surprise.

A queer figure was slowly moving toward him; an old man in dressing-gown and nightcap. It was the Bardwell family servant, Jason Moone. He was carrying a flickering candle, and his movements seemed stealthy—almost furtive.

At sight of his master, Jason's pallid face grew expressionless. A characteristic trait, that mask of immobility. Once the servant had been a character-actor. Even after thirty years, he still possessed a weird control over his facial muscles. But nothing could hide the strange glitter that made his eyes seem almost reptilian.

"Jason!" Bardwell said again.

"Yes, sir?"

"What are you doing here? Is anything wrong?"

The servant's answer had a sonorous resonance. "Nothing is wrong, sir . . . yet."

"What do you mean, 'yet'?"

Jason's tongue licked snakily at his lips. "Do you happen to remember what month this is, Mr. Rex?"

"Why, of course. It's August."

"Ah, yes, sir. August."

"What of it?" Bardwell demanded impatiently.

"August, sir. . . . And tonight is the night of the full moon. You'll be remembering the Bardwell legend, Mr. Rex."

"Shut up, you fool!" Bardwell rasped.

BUT Jason went on, as if he had not heard the interruption. "In every generation for the past three hundred years, a Bardwell has gone insane on the night of the August full moon. The spirit of the first Bardwell who lost his mind on this night, returns and takes possession of the body of a living descendant. And then *human blood is spilled!*"

Rex Bardwell felt cold terror probing into his soul. Not because of the legend; but because of the weird timbre to Jason Moone's voice. He shook himself savagely to throw off this sensation of dread.

"Don't be a damned fool, Jason!" he snapped irritably. "There's nothing to that superstitious drivel. I'm not afraid of old Ben Bardwell's ghost entering my body, turning me into a killer."

Jason seemed apologetic. "I'm sorry, sir, if I've disturbed you. I wanted only to protect you from anything that might happen."

"Protect me? From a ghost?"

Then the servant revealed what he held in his left hand; a sprig of dried mistletoe. "I was going to fasten this to your door, sir. Evil spirits cannot enter a room where mistletoe hangs."

"Rot!" Bardwell grated, feeling him-

self filled with an anger oddly foreign to his usual disposition. "Go back downstairs to your quarters and go to sleep! If I hear any more of your nonsense, you'll be looking for another job!"

He was sorry, the moment the words sprang from his lips. He had not intended being so gruff with poor old Jason. After all, the man had been a faithful servitor for thirty years. He was entitled to his superstitions.

But it was too late for apology. The servant had already turned away, making no answer as he descended the staircase to the lower regions of the gloomy house.

As the candle-light died down the steps, Rex Bardwell clenched his fists until the nails dug into his hard palms. Why had he spoken so sharply to Jason? It was almost as if some other brain had given volition to the words.

God! he thought. Could it be true? Could another soul disposses his own, force him to do things beyond his own control?

Something interrupted his thoughts in the darkness: the sound of a door opening. He turned, saw his younger brother Stanley in the glow of a night-light.

"What's wrong, Rex?" came the whispered question.

Bardwell went into his brother's room for a moment. "Not a thing, Stan," he forced a grin. "Just some of Jason's delusions."

BIRTH OF TERROR

IN the main bedchamber, Elaine Bardwell sat up as her husband re-entered. The moon's green light fell upon his features as he came toward her; and suddenly, without knowing why, she was afraid. . . !

He seemed so strange, so evil! But that was only an illusion, she tried to tell herself. It was a trick of the moonlight.

She tried to smile, although it cost her an effort. "Rex, dearest," she held out her arms to him.

His embrace drew her close. "Elaine! You're awake?"

"Y-yes. I woke up when you first went out of the room a while ago. And . . . oh, darling, I—I heard what Jason said—"

He stiffened, scowled. "You heard? I'll discharge Jason for that, tomorrow! I never wanted you to learn."

She stared at him. It seemed odd for him to show bitterness toward anyone; toward Jason especially, who had served the family so long and faithfully. "Rex!" she stirred uneasily against him.

He stroked her hair. "Surely you're not taken in by such tommyrot? That Bardwell family superstition—it's just an old wives' tale. I told Stan the same thing a minute ago. Forget it, my dearest. Kiss me."

She gave him her parted red lips; but there was a queer reluctance within her heart as she felt his mouth pressed upon hers. Never before had his kisses chilled her this way. At the touch of his fondling hands upon her shoulders, she shivered.

He seemed to sense her disquiet. "Elaine!" he whispered sharply as he crushed her in his arms. "You're acting damned upset. Almost as if you didn't want me to be near you!"

"N—no," she lied. "Th—that isn't so, Rex."

To prove it, she cuddled closer against him; ignored it when one shoulder-strap of her night-gown fell low over her arm, so that the upper halves of her breasts were bared to the moonlight and to his hungry eyes.

SHE was very lovely. Her bosom was snowy, with a texture finer than the softest silk. The moonlight accentuated the shadowed valley of it, and the sheer-

ness of the clinging crepe de chine lent added enticement of her charms.

The lure of her femininity seemed to make Rex almost brutal. When he kissed her again, his mouth was fierce against her lips, bruising them. His fingers sank into her yielding flesh, hurting her.

He had never acted that way before. Always he had been tender. But now she suppressed a moan as his hard hands held her. When she saw the gleam in his eyes, boring into her own, it seemed almost that he was a changeling; that some other soul had taken possession of him, rendering him bestial and repulsive.

She remembered a faded portrait in the parlor downstairs: a picture of his ancestor, Ben Bardwell, who had lost his reason three centuries ago and slain two people before committing suicide. She recalled the eyes of that painting—eyes that held a yellowish inner flame, exactly as Rex's eyes now gleamed as they probed into her brain. . . .

Merciful God! she thought. Could the ancient legends be true? Had the evil spirit of Ben Bardwell, dead these three hundred years, returned to inhabit the body of her husband, the man she loved?

But that was absurd, she tried to make herself believe. Rex's changed appearance was only a malicious trick of the green moonlight. He was himself, surely, even though his eyes seemed different; even though there seemed to be a hawk-like savagery about his features. Her imagination was playing tricks on her!

But why was he so cruelly rough? Why were his caresses so savage, his hands so brutal? In spite of herself, she cried out as his mouth darted toward her throat.

"Rex! Rex—you hurting me! And your hands—you're bruising me—"

"That's because I love you so much, my dear!" he rasped. A canine grin

leaped to his lips. "You're not afraid of me?"

"N-no . . . y-yes . . . I d-don't know. . ."

"I'll teach you to have no fear of me!" he growled. His hands clawed at the shoulder-straps of her night-dress, ripped the thin silk. He pinned his feral eyes upon her quivering beauty. He stroked her shoulders, his fingers lingered as if he had not previously known the full loveliness of her.

And even though she feared him, she knew that she could not repulse him. How strange it was that she should think of it in such terms! Always in the past she had responded ardently to his courtships. But now she had to force her arms around his neck, steel herself to his kisses, fight down her sudden terror at his roughness.

She closed her eyes. What was almost pain lanced through her. Not a physical pain, but a psychic agony that convulsed her soul and stabbed through her rebelling heart. . . .

This was not her beloved Rex! This was a stranger who held her helpless! Yet in outward appearance he was Rex Bardwell. The transformation was an inner one. It was as if his soul had been ousted by some malignant fury. . . .

THEN, long moments afterward, he grew quiescent again. The evil aura that seemed to emanate from him was now less distinct. Weariness had blunted the devil that seemed to possess him.

His eyes were closed. He breathed stertorously. Green moonlight made a viscid puddle of light on his face, revealing harsh lines that Elaine had never before noticed.

She turned away from him; pretended to be asleep. Her heart thumped wildly from the experience she had just undergone; and she strove desperately to make her feigned slumber real. Perhaps sleep

He lowered her easily over the pit and callously dropped her.



would dull the memory of these past few moments. . . .

A sudden tenseness froze her.

Rex was getting up!

He was moving silently across the room, like a flitting shadow. He was stealing toward the long cheval mirror on the far wall.

Through fringing lashes, Elaine watched him. She saw him stand before the mirror. An awful horror ground her bones together. The glass was a black rectangle; and although the room was dimly lighted by the moon at the open window, *Rex cast no reflection in the mirror.*

Wide-eyed, Elaine stared. She saw her husband take another step forward—

He walked through the mirror and vanished!

CELLAR OF DEATH

AS if drawn by some hypnotic influence, Elaine arose. Stark terror grew in her mind as she saw the man she loved disappear in the looking-glass. She found herself gliding toward the black mirror in his wake.

She reached it; peered into its dark depths. Her hand fluttered to her breast to still the hammering of her heart.

She could not see herself!

Instead of her reflection, there was nothing but emptiness in front of her; a black solidity of shadows. Then, out of that emptiness, a voice whispered: "Come, Elaine. Come, my sweet bride. *Come with me into madness . . . !*"

Her husband's whisper—like the rustle of ancient parchment stirred by ghostly fingers!

She could not see him. She could see nothing but the yawning black rectangle of the mirror. Yet she sensed Rex's presence beyond it; sensed his desperate need of her.

Intuitively she knew that his very soul was crying out to her; that unless she went to him, he would be lost forever—

She stepped into the mirror. But it was not there! As if she herself were disembodied, she walked past the framework of the looking-glass; found herself in a stygian passageway. Clutching her torn night-gown together, she stumbled forward with her eyes staring sightlessly ahead.

A breeze brushed her cheek, as if she had passed by an open door. Again she moved forward, impelled by a loyalty greater than her dread.

Now her steps seemed to be inclining downward, into the bowels of the earth. Her feet encountered stone steps. She descended.

She heard a sound, far below; a faint wail of agony. A woman's cry!

But there were no other women in this somber house; none except Celeste, the French maid—the only other Bardwell servant besides Jason Moone.

Could that have been Celeste's scream? Was the maid somewhere below this secret passageway, facing some terrifying danger?

Elaine swayed; felt her senses reeling. Then to her straining ears there came again a whisper: "Come, my sweet bride. Come with me into madness. . . ."

Her husband's voice! Calling her, pleading with her, summoning her!

Strength and courage returned to Elaine. She bit her lower lip until she could taste blood. Blindly she stumbled forward and downward again.

At last she had the sensation that she was far below ground; somewhere under the mansion, in a subterranean corridor of hell. The passageway was smooth beneath her feet now, without downward incline. The dampness was a solid thing that choked her as she breathed. From overhead, water dripped like blood from

an open wound. *Drip—drip—drip. . .*

SUDDENLY there was a bend in the passage. As she turned the corner, Elaine saw a light ahead of her. She fought down her fears, moved resolutely onward. She came to a door; pushed it open.

"Oh, God—!" she gasped.

She stared into a cavernous cellar.

In a far corner, a bracket of candles flickered in an eddy of air. The walls were hewn out of sweating rock, grey and scabrous in the yellow light. Shadows danced and shuddered like living things. There was a heavy, reptilian odor everywhere.

With widened eyes, Elaine beheld a pit in the center of the cellar. It was well-like, circular, at least ten feet across. Over its top she saw a screen of heavy, meshed wire. Below that covering, she thought she heard a sound like the coiling and uncoiling of a scaly shape.

But it was not this sound that struck horror into her heart. It was something else beyond the far lip of the pit.

Celeste, the brunette French maid, was roped to a ring in the wall of rock, with her wrists drawn tightly over her head so that her bare feet scarcely touched the ground. She was nude except for a wisp of torn step-ins clinging to her ivory hips.

Like a suspended statue, the girl hung in mute misery. Her full breasts were distorted in shape by the upward pull of her straining arms. Quivers danced across her flesh as she vainly struggled to free herself.

Her shoulders and hips were lacerated and bloody from scraping against the rough wall in her efforts to secure release. Her eyes held fear-spawned madness; a frothy spew of white foam bubbled at her lips.

"Celeste!" Elaine cried out. She started toward the girl.

But before she had taken a step, she felt hard hands grasping at her. She squirmed, turned—

"*Rex!*"

His yellow eyes blazed insanely into her own. He grinned, and the mirthless twist of his cruel lips was a harrowing nightmare.

"So you have come at last, my sweet Elaine!" he chuckled. "You have decided to join me in madness!"

Elaine shrieked in a frenzy of dread. "Rex—you monster! You inhuman beast! *Let me go!*"

"Not yet, my love. Not until you have helped me placate the spirit of old Ben Bardwell. Not until you and I have joined in making a sacrifice to him, so that his curse will not fall on us. A sacrifice of *human blood!*"

She tried to struggle out of his arms. Her nightgown, already torn, was now almost completely ripped from her nubile body as she fought to free herself. But he would not let her go. He forced her into a chair; and with a length of rope he trussed her so that she could not move. The rope cut into her ankles, her wrists; and where it passed across her chest it sank cruelly into soft white flesh.

When she was completely helpless, he lifted her, chair and all, close to the yawning maw of the circular pit. She stared down through the mesh wire. A cry strangled in her throat.

In the pit's depths a huge snake undulated and writhed. A monstrous, scaly thing of terrifying aspect.

A python!

MADMAN'S WRAITH

FOR an instant, Elaine shut her eyes to the horror of that slimy thing. Then she stared at the man who was her husband, and yet who was so strangely altered. . . .

He had left her side. He was approaching the French maid. His hands were pawing at the helpless girl's lacerated sides.

"Ah-h-h-h!" he was purring. "It is too bad that you must die, my dear Celeste. But once in every generation, the spirit of Ben Bardwell returns. My madman ancestor! Tonight he inhabits the form of that snake in the pit; and he demands a human sacrifice. You shall be the sacrifice, little Celeste. Your blood and your flesh will appease my ancestor's hunger!"

"*Non! Non!*" the French girl screamed.

"Ah, but yes. It must be so. Yet I am reluctant to deliver you into the jaws of death until you have known the pleasures of life. . . . So I am going to be good to you, little Celeste—before I send you tumbling into Hell!"

Strapped to her chair, Elaine realized what he meant. Glassily, she watched.

She saw Celeste being untied, thrown heavily to the dank floor of the cavern. She saw her husband's mouth seeking the pinioned girl's frothy lips. . . .

That kiss was a torturing nightmare. And what followed was sheer, demoniac madness.

Celeste squirmed and screamed, but it did her no good. The hands that clawed at her were ruthlessly implacable. The fingers that gouged into her flesh were bestial instruments of pain-dealing. . . .

THE maid was still senseless when Bardwell picked her up and carried her to the brink of the pit. He kicked aside the mesh-wire covering.

Elaine felt nausea seeping into her soul. "Rex—no—don't! For God's sweet sake, don't throw her to that snake—!"

But he seemed not to hear. Laughing ferociously, he lowered the French girl over the lip of the pit. Callously he

dropped her. Then he replaced the wire top.

Staring down through the heavy mesh, Elaine beheld a sickening horror. The huge python coiled its length about Celeste's body. Its scaly form wrapped loop after loop around its unconscious victim. Then the coils began to constrict.

Crunch—snap—crunch of human bones. Dull, explosive *plop* of bursting flesh. Viscera being horribly squeezed. . .

And then—

Suddenly, there came a hoarse bellow from the underground vault's entrance. A thunder of footfalls. A roaring challenge of rage.

Elaine squirmed against her fetters, turned her head. She saw someone leaping toward her—

A man—

Her husband!

But how could that be, in God's name? What madness was this? Rex was here by her side, at the edge of the pit. Or rather, a man who bore Rex's features, although a strange, evil soul glittered from the windows of his feral eyes.

Then how could this newcomer be Rex? *How could there be two of the same man?*

In some manner, Elaine knew instinctively that the one who came leaping toward her was the real Rex. She could sense it, with her woman's intuition. New fear throttled her throat. If the newcomer was the real Rex, then this other man was something more than human.

And how could her husband triumph over a devil from beyond the grave?

Rex—the real Rex, who had just appeared—smashed himself at his counterpart; wrapped sinewy fingers about the other's throat.

"Damn you to everlasting hell!" he panted. "I know you in spite of your disguise, you fiend! You knocked me unconscious with a blow on the head.



And when I was senseless, you made up your face to look like me! You went into my room, lured Elaine down into this secret cellar of the house! I found the hidden passageway behind that damned mirror that swings aside—”

On her chair, trussed and helpless, Elaine went white. Now she understood everything. The man who had returned to her room had not been Rex! That was why she had sensed the change in him; why she had felt his evil aura. And—oh, God!—she remembered with horror all that had happened. . . !

REX and his double were still locked in savage combat at the pit's edge. “You monster!” Rex snarled as his fingers tightened about his adversary's gullet. “You've been Celeste's lover for a long time. You were tired of her. You saw a chance to kill her and pin the crime on me!”

They swayed dangerously close to the pit. Elaine screamed.

Rex went on: “You had that snake ready here. You lured Celeste down to her doom. Then you tricked my wife here to witness your crime! If I hadn't regained consciousness and found the way here, Elaine would have thought that I was a murderer! Her testimony would have sent me to an asylum—because of our family legend! Then you'd have had Elaine for yourself—you've been casting eyes at her for weeks. . . .”

The two men swayed closer to the pit. Somehow, the wire covering became dislodged. One of the combatants slipped at the edge of the yawning orifice. Shrieking, he went tumbling downward—

“God in heaven!” Elaine screamed. “Rex—Rex—!”

But it was not her husband who had toppled into the maw. It was the other man—the one who had impersonated him.

And now, in the depths of the hole, she saw the huge serpent writhe its coils about a new victim—

She saw the dying man's contorted face change its appearance. Wide-eyed, horrified, she looked into the twisted features of *Stanley Bardwell, her husband's younger brother!*

And even as her reeling brain realized the truth, someone else rushed into the subterranean chamber. It was Jason Moone, the old family servant.

Jason leaped to the pit's mouth. “Look, Mr. Rex!” he cried. “It's true! The Bardwell legend! The evil spirit of old Ben Bardwell came back to inhabit a Bardwell of this generation and transform him into a murderous madman—just as I told you!”

They stared down. Elaine went limp at this crowning horror. Young Stanley Bardwell was dead, crushed in the coils of the python. And issuing from his bloody lips, she saw an ectoplasmic substance *that gradually assumed shape!*

The stuff seemed viscid at first. Then it solidified—and became the wavering wraith of a man.

The wraith of Ben Bardwell, whose portrait hung in the parlor of the mansion! Ben Bardwell, dead three hundred years, and now returned from the grave!

No wonder young Stanley's face had altered, taken on an impenetrable disguise. It had been no trick of make-up. It had been the soul of his madman ancestor inhabiting his body—the ancestor who looked exactly like Rex!

And now the solid specter was crawling up from the pit. Curses bellowed from his throat. “Damn ye! Damn all of ye! Ye thought to keep me from the blood I wanted—but ye failed! Two of 'em I killed tonight—the girl and Stan. An' I'll do for the rest of ye before I leave—!”

Rex Bardwell hurled himself forward.

"You fiend—I'll put an end to you—"

"Ye can't harm me, ye fool! Ye can't harm a man already dead these three centuries an' more! Come on, if ye like. I'll taste your blood!" the wraith challenged fiercely. "An' when I'm done with ye, I'll sample your wife's kisses. . . !"

IT was Jason Moone who interrupted. He tottered against Rex, shoved him aside. Then, unexpectedly, he stretched out his hand. Clutched in his fingers was a sprig of dried mistletoe—the same sprig he had wanted to fasten over Rex's bedroom door, earlier tonight.

He threw the twig straight at Ben Bardwell's ghost.

There came a flash of blinding flame; an acrid, putrescent puff of smoke. And when the noxious billow had cleared, the demon-specter of Rex's ancestor had vanished.

Jason turned to his master. "He'll

never return again, sir. Mistletoe destroys any evil spirit it touches."

Rex gulped spasmodically. "Thank you, Jason, old friend." Then he turned to Elaine, untied her, lifted her unclad body into his arms. "My dear—my dearest dear!" he whispered tenderly. "The Bardwell legend is ended. There will be no more madness, no more unhappiness for us. . . ."

She tried to draw away. "But—but Rex, darling. Tonight, when you were unconscious, Stanley came into my room. Only it wasn't really Stanley; it was Stan's body inhabited by that evil *thing*. . . . In the moonlight, I thought it was you. He. . . ."

Rex enfolded her gently. With his lips he stopped the words that faltered on her tongue. His chest mashed her rounded breasts as he strained her against himself. Then when he had kissed her, he looked into her eyes. "We'll never mention it again, my sweet," he whispered.

They started up the secret staircase.