

Strange STORIES

VOL. II, NO. 2 **CONTENTS** OCTOBER, 1939

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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1939, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$1.15; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

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HOUSE OF THE GRIFFIN

By WILL GARTH

Author of
"Sea Vision," "Double Ring," etc.



Dan Keith

DAN KEITH was slumped down in a big old armchair but he was not at ease. For an atmosphere of evil brooded over the old house and strange sounds came from the shadows that were sinister black blotches in the semi-darkness of the big living room as he listened to the monotonously droning voice of the middle-aged man who was Joan Stanton's guardian. The fire in the open grate hissed and crackled as though it found Arthur Lake's suave voice to its liking.

"—a weird legend I'll grant you."

Keith found himself suddenly conscious of Lake's words. His gaze centered on Lake, hating the man for his apparent delight in adding to the uncanny atmosphere of the place.

"Most of us believe that a griffin is a fabulous creature with the body of a lion and the head of an eagle," Lake went on smoothly. "But how can we be sure that it does not actually exist? In pre-Revolution days this old house was once an inn called the Sign of the Griffin."

Keith saw that Joan was leaning forward in her chair listening with rapt interest to every word that Lake uttered. The firelight gleamed on her lovely face, her beautiful light

brown hair, and cast its flickering light over her slender figure in the yellow evening gown.

"Proving what?" Keith demanded.

Lake glanced at him quickly, surprised at the aggressiveness that had crept into the tone of the younger man.

"That it is only natural that a place as old as this would have its legends of the supernatural," Lake said placidly. "It is said that this house is haunted by an ancient savage, a witch doctor who ruled the Indians in this part of the country long before a white man ever saw America."

"How spoofy!" said Joan softly. "What was his name, Cousin Arthur?"

"He was called the Thunder God," said Lake. "And he supposedly was able to materialize creatures out of the half-world—creatures such as the griffin."

BUT Keith was no longer listening. He had turned his head and was watching the door of the room as it slowly opened. Eyes peered into the shadows as a figure loomed in the doorway. It was To-

Forces of Terror Strike from the Void to Be Stayed Only by Stronger Forces for Good!

mega, the Seneca Indian who was caretaker of the old house.

From the first Keith had disliked the idea of spending the night here in this old place that was part of the property that Joan had inherited upon the death of her father two months ago. But when she had invited him to go with her and her cousin Arthur Lake, who had been appointed her guardian, he had accepted. He had been unable to dismiss the idea from his mind that it was his duty to go, in order to protect the girl he loved and was to marry within two weeks. Though what he was to protect her from he hadn't the vaguest idea.

Tonega came stolidly into the room and marched up to Lake. The Indian had only faint ideas of how a servant should act, but he was a good cook and an excellent worker, which was fortunate, as he was the only one there to take care of the trio during their brief visit.

"Hear noise in cellar," said Tonega. "Somebody down there now."

"Probably some tramp," said Lake, getting to his feet. "But I guess we had better go and take a look. Coming, Keith?"

For an instant Dan Keith hesitated, then he stood up. After all there was really nothing wrong with this old house. He was just getting jittery, letting the atmosphere of the place get on his nerves.

"All right," he said. "I'll go with you, Lake. You had better stay here, Joan."

"That's best," said Lake. He touched a button on the wall and the electric lights clicked on. In their glow the big living room looked old but homey and comfortable. "We'll be back in a few moments, Joan."

With the Indian in the lead the three men went back through the house until they reached the cellar stairs. Lake tried the electric switch at the head of the stairs but found it did not turn on the lights below. He produced a flashlight and they went ahead with that, descending into the gloom.

It was pitch dark down there as Keith reached the foot of the stairs.

And instantly something, or somebody came hurtling at him out of the darkness. He grabbed for his assailant and caught a bit of cloth. Then something crashed down on his head and everything went Stygian black as he fell to the cellar floor unconscious.

Keith had no idea how long it was before he finally opened his eyes. But he did know—and quickly—that he was tied and propped up against the wall of a big room. Beside him stood Arthur Lake, also tied. And as if drawn by a magnet the eyes of both men went to a table not far from them. Joan was lying on that table, and steel shackles were fastened to her wrists and ankles!

"Look!" Lake suddenly shouted. "The Thunder God!"

A strange figure had appeared out of the shadows. Long hair hung about a thin, sinister face, hair that was held back by a copper band in which two goat horns were fastened. A dark cloaklike garment covered the wiry, sinuous body.

"The Thunder God is supposed to have the power of driving evil spirits out of us all," muttered Lake in a low voice. "Perhaps he may be able to call upon the griffin to help him."

BUT there was a note of cynical amusement in Lake's tone that Keith did not like. He glanced sharply at the man tied beside him. They had both dressed for dinner and now Keith saw that Lake's white tie had been torn open. Could that have been the bit of cloth that Keith had grabbed in the dark, he wondered. Could it have been Lake who knocked him out? If so why?

Questions vanished from Keith's brain as the sinister figure Arthur Lake had called the Thunder God came closer until Keith could scent the dank smell of the grave. The weird apparition paused by the table on which Joan was stretched out.

Then Keith saw it. At first it looked like a winged lizard far off in the distance, then grew in size as it came closer. It was the Griffin! It had a long neck, somewhat like a cross between that of an eagle and a reptile. Its body was that of a lion, but

its feet were not paws, they were eagle's claws. And wings like those of an eagle jutted out above its forelegs.

It moved slowly, as if climbing an invisible hill. And by the time it had reached a spot where it was poised directly over the girl it had grown to the size of a dog.

Joan screamed in horror, and Lake uttered a hoarse shout, stark fear in his voice now. In spite of himself Keith was trembling as it was borne in on him that this winged creature was some terrifying materialization from the spirit half world. Cold sweat damped his face as he writhed and fought against his bonds.

The Thunder God extended his claw-like hands and a strange glow radiated from the withered old fingers. But their power held the griffin motionless, though it appeared to be struggling against the force that had stopped it.

Then suddenly the lights went out, a strange light that had illuminated the whole cellar. Though it was not until afterward that Keith remembered that the electricity had not been turned on.

In the black darkness he heard Arthur Lake cry out in mortal terror.

"Take it away from me!" Lake was shouting. "It's real! I didn't plan this! I—" His voice died away in a ghastly gurgle.

Keith had not let up for an instant in his straining at his ropes. Suddenly

he felt them snap and at the moment he realized he was free. The electric lights came on startlingly. Who—or what—had turned them on he never knew. But the brilliant light showed Joan still stretched on the table, and Lake sprawled face downward on the floor. Not far from him was the Indian, Tonega. He, too, was lying there motionless.

Keith turned the two men over. Both dead, were clawed to death by something. And the griffin and the Thunder God had completely disappeared. Keith grabbed up a key that glinted, on the table. It fitted the manacles that held Joan's arms and legs and she was quickly released.

"That horrible creature!" she choked, swaying.

"Lake planned it as a trick, Joan," said Keith. "He was trying to drive you insane so that he might get your money as next of kin. But he made a terrible mistake. He forgot that this was the house of the griffin—that the strange beast does haunt this place. If the Thunder God had not also appeared and held back the griffin by the power in his hands it might have grown larger and larger until it had destroyed us all." He glanced down at the still forms. "But as it was evil it was only attracted by evil."

Joan shuddered as he took her gently by the arm and helped her up the cellar stairs—away from two dead men on which the griffin had left its sign.