

September

Weird Tales

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DERLETH

WELLMAN

C. A. SMITH

We have with us:—

EVERIL WORRELL Everil Worrell's story of a hesitant and charming witch appeared in our January issue—"Once There Was a Little Girl." That was Jennifer; in this issue another Worrell witch appears—Miranda. About this Miranda the author says that she was compelled to write, because Jennifer was such a sweet little witch that she found it utterly necessary to do equal justice—or injustice—to a modern witch who really ought to be spelled with a 'B'. So we leave you to Miranda; or Miranda to you, as you will.

Mrs. Worrell also gives us an amusing quote from a letter to her from Ray Bradbury to whom she had written commenting on the patronizing note she had observed in certain reviews of fantasy books. "Yes," wrote Bradbury, "their attitude was not unlike someone walking up to an expert harpist and saying, 'None of that nonsense now; when are you going to learn to play the tuba?'"

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

Familiar—"one bound by a supernatural law of servitude."

I Loved Her With My Soul

BY EVERIL WORRELL

IF I COULD have known her for what she was in the beginning, would the end have been different? I imagine that a great many men have asked themselves that question. But a merciful God, the mysterious laws that sustain the universe against chaos, or just the law of averages must prevent the appearance on earth of many such women as Miranda.

I think not many such have walked the earth since the days of Lilith. There have been traffickers in black magic always, and only those who scoff at the existence of anything not to be weighed and measured in their laboratories would care to deny that their cults continue. But black magic should not be allied to beauty. Old hags, warlocks, medicine men and voodoo priests—barbarians with feathers and nose rings—these are its fitting exponents.

And, Miranda! That beauty is

not the word for her strange charm, I know. It would take a master of words to describe that. I can say only that it was enough to deprive me of my soul, as it had deprived other men before me. Her pitiful husband, for instance.

I ought to have shunned her from the first occasion of our meeting, even if I did not denounce her. Ina knew —Ina with the clever eyes and the faithful heart of a good, loyal child. And I saw, that evening at the ambassador's reception, exactly what Ina saw: the simple, obvious, and utterly damning fact of murder.

That is—my eyes saw. But they had already seen Miranda. It would be easy for me now to say that the woman was a witch, and that I could not help myself, but it would not be true. I think there is always a choice. One does not lose one's soul so easily. It isn't necessary to sign your name in a black book with a



quill dipped in your own blood. That isn't the way it is done, in modern times. But the process is as clearcut and definite, and as irreversible, as ever.

I loved her with my soul. We were at the embassy party because someone had invited Ina to sing there. I had taken her, just as I had taken her to things

since our boy and girlhood. I was seven years older than Ina, who now had reached the ripe old age of eighteen. To me she was a combination of kid sister and young comrade-at-arms, knightly squire and page boy, left over from childhood days. Orphaned at three, Ina had come to live with us then. My mother was first Cousin to her father, making us no closer than second cousins, but we were Ina's next of kin.

We Clivedales lived in a huge monstrosity of a house which some romantic ancestor had built on the plan of a medieval castle. The place tintured my boyish imaginings as far back as I can remember, and I played with wooden swords before I finally got my hands on a fencing blade. When Ina was six and I thirteen, I had her all over bruises; she was my squire and fencing partner, then. When we were sixteen and nine, I combined my first interest in architecture with my love of historical romances, particularly those of the days of knighthood all the way back to King Arthur's court, and I painted and modeled castles surrounded by moats. Ina would sit by the hour, singing to herself in her clear, lovely young voice, watching and making suggestions.

It was in that seventeenth year of mine that I made such a model

—it was almost a replica of our home, but it had a moat, and behind the moat a stand of forest on one side, and, stepping delicately and gracefully out of the forest a little clay figurine of a doe. This model won a prize that determined the course of my studies definitely, and it stands on a table in my apartment in the city where my work as an architect established me.

I DREAMED of that doe, before I modeled her. She was the only animal figurine I ever had any success with, although she seemed so all but alive in miniature that for awhile I did try other figures. But the dream must have inspired me. It was vivid enough, and real enough, and seemed to have a poignant significance I could not quite grasp.

In the dream, she walked out of the forest, coming down toward the moat.

Then a horrible thing happened. The doe faltered, shuddered, tossed her head, seeming to pant for breath—and fell lifeless at the very edge of the moat, so that she rolled down, inert and limp, into the quiet water.

I woke, then. And might have forgotten the dream, but for the impulse that made me, next day, set to work on the little lump of clay. It took me the free hours

of a long, happy, idle summer to finish the whole thing: figurine and castle, moat and bit of woodland. By that time I had worked the dream, the vision, call it what you will, into my life.

I told the dream to Ina; and she took it strangely to heart and cried hard—as she had not done since she was a very little girl.

After that summer I was busier, and my studies absorbed me, and that was the last year of my playing knight and squire with Ina, who began even then to grow up in her different way. It was a coincidence, I supposed, that she found work in the same city to which I had come as a budding architect, and yet perhaps it wasn't quite that. Ina had always given me a child's hero worship, and she continued to do it; and I had always loved her and tolerated her when she tagged a little too closely, and there were opportunities for studying voice and music in the city, and after all it was near home for us both.

Anyway we had been established there for all of a year before the evening of the party, Ina living in a girls' club, working and studying, and beginning to receive invitations to sing—as on that night.

Never mind the name of the embassy. The party was in honor of a Mr. and Mrs. Dale Nugent,

who had been attached to the American embassy in one of the little mid-European countries and who had come home after five years abroad.

Ina sang beautifully. She looked like a little girl—I believed she always would. I couldn't imagine Ina really growing up, though I knew my incredulity on that score was strangely annoying to her. She was wearing a fluffy, filmy gown of pale pink shot with glimmering golden threads, and had a kind of golden, woven snood on her fair hair, which curled naturally down to the nape of her neck, at which length it stopped. Her eyes were so dark a blue that excitement made them black. It occurred to me for the first time that she was very fond of me indeed, and I was very fond of her, and after all, we were only second cousins! I listened to her, and wondered that I had not thought of these things before, and a kind of happy lightness seemed to possess me, as though the champagne cocktails had been made of something more ethereal, something that had the magic power to link all the best elements of childhood and manhood so that life became for just that moment a fairyland thing come true.

For just that moment.

Before the song ended, I heard

behind me the slight commotion of late arrivals slipping in quietly. As the applause began, a man and woman were being seated beside me—and directly behind Mrs. Nugent, the lady just returned from near Hungary. I saw that the man was rather thin and pale, with the eyes of a man who works or worries too many hours and sleeps too few. I saw the woman, I was introduced to Mr. and Mrs. Adam Wallace, and they were introduced to Mrs. Nugent, and to the others sitting and standing near. Ina came to sit in the vacant seat on my other side, and she met them also, and there were compliments on Ina's singing and Ina's songs. The Villanelle, I remember, particularly the Villanelle, which was wonderful and had sounded like a bird singing, like water flowing, like bells chiming over water—all the pretty similes a singer loves to hear, and they were true.

I hardly heard them. I was looking at Miranda. I knew her name already, I could think of her by it, and not as Mrs. Adam Wallace. The Ambassador's wife herself made the introduction, and called her Miranda when she spoke to her. They were friends. One saw that Miranda knew important people, went to important places. Adam Wallace probably knew the same people and

went to the same places—but he, without Miranda, would probably have been a nonentity.

These things drifted in my mind, as the small talk drifted in and out of my ears. I was living in my eyes, I was looking at Miranda.

She sat gracefully, as though the gilded chair was not hard and uncomfortable—which I knew it was, for it was exactly like mine. She had a light erectness, a dainty fragility that seemed incompatible with the articulations of the human skeleton. She might have been, actually, air-borne; a figure moulded of cloud or mist.

Her dress was a drift of silver gray—like mist. Her eyes were gray, and to look at them made my heart turn over with loneliness and longing. They were lonely eyes, I thought—lonely as a sea that longs for the sun. They were hungry eyes, I thought—hungry for happiness and love. The nervous tense man at her side had not been able to fill them with laughter. I caught a glimpse of her in a wall mirror, and of myself beside her—a tall young man with black hair and brows and dark blue eyes that looked at Miranda as I had seen Ina's eyes look at me, but with more intensity. Beside the sun-tan of my face, Miranda's pearly translucency become pallor.

I tried to give a name to the

color of her hair. It was neutral, yet shining. There was no glint of gold in it, nor hint of bronze; perhaps it was a dark ash-brown, although the definiteness of brown was lacking too. Certainly it was not gray—but when gray touched it, one would hardly notice. It might have been woven of mist, thick, and shining. And it was simply combed back from her white forehead, and fell mistily like rain about her shoulders. The simple straightness of it made her look very young. Not childlike, as Ina looked, but ageless. Like a young thing born old, with the wisdom of years, the knowledge of centuries in it, so that age could never touch it, as the crude, simple excitabilities of youth had not.

The woman returned from near Hungary turned then, and spoke to her so directly that I must pay attention.

"It is incredible to me, my dear, that we haven't met before," she said to Miranda. "I've been thinking and thinking—and the name isn't right. Mr. and Mrs. Adam Wallace—Miranda Wallace. I keep remembering Budapest—we were there for a while, and I feel as though I must have met you there. You are so lovely, I don't see how I could forget. But—the name isn't right, I'm sure. I'm sorry my husband, Mr. Nugent, was called away; par-

ticularly as we sail tomorrow for London. Yet—my mind works slowly, sometimes, but—it nearly always comes up with the answer! Somehow, I'm thinking of dancers."

A SERVANT passed punch in wonderful crystal cups and a lady's exclamations of admiration cut across the words. Mrs. Nugent took a cup, as did nearly everybody else.

I took a sip from mine, silently making it a toast to Miranda, my eyes fixed on her, drinking in her strange beauty while other people drank and gabbled around us.

Someone called out to Mrs. Nugent, and she set down her cup on a low table as she turned. She exchanged a few sentences, settled back in her chair, and picked up the cup.

But in those seconds, it happened.

Miranda's white hand drifted out in a gesture so swift, so smooth and sure and quiet that it was like a white blossom floating away from her. On the third finger was an antique ring with a heavy, massive emerald setting. There was a skillful movement of thumb and finger, and the ring turned emerald under; and a white powder fell into Mrs. Nugent's cup.

It was a matter of seconds

only. I leaned forward, impulsively—but in the wall-mirror Miranda's sea-gray eyes met mine and their light shone into mine, and I caught my breath and all but gasped with the impact. Without my volition I put my own hand on Ina's arm with a clutch that demanded and admonished; and Ina's little gasp was checked, and I heard her half speak my name in surprise.

The cup was at Mrs. Nugent's lips. When the moment had passed, when I released Ina's arm and tore my eyes from their silent communion with those mirrored eyes, the cup was empty.

Ina's face was more than pearly white when I glanced guiltily sidewise at her. It was the white of chalk, the white of shock and terror. She looked like a sick child.

Yet it was nothing, it meant nothing, I told myself. Mrs. Nugent sat still for a moment, then rose quietly and walked out of the room. And it was a matter of five minutes before the party was shattered and broken and dispersed by news of what happened after that.

To a cloakroom maid, Mrs. Nugent said that she felt faint and would go home. To the ambassadress who followed her out, she repeated this with composure. Then—

"It was heart failure. She simply dropped dead at her feet!"

"But—she was so *young* to go like that! And quite well—Wasn't she? To have travelled all over the world, and here at home, at a reception in her honor—and, oh, her poor husband! The man looked like death, himself!"

"Well, it won't help her to go home—but I can't stay. It seems too heartless. Yes, I think the best thing will be for all of us to leave."

ON THE way home Ina was silent. Only at her door she spoke.

"You *saw*—didn't you, Cedric? You *saw*, and you were afraid to speak. I wanted to warn Mrs. Nugent. I would have told her—that woman had poisoned her drink. And you caught my arm and stopped me for just a moment—and then it was too late.

"But, Cedric! We must tell what we saw even though it *is* too late. We must, mustn't we? And—oh, why did you stop me?"

I kissed her goodnight, which I did not usually do. It was to comfort her. It was a plea for forgiveness. I told her I would talk it out with her tomorrow. It would be difficult to say we had *seen* what we—or she

thought we had seen; and that we had been silent. She promised to talk to me before she let us in for anything like that. I think she saw us—me, at least—hanging as an accomplice, at the very least. I think she was confused by her pain at what I had done. She knew, of course, that I had fallen in love with Miranda.

I did not hope for sleep that night, but it overwhelmed me as soon as my head touched the pillow. It was a sleep like drowning. Waking was like rising up out of an abyss; it took me awhile to orient myself, and then I saw that it was late in the day, late, even, in the afternoon. By the clock, it was five—and the sun was westering. I had never in my life slept over like that.

I dressed hastily, made coffee and drank it, eating and begrudging the time it took. I must decide on a course of action, and I must phone Ina at once.

I had been a fool last night. Not only had I seen, as Ina saw, the dropping of the powder into the cup of the woman who had died, but I had heard enough to explain the action. Poor Mrs. Nugent had been trying to remember where she had seen or known the Wallace couple, especially Miranda. Because of that, Miranda had poisoned her, and she had died.

Nearly twenty-six years old, I

had fallen at the feet of this murderess and worshipped her like an adolescent. Obviously there was nothing to do about it now, but to tell the whole story to some responsible person. The ambassador's wife? But she was a friend of the Wallaces. Another person might be better. Or maybe the only thing was to go directly to the police.

I decided that Ina had the right to decide our course. I had bullied her and involved her; and this must be made clear along with the rest. It was Ina's turn to talk, and mine to listen.

I dialed her number several times, amazed at getting no response. Amazed, if it came to that, that she had let the whole day pass without calling me. And it was only then that I saw two envelopes which had been shoved under my door.

They were both marked "Special Delivery," and the one on top had Ina's name on the back. I opened this one first; the other could keep. Inside was a hastily scrawled letter in her bold backhand script:

"Dear Cedric:

"Since you don't answer your phone, you must have gone out. And since you haven't called me, you want to forget about what happened last night.

"If I went to the police,

they would question everyone. If I were involved, I know you would involve yourself, to excuse my having done nothing. Or would you? If you did not, perhaps no one would listen to me. There would have to be an autopsy, wouldn't there? People don't like to give permission for that, unless they're pretty convinced.

"I can't drag you into it anyway, unless you drag yourself. But if you decide to tell, you know I will also tell what I saw. I can't decide for you, Cedric; I can't lead you into trouble, and it wouldn't help poor Mrs. Nugent now.

"It hurt me so much to see you staring at that Mrs. Wallace in a sort of horrible fascination—as though, it seemed to me, you were a bird and she a snake—that sometimes I try to tell myself I was hysterical and imagined more than I saw. When a little time has passed, perhaps I will have gotten over that feeling, and perhaps then I will know that in spite of everything I *must* go to the police.

"At any rate, I am going out of the city for a few days. A wonderful thing happened this morning—I was offered an engagement to sing at the Sea City Ocean Pier Theater. If you have time to drive over

there, and care to do it, we can talk. Rehearsals start immediately, and miserable as I am about what happened last night, I am just starting for Sea City with a group of other singers.

"I will look for you. It is hard to go without seeing you.

"Yours always,

"Ina."

The relief that flooded me, reading that letter, was as incredible as it was inconsistent. Now I no longer felt the pressure to immediate action, and I became a little bitter against Ina. Whatever had happened was a dirty mess to get into now; I couldn't get into it without dragging in Ina, court cases had always been hard on innocent witnesses, and seemed to be becoming harder. If their characters couldn't be challenged, their motives must be. Yet because I had waked expecting insistence and urgency from Ina, I had been ready to plunge into something that after all it might be better not to start.

I sat down—I had read the first letter pacing up and down—and opened the other note which was only a few lines of finely slanted writing on a thin gray sheet:

"Dear Mr. Clivedale:

"It was a dreadful thing which happened last night—and particularly so to me.

"Please forgive my temerity in writing to you, and even more in asking that you call on me and my husband. We are at the Stratford Arms, and I will look for you tonight at eight. Please, please come. I *must* talk with you.

"Miranda Wallace."

THE Wallaces' apartment was on the top floor of the Stratford Arms, which was the tenth floor. I was admitted by a dark skinned maid whom I took to be an East Indian, shown into a pleasant, airy room, and asked to wait. The minutes passed, and I grew painfully conscious of two things.

First, a low toned conversation was going on in an adjoining room which I couldn't help hearing, and this gave me an uncomfortable feeling of eavesdropping. And second, my solitude was shared by another creature—a queer sort of pet, for I could not identify it.

At first it seemed to me a small monkey, as it sat regarding me—and that regard was hard to take. The eyes were somehow *evil*, and it studied me with a positive avidity which made me feel as though it regarded me as a potential dinner.

Then its nondescriptness took over, and it worried me beyond reason that I couldn't classify the

little beast. It sat up almost like a monkey, or even a child; something about its pointed ears and sneaking expression reminded me of a jackal—and its straight, long, hairless, pointed tail was disagreeably rodent.

After awhile the talking grew louder and more careless. Two women were talking—Miranda and another. The second voice was strange to me, and fell harshly on my ears. There was what might have been a Slavic accent, and the brittle sound of age, and it was hard and occasionally cackling.

"You could have done without him in the beginning, and you must get rid of him," this older voice was saying. "He is soft and cowardly, and since he has this—obsession, they call it?—for a soul purging, a confession, there is no doubt what must be done now. If you let him talk to others, what happens to you?"

"Only, my dear, I tell you as I have done before—you must use *our* methods. Your own are crude—you have seen what danger they place you in. You used your own methods in Budapest—remember? Sometimes I think that you would like to be independent—free of me. It is impossible. Your power is as mine only when you conform to our ancient laws. Because you are beautiful, you try to be as other

women. Not a good woman, but still an ordinary one. You play at being that which is impossible for you. As to what happened last night—Phah! It was common, cheap and disgusting.

“Adam is on the roof?”

“I asked him to go there and wait for me. He’s hoping for my consent to his confessing, expiating, as he calls it, *all* his crimes. He thinks, somehow, he can take most of it on himself, say he drove me to be his accomplice, rather than saying that he has been mine. Anyway—whatever happens, he has made up his mind.”

“Then you must join him on the roof, my dear! Comfort him there. And—you know what else. And, about—*the other?*”

“I know, Madame. He must see what I do and what I am. And I must have from him not his heart, which I want, and which may learn to hate me; but I must make him give—*his soul!*”

Miranda’s answers were low pitched and sorrowful. None of the conversation made as much sense to me as the sound of her voice made to my senses. I longed to take her in my arms, to help her in her trouble, to comfort her. Most of all, I simply longed to take her in my arms.

I caught a brief glimpse of Miranda through the doorway into the next room. Tonight her

gown was green. She passed the door slowly, head bent, face turned from me.

It was the woman with whom Miranda had been talking, who entered through the doorway and advanced toward me.

“Permit that I greet you for our Miranda, who is so grieved—” the woman said. “I am her very close friend, Madame Slovani. She would make the introduction, but she has gone by a private stairway to the roof to warn her husband of your arrival—and to try to comfort him as a wife may. Poor Adam is equally distraught—

“Miranda asks that you go to the roof by the stairway at the far end of the corridor. This will give Adam a moment to compose himself, and they will receive you together there. The roof—it is not a garden, nor a penthouse roof—but on a summer evening it has charm.”

Madame Slovani was short, a little bent, and somehow tawdry in appearance. Her face was upturned because of my height. She seemed dry enough to crackle like a stick, yet she was stocky rather than thin. Her dress was black and fashionably cut, her gray hair short and loosely curled—and yet there was about her that suggestion of sham, of pretense, of veneer. Perhaps it was because of her eyes. They

fawned on me, and yet they were as cold as the eyes of a crocodile.

She gave me no chance to answer her. Somewhere a clock began to strike, and she reached out and pushed me with her ringed, gnarled hands.

"Go!" she cried urgently. "It is time. Do not keep her waiting!"

I went the way the woman pointed, found the stairway to the roof and climbed it.

THE building was rectangular, the frontage and rear the narrow elevations. The stairway exit was toward the front. Accordingly, most of the length of the roof lay before me as I stepped out on it. The Stratford Arms was the highest building in the immediate vicinity, and it was like coming out on a lonely plateau. At nine o'clock daylight time, the afterglow lingered, but the first stars of evening were whitely visible. Venus swam through an amethyst sea, companioned by the slender sickle of the new moon. The zenith was an upside-down well filling with midnight. Away from the west, the horizon was flooded with sweeping swatches of the clearest lambent green. My eyes sought a green-clad figure, but did not find it.

Brick ramparts ran waist-high the length of the building on

each side. Front and rear were provided with steel guard rails which did not impede the view. Brick chimneys, turret-shaped, and various small superstructures, rose in irregular serration along the rampart walls, and grouped darkly together near the center of the roof. Deck furniture was scattered everywhere; but at this hour and by whatever chance, the roof was untenanted except for myself and one other, and this other was a man. I recognized him at once in the clear twilight for Adam Wallace. He was sitting on one of the low ramparts—the one on the eastward side of the building. I walked back toward him slowly.

It was awkward that Miranda had been delayed. I felt a necessity to speak to him; but as each step brought me nearer I could see more clearly the utter despair and dejection of the man. When I had come quite close he lifted his head and looked at me, and the look in his eyes was like a silent scream of despair.

I could find no words. I drew back a little and simply waited. Miranda wanted to reach him first, I told myself. To help him pull himself together for our talk. It would be about last night. Some explanation, a desperate appeal—only Miranda knew why she had summoned me.

And Miranda must come soon. She *must*.

I turned to stare back at the doorway through which I had stepped out on the roof, although I knew she was to have come up by another way. I had, I suppose, to have a pretext for averting my eyes from the tortured face of the man who was Miranda's husband. Anyway I did look back into the gathering gloom. Then there was a movement, a cool tremble in the sultry summer air, and it seemed to me it was her coming that I felt.

I looked toward the central huddle of housing and chimney turrets, and then I looked back at Adam Wallace, and I saw her coming up behind him, walking on the outside of the wall.

There must be a catwalk on the very rim of the roof; but my heart missed a beat, seeing Miranda lined against the empty sky. I reminded myself that most likely a second guard rail separated her from the sheer, ten-story drop; then in the next instant, I was lost in the sheer spell of her beauty.

Her green dress was as filmy as last night's gray; but as it caught light from the green encircling three-fourths of the horizon, she seemed to be clad in a shimmering green flame. Her face and neck and bare arms, though, caught the reflection

from the west and kindled to a rosy hue. She was a picture painted in pure light, seeming literally to float there outside the parapet, which rose no higher than her knees.

SHE glided to her husband's side, and spoke his name, and he started up; but she laid her hands upon his shoulders, and then her arms encircled him. He looked up into her face like a tired, lost child who has come home, and she pressed his head against her breast.

She spoke, so that I barely heard her words:

"Rest, darling. Lean so, against me, for a moment. Just let go and relax—yes, better—Ah, like that, Adam!"

She held him to her, yet she drew away a little; and still her arms were round him, encircling, drawing, as the low, weighted calling of his name seemed as if it must summon all his senses and his will.

He leaned against the glimmering green-clad figure, and the slant of his body suddenly became awkward and grotesque.

The rest happened in a split second.

Adam Wallace seemed to stiffen, to struggle desperately to regain his balance. There was a slipping, scuffling sound and the little thud of a dislodged brick

striking the roof. I saw a flailing of arms and then of legs black against the sky. For one moment, the soles of the man's shoes shone in the western light which had deepened and reddened. Then man and legs and kicking feet, horribly upside down, took the plunge, and a wild, hoarse scream trailed down and away and died.

Night fell out of the top of the sky. The lower varicolored air strata flowed together and went ashen. Out of the high abyss vertigo fell with the dark. My knees gave under me, and I staggered the few steps to the brick rampart.

I had seen Wallace fall. In that last moment I had not seen Miranda at all. Simply, she had been there—and then she was not.

I looked over the wall.

It went straight down without visible jointure, one piece of solid brick masonry with the side wall. It was a sheer precipice based in the alley alongside. A street lamp shone into the alley making the white paving dimly visible.

It made visible the crumpled dark heap that had been Adam Wallace.

No broken woman's body clad in green was down there. But then no woman could have stood outside the brick wall, or spoken

there to Adam, or drawn him to his death.

Yet I had seen what I had seen.

I sank into a deck chair and lay there sick and dizzy, thoughts and senses reeling until I heard the first shocked outcry from below, and then other voices. Last, the siren of an ambulance.

Then I stumbled back down the stairs and to Miranda's door, and it swung open at my uncertain touch.

Madame Slovani blocked it. "Go away," she said. "You shall come back—but go now. You understand, there has been a second tragedy—a worse. Miranda's husband has thrown himself from the roof. She came back for—for a handkerchief, and it was then the manager called this apartment. Someone had just found him lying in the alley, and now they have taken him away.

"We will not say that you had gone to the roof, Mr. Clivedale. The press is so eager for a scandal, and our Miranda is too beautiful—ever I must shield her from the gossip. Some might say you had seemed smitten with her beauty, found her husband on the roof edge and made a quarrel.

"Go, now! Go home, Mr. Clivedale!"

She was ordering me, I thought, like a dog. I looked into

the hard blackness of her eyes and took a forward step. A cold fury rose up in me. I wanted to force my way in, to force Miranda to talk to me now, while my eyes still held clear the image of that awful, impossible scene upon the roof.

It was not Madame Slovani who stopped me, either. It was Miranda, and yet she neither looked at me nor spoke.

SHE lay back heavily propped with cushions in a deep chair by the window, and the uncertain light from one shaded lamp lit her face and figure and the crouching little monstrosity at her side. One of her arms fell limply down toward the floor, and the little beast was licking it in a disgusting, slavery manner—I could hear the obscene sloppiness of soft animal lips. The green dress was livid in the lamplight, and the flesh of the woman's face was yellowed and flabby, the features slack, each line indescribably coarsened. From this caricature of Miranda's face her large eyes stared bleakly, nor it seemed, were they quite mated, one being as pale as the eye of a stranded fish, and the gray of the other catching the yellow light from the lamp as does the eye of a cat.

It was this sight of Miranda that drove me back, and away.

The old hag's voice came after me:

"She is spent. Youth will return and beauty—you shall see. You will comfort her shortly in my place. Only late of today I have come from Sea City to give her strength, and I must go immediately back. So many things have to be done! Even without the mishaps, the crises, so many!

"Dangers to meet. People who threaten danger to be crushed—crushed—"

Her voice rose until it sounded like the wailing of a wind.

I reached the waiting elevator, which was self-operating. The door slammed shut, and I escaped.

It was only a five-block walk from the Stratford Arms back to the Leicester. Going home I short-cut through a small park. I wanted to think, and something was pressing on my mind to be recognized. There was a thing I must do—an urgent thing. But an awful lethargy had begun to fog my senses and weight my limbs. I sank down on a bench under a twisted black walnut tree, and my heavy lids closed, and the sound of traffic and some kind of little peeping bird receded to a misty distance.

Yet I was conscious. I was conscious of hearing Miranda's voice. But it was muffled and husky and tired, and sometimes

the syllables blurred and it was like the voice of a woman who had been drinking—or like the voice of a tranced medium I once heard in a seance. I was conscious enough to tell myself, at first, that I was dreaming.

"Last night's spell was sounder, and it kept him sleeping through the day," the dream voice said. "Now I can feel that his mind is not closed to mine. Today I was able to use my pass key and see everything in his apartment that I needed to see. I looked at him as he slept, one dark strand of his hair fallen down on his forehead. I kissed him, Slovani, and he never stirred.

"Tonight he was near when I opened the gate to the dark power. Tonight he was drawn so near me that the wall between our souls has crumbled. He will belong to me; but neither can I withdraw from his knowledge. *I tell you, he hears us now!*"

"Yet sleep will delay him," Slovani muttered. "Our little Vermio will have had time to do his tricks. And I will be in Sea City in time to have my darling little troupe of horrors trained to their parts for tomorrow night. *You* whine, Miranda, because the youth that our dark powers preserve in you falls into age—and you're a hag for a few hours when you spend yourself

to work the greater spells. Look well at me! I waste none of my potency on rose leaf skin or a girl's grace. To your new lover, I'm nothing but a hag—and the same, no doubt, to you. But I've my company of apprentice spellbinders and accomplished haters that I can use for any purpose—here in America, as I've done from Budapest to Peking. I can make them act, or dance, or sing at will, wherever I've introduced them, as well you know.

"So advanced are they, I scarcely need to hypnotize them now. And each serves the Dark Master, and each nurses a beastly familiar—and grows to resemble the little monster, I swear! None so clever as our sweet Vermio—who should be getting back to us, it seems to me.

"Pull yourself together, my girl. I've other things to do than comfort you for being obliged to pay the powers that serve you. You're free of Adam, aren't you? And Cedric, the new lover, caught in your web? Already you look less like a mouldering corpse; your eyes turn straighter in their sockets, and are near of a color again. Now you will dare to sleep. You'll wake in your known guise, Miranda!"

Somewhere, I thought, a door slammed. The older witch, the hag, Madame Slovani was on her way.

To Sea City.

But—she spoke of singers. And Ina, there? Ina was to sing at Sea City.

I must go to Sea City. Ina was dangerous to Miranda, and that meant that I must get to Ina. Ina had seen murder—but I had seen it twice; and I had seen worse. I had seen what doesn't exist—so men say in our time. I had seen black sorcery and witchcraft, and they were evil and ugly and loathsome. I was on my feet and running toward home.

The elevator ran me up to my floor, and I pelted down the carpeted hall to my door, key in hand. The door swung open, and I had stepped inside and lifted my right hand to the tumbler switch when the horrid thing happened.

Moist, sucking, slobbery lips closed on the fingers of my left hand. The wet heat of the unseen maw was indescribably loathsome; the hungry, avid sucking was worse; the obscene caress of a darting tongue, the worst of all.

I shook the thing, lifting it bodily from the floor, for it clung like an octopus. I went on shaking and dashing and slamming it about, and at last I was free of it.

It flew through the air, landed with a plop, tittered a too-human titter, and made off through the

open window which must have given it entry. I caught a brief glimpse of a grotesquerie silhouetted against the star strewn sky before it swung sideward and was gone. There was a fire escape at the next window, but I would not have doubted it could scale a sheer wall. I had too good a view of one of those hand-like paws—the thing actually made a mocking gesture of farewell.

VERMIO, the hag Slovani called it. It was the thing that infested Miranda's apartment. Yes, the witch's familiar. Miranda had her familiar, as the apprentices Madame Slovani had spoken of bad theirs. Madame Slovani's, I thought, should be a crocodile.

What "tricks" had she sent the ugly hybrid atavism to perform?

I wasted time which might be valuable, but I couldn't find the answer. I was thorough and painstaking—for, out of my depth as I was, wallowing in unreal, murky waters, anything might be important. Only one thing I found changed or different, and it was an odd little thing that brought a strange constriction to my throat. It was a childish thing, a little thing that no one but Ina, I thought, could have done on one of her brief calls on me. It was a thing I

might easily not have noticed, in an ordinary mood. A silly little thing.

Around the neck of the little clay model of a doe was a slender braid of shining golden hair that could have come from no bright head but Ina's. That mop of hers was thick and fast growing, and she herself snipped out tresses occasionally, after which the fluffy mass seemed quite as thick as before. I saw, then, on inspection, that the child—for these whimsies made me think of Ina so, again—had taken one of my brushes and very minutely and neatly traced on the forehead of the pretty little statue the letters of her name.

I found myself smiling. I knew an evanescent, tender, happy moment. So at the age of three, or five, or ten, had Ina done small things to make me notice and think of her.

My mantel clock began to strike three, and I remembered the last time I had listened to a striking clock in Miranda's apartment, and all the ugliness flooded back upon me. I had wasted too much time.

I threw a few things into a bag, raced downstairs and got my car from the garage. The early summer dawn whitened the east as I cleared the suburbs and pointed my headlights east, toward the ocean and Sea City.

IT WAS when I lit my first cigarette that I realized the tips of all the fingers of my right hand were bleeding. I felt no pain; but a slow seepage gathered on them again, a fine red dew, after I had wiped them clean. The sense of taint, of uncleanness and of degradation, that swept over me was beyond any words of mine. I found no trace of broken skin, no tooth wound. It was the sucking of the familiar Vermio which had broken the capillaries and inflicted microscopic skin lesions. The little monster's lips and tongue had all the suctional power of an octopus tentacle.

I remembered that familiars were supposed to "milk" blood from the fingertips and parts of the bodies of witches and warlocks, and was briefly overcome by nausea.

It was a day of maddening mishaps.

The motor of my car, usually smooth as the purr of a kitten, coughed its way through unprecedented streams of traffic. Traffic jammed. I had a blow out, missing a ditch by inches, had a long verbal tangle with a fat family of five bound for Atlantic City. My spare ran a mile and developed a slow leak, and I limped into a roadside garage at a mile an hour. The mechanic's inspection proved that I would

get no further without motor repairs, and hours dragged into hours.

I was groggy from lack of sleep and from shock. At a lunch counter adjoining the garage, I forced down a few mouthfuls of food and drank three cups of black coffee. I went into the wash room and washed my hands and sluiced cold water on my face; staring at myself in the cracked mirror. My eyes stared back at me, red rimmed, and sunken into circles nearly as black as my brows and hair. I bought band-aids from a vending machine, and tried to tape up the fingers of my right hand; but the slow, slight trickle not only discolored the tapes, but loosened them, so that they hung and flapped, and presently fell off.

WHEN I took the road again, the monotonous ribbon of paving slipping under my wheels exercised its hypnotic effect, and I drowsed at the wheel, jerking awake as the car made each first slip from control. I had to pull up in a side road then, as I had been dreading that I must do. My exhaustion was natural, but I thought of Miranda's sleep spells with no confidence.

I would reach Sea City, I feared, only if and when she permitted. All of the delays were, perhaps, no accidents. I only knew

that the sun was pulling to the west, and the air growing cooler with a hint of the sea smell in it, that winged things were whirring and birds singing. Yet even as sleep took me, I poured my whole will into an effort to waken in an hour's time—a knack I possessed to some extent.

It was longer than that, but not by much, when I roused, feeling refreshed. Without the brief interval, I could have done little more. My hand seemed better; it was caked with dried blood, and only one tiny drop hung from the tip of my index finger. My watch marked the hour as six; but now Sea City was only a thirty minute run.

I knew where the pier stood out to sea, a few blocks north-east of the center of the boardwalk. Sea City was a revival of a resort that had gone down to almost nothing, by some unpredictable freak. The older Sea City had built the pier, the new Sea City had extended it. Certain promoters had plans of making it a rival to Atlantic City's, but it remained rather a sad compromise. The auditorium was near the end, which extended now perhaps a quarter mile from the shore base. A dance hall was built in at the shore end, and there were side decks and one across the front, where in stormy weather waves rushed in foam-

ing. Midway of the pier an old construction had been left standing—a portion built and operated as a kind of maze—or rather two. One was a black tunnel, in the old days, where you wound your way from horror to horror—Indians tomahawking a group of early settlers, and a major devil complete with tail and horns and surrounded by capering imps in waxworks, and an Aztec priest cutting out a human heart were among my own childhood memories. The other tunnel ran parallel, and was given over to ugly, unfunny “figures of fun.” Some of the partitions had been taken down, some of the cave-like rooms had been wrecked and dismantled, and some, it was said, had just been left alone to gather dust.

I PARKED the car near this pier, and began my reconnoitering.

No one at the ticket office knew where any of the evening’s singers were lodged, nor where rehearsals were held. I made my way onto the pier, having bought a ticket, and continued prowling about and asking questions. I was about to leave the place and begin a tour of the larger hotels, when a small boy pulled at my coat tail.

“I know where they are now, mister—the ones that are goin’

to sing tonight,” he offered. “Give me a package of Camels, and I’ll show you.”

I thought it some kind of a practical joke, when he led me by a door at the rear of the vacant ballroom into a narrow, twisting, black passageway, and I suspected the joke of being an ugly one when he declined to accompany me further.

“I’ve been,” he said with a small-boy terseness. “I’ve been all over the whole place—but I don’t like it, mister. I’ve seen where the old woman keeps some animals. The people that are supposed to sing for her, they stay at the Ocean Surf Hotel. It’s a nice hotel, and I guess they got this old place to practice in for free. They aren’t any of them at the hotel now, so if you want to see them you go straight ahead, and if you don’t bump your own head hard enough to knock yourself out, you’ll come to a door with a little grating up top, and you can see them and hear them and maybe make them let you in. They’re all down there, havin’ what the old lady calls a dress rehearsal. Me, I don’t like it down here, and once was enough.”

He took the cigarettes—he settled for what I had—and dived out into the fading daylight. I felt my way in the dark. It seemed that I went farther

than could have been possible, because of the blackness, and the constant winding. I thought of using my lighter, and decided against it. I wanted to look through that little grating before I announced my presence.

I saw a glimmer of light around a couple of turns, then a bright square on the ceiling, cross-barred by shadow. A murmur of voices reached my ears, and I took up my position behind the closed door, looking in at an angle.

There were half a dozen persons in there, two young men and four young women. That wasn't all, their pets were with them—the pets I had heard Madame Slovani refer to. The beasts seemed more normal than Vermio, and accordingly less loathesome. I found the men and women without exception repulsive; but what I recognized on second glance as the disconcerting and appalling factor in the little group was the repeated resemblances between animal and human.

A long legged, pop-eyed youngish man with batrachian features fondled a large frog—and surely there was a likeness between them. He capered about the room at intervals, at the same time running scales in a gurgly tenor. A short, fat girl with heavy features and a tendency

to puff carried a fat toad. A small, thin girl with hanging elflocks was paired with a black monkey that capered about her; a tall, thin, hard-jawed blonde let an over-sized chameleon wander over her polka-dotted blouse, changing color appropriately in spots where it lingered; when she threw back her head and laughed, her slender pink tongue darted out, for all the world as the lizard's tongue darted after invisible insects, or at times, in what seemed a caress, to lick the girl's cheek or neck or chin.

I believe men are usually more tolerant of bassos and dogs than they are of tenors and frogs, so I found the man with the deep bass voice and the tendency to say "Ho! Ho!" when he laughed a little less trying. Men don't like eccentric females either, so I classed him above all the others, and found his coarse-haired black dog a better looking pet. But the animal's eyes seemed to shoot red sparks, and the basso's laughter was heavy and harsh.

There was considerable laughing. They seemed to be having a merry time of it. But before I could more than try to get the trend of their conversation, the tenor set his frog tenderly on his shoulder, looked at his wrist watch, and sybillantly hushed them into silence.

They lined up near the grand piano which bulked against the opposite wall, and a door opened, and Madame Slovani came in. I wondered again if she, too, had her familiar in the beast world, and what it could be like; and repeated my thought that it should be a particularly evil appearing crocodile.

She might have been wearing the same black dress, and her hair was combed and groomed. She advanced toward them, and each of her troupe bowed low, and the monkey bowed. She spoke to them all together, in what seemed a kind of ritual.

"Good evening, disciples," she said. "I am with you, your mistress. And you—what are you, and what is your duty?"

They answered with one voice:

"Madame, we are your disciples. And we have danced in Budapest and juggled in Tangiers; and tumbled in Baluchistan; served in tea houses in China, and performed masked pantomimes from Siam to Tibet. We have sung in the cities of Asia and Europe. We serve you and our Master, and hope to be accepted to take part in the Black Mass."

That part over, the animals chattered, croaked and barked, and the men and women (who were not, I thought now, particularly young after all) laughed

as at a tremendous joke. And Madame Slovani did a very extraordinary thing—for with one deft movement she abstracted a pair of false dentures from her mouth and laid them tenderly on the top of the piano, before which she then seated herself. Light from two hanging bulbs cast heavy shadows on her face, and now she looked not like an old woman who was a bit of a hag, but all hag—and all witch. Also, the falling in of her lips added indescribably to the saurian features of her appearance.

She began talking in a cozy, studio voice, now—about the teeth being hard to wear for long, and it being against her nature to have the artificial things in her mouth. Her speech was considerably altered without the teeth, but I lost track of the proceedings here, for a very good reason.

Someone was approaching down the corridor behind me, carrying a light. At first I was not sure; the light through the grating was bright and near, and my eyes were full of it. Then I knew I was right, and I felt an impulse to blend my six feet of broad shouldered height with the wall—a thing which couldn't be done.

So I did the only other thing possible. I turned and waited to see who was coming.

The one who came carrying the light rounded the last turn, and I caught my breath.

Miranda, a black-clad, slender figure with the sad, white face of a suffering angel, confronted me. Her fingers clasped a candlestick in which was set a long, black candle. The smoke from it blew toward me, and I caught the pungent smell of it. The first whiff set my heart pounding and the blood racing in my veins. Miranda's eyes were deeply glowing, the black pupils widely expanded. Their tenderness enfolded me like a caress. When her hand went out to me I seemed to fall toward her rather than to be carried the short distance by my feet.

She drew her hand back before I could clasp it, though, and laid her finger on her lips.

"I was not able to come sooner," she whispered. "I had to rest. I tried to hold you back—there is more danger for you here than you could dream of, Cedric!"

An altercation seemed to be going on in the room behind the grille, and we both listened. But I had time to think: "Whatever she is, she has come to help me. I must make her help Ina."

I heard the tenor's over-mellow voice:

"Mistress, I wish you'd answer just one question. *We* dance and

sing, and learn hard roles—even with the hypnotism, they are difficult. Miranda does not work. She goes to the places we go to sometimes, but as one of greater rank. As someone who is different. She has been a benefactress to me, Madame. Sometime I think I shall make her more than that. And still I ask you—what is the difference between us?"

Madame Slovani laughed.

"The difference between a Morgan La Faye and a cheap maker of spells, Roberto. If I don't have to punish her some time because she fancies herself too much as a beautiful woman, she bids fair to be my successor—when finally my years run out. Why, it is because the blonde baby is dangerous to Miranda that I used my influence to arrange this evening. Few notables are coming. Do you think I craved to hear your hypnotized warblings, that I must plan it for my pleasure?"

Miranda and I stood close, our bodies pressing together; my breath came hard. I heard the skinny dark girl say harshly—accompanying the words with a look of pure venom:

"Ina, the beautiful young blonde. *Really* young, with no years to spell off her. Well I tell you, I hate her!"

Madame Slovani straightened and glowered.

"Remember that I am your mistress and that I tolerate no questioning! What are you all here for but to hate her? Hate I need from you tonight, Roberto, you know that this girl can sing, and you hate her for that. Romanoff, why do you hate? For hate I want from you all."

The big Mephisto—that would be *his* role—laughed, and the black dog barked briefly.

"I hate for the pleasure of it!" he declaimed robustly.

"And that is the best hate of all!"

The toothless mouth widened, the claw hand went up in the gesture of one drinking a toast and dashing the glass to the floor.

"All is prepared," Madame Slovani purred. "The costume cut and fitted by my hands to our new Mauguerite's slender curves. The hair close cut, for the fitting of the priceless wig, the long, golden-haired wig to snare Faust's heart. What a pity we shall use but the finale! And the severed tresses artfully disposed. Woven into the rope girdle around the prison dress of gray. Woven into a narrow necklet—a fine touch of authenticity! Woven into a tighter, narrower one for the little clay figure marked with her name in her own blood—drawn in a playful moment from her little wrist

when she was induced to try to pat the devil's own dog before we came away!"

THINGS clicked into a ghostly pattern in my brain. Miranda had been in my apartment; of course Ina had not, not lately. The little horror Vermio had been in my apartment, sent there to "do his tricks." With his too human paws *he* had placed that necklace of plaited hair; with his too human paws he had copied a pattern given him, and dipped my own paint brush into a little bottle that held drops of Ina's blood, and traced her name.

Things clicked. The braid of the victim's hair; the naming of a clay figure—and they meant that Ina should die. Ina. The child who had watched me make the little doe that I somehow—now, so late—discerned, she had always identified with herself. The little doe I had dreamed of—that I had seen, in the dream, fall dead.

I turned on Miranda in a sudden rage. But Miranda's eyes were on me, and the scent from the black candle's smoke filled my veins with a burning fire it was torture to deny.

Her hand closed on mine now of its own accord, and her lips were soft at my ear.

"One false move, and I can do nothing," she whispered.

"You must trust me—there is nothing else you can do, *now*. When the performance is over—that is the only chance. They have ways of killing you—and her too, your Ina too, do you hear? Why, in this place in the pier they wouldn't need even a cover up, even a careful means. A spell, or a knife, what would it matter? Your body need never be found. Would that help Ina? You have not dared to talk—not even about the thing that happened at the ambassador's. As to the rest, who would believe? I promise you this: they will give the performance. They always do. Ina will sing tonight, and you will see her and hear her on the stage—nothing will happen before that—"

I heard a door open and close, and I turned and looked through the grille again.

Ina had come into the place.

Ina—so changed, yet so unchangeably herself! I tasted salt tears, and the tears were for her and for me.

She stood alone at the piano, facing Madame Slovani. The others gathered near—but not too near, and no hand was lifted against her. So far, Miranda seemed to have spoken truth.

Ina's hair was clipped short to her lovely little head. Her face was pale, but still defiant. She was not, I thought, actually

frightened; resentful, puzzled, uneasy, rather. She did not, I believed, imagine that anything very bad could happen to a good little girl who only wanted to sing, and who had got into a queer place where queerer people rehearsed very briefly for a performance that would be tonight.

"You know your role," Madame Slovani said to her. "I can use you again, if you will do the very little thing for me tonight. No one hears what a singer says, and especially when they think in English and she is singing in French. Instead of singing 'Dieu juste, à toi je m'abandonne!'—use the word 'Maitre!' It means the same; but we have some high Russian guests, and they love not the name of deity. And instead of singing 'Ange purs, ange radieux—' you shall sing: 'Ange noirs, ange de nos Maitre!' Black angels—so what? No one will notice and no one will care; but we have as guest a Red leader from Transylvania who will laugh and say how very clever and humorous we have been. I have told him to watch for the little joke. He has great friends, this Red leader. He could buy you performances in Rome, Milan, or even Paris. You want life, and to rise to its heights? It is so very simple. You understand? You will not forget?"

She banged the piano then,

and struck a few chords. Miranda's hand was drawing me away.

"It will be a good performance, and possibly little Ina's future will be made!" she told me. "We will go. Afterward—it is lonely at the end of the pier—we can go there for a while, before the last scenes are sung. It's a series of short scenes, you know. We can be alone with the sea—you and I. We can plan what may be done for Ina. But Madame, I think, has decided to be kind!"

WE DINED at the Ocean Surf Hotel. Madame Slovani and the singers had a table across the room.

Miranda had disappeared briefly, and returned wearing a small black hat with a heavy veil.

"It is unthinkable that I should be here, while Adam is unburied, at the funeral parlor," she said. "I came only because I had to save you, Cedric. To save you—for myself. You must believe me."

She lifted the veil at intervals to eat sparingly. Nature had caught up with me; I was famished, and hot food and the sight of Ina eating her dinner made the world seem normal, and abnormal things seem sick imaginings. When Ina saw me, the shocked pain and anger in her face were normal, too.

I scrawled a note and had a waiter take it to her, and in the note I asked her to leave the table and let me take her home. A note came back. It said:

"No, Cedric. I can see that it wouldn't do any good."

Truly, there seemed nothing I could do.

I sat with Miranda near the front of the auditorium. There were several opera scenes before the Prison Scene from Faust. I sent a second note back stage by an usher—this time at Miranda's suggestion. In it, I asked Ina to slip away after the Faust and meet me at the end of the pier. Miranda watched me write, and inclined her black-veiled head thoughtfully. This time the answer was different. Ina had written:

"I will, Cedric. I will be glad to get away. No matter who you are with—I will come to the end of the pier."

Miranda murmured:

"I am sure she will be there."

Gounod's music filled the hall—magnificent, sublime. The curtain swished aside.

Ina lay as if asleep, clad in a clay-gray gown belted with yellow rope, the yellow tresses of the wig sweeping back from her face. Around her throat was the narrow golden circlet—we were close enough to see the braiding. Faust and the devil entered, and

the scene led into Marguerite's music. Ina rose up singing, her voice as sweet and pure as water flowing, falling gently. Faust importuned her, and Mephisto; and she soared like a bird into the climax. I listened, tense:

"'Dieu juste, à toi je m'abandonne!—'"

"'Agnes purs, anges radieux—'"

There was no tampering with the clear words of defiance to the dark powers; and three times the theme was sung, each time on a higher modulation, until the soprano notes seemed to beat at the gates of heaven.

She fell down, then, softly, like a snow flake settling; and the dark blue curtains swung together.

Miranda and I went at once to the end of the pier.

There were no waves dashing there; only a long, slow, glassy swell seemed to sigh softly to itself. Miranda threw back the black veil. Not only were we alone, but the night had veiled itself. Shoreward the lights were tiny stars with spreading halos. Straight down, the water had a faint luminosity of its own; this time of year the gulf stream carried northward the dim ghost of its southern glory.

"We have a few moments—" Miranda said, and drew me to a bench. I felt longing and urgency

and a deep, trance-like languor sweep over me. It would be easy to forget all but Miranda—

I wanted to be alert, to think.

"What are the animals—Madame Slovani spoke of as *familiars*?" I asked. "What is the connection between them—and those of you who keep them? And why has Madame none? Or, has she?"

"They are atavistic hybrids, some of them. Like Vermio—*he* is a rare specimen, a rare being, rather. He was specially bred and specially trained. Remember, there are two codes. They call them good and evil—men do, and you would. But—what is good, and what is evil? To me it is good to be happy. Sometimes I have to do horrible things—and to pay horribly—for that. Under what you would call the good law, things follow the laws of evolution. Good little animals mind good little people, and the people don't get like the animals, but the animals take on less beastlike ways.

"While under the bad law, people get more like beasts, and beasts—oh, sometimes they grotesque humans, and sometimes slip down toward lower animal forms. But again—what is lower, and what is higher? If there was a Circe, and she turned men into swine—in some cases it must have been an improvement!"

"And Madame Slovani?" I asked again.

Miranda caught her breath, and had to start her words a second time.

"Slovani has no familiar. Because she has—among her gifts—the power—to *change herself!* Never defy her, Cedric, never! Even I am afraid of Madame Slovani!"

I stood up and leaned over the rail, looking straight down. Something had floated out from under the pier.

It was, I thought, a loose bundle of gray cloth, or gray rags. Clay-gray; the color of the clay doe; the color of the prison dress Marguerite had worn.

I strained my eyes. The bundle was wrapped once around the middle by a rope—wet and darkened, but yellowish still. I saw things trailing downward from that bundle, trailing like arms. I thought I caught the white gleam of hands floating submerged, like two drowned waterlilies. Then I was sure I saw, drooping below the surface at the far side, a rounded protuberance with the glint of gold.

Ina's shorn golden locks!

The swell lifted and dropped it, the slow sea swell that sighed. It was Ina's body, floating as the dead float, face down. But it was *not* the body of a dead girl. It floated because it had gone into

the water unconscious, with lungs air-filled; it was settling lower—almost imperceptibly.

I climbed the railing shouting for help. Miranda impeded me, clung to me.

"It would have been kinder the other way!" she muttered, struggling with me, and her words confirmed my certainty. "Slovani ordered me to work—the death spell. Because I wanted to be a woman—to love you as a woman—I—spent myself to no purpose. *She is not dead—*"

I fought silently. Miranda's arms around me were like steel bands. She was half up on the railing too. But people were running our way.

Then it happened. From the black shadow of the pier a second thing emerged, and it took the form of nightmare.

It couldn't be. Not in these salt northern waters; but it was.

A BLACK crocodile, heavy and squat of body, circled with a swing of its tail that lashed the water into real phosphorescent fire. That hellish green illumination showed me the rest, while Miranda dragged on me now, so dead a weight that she might have been a corpse.

The monster saurian drove at the figure of the golden haired girl who was not quite dead,

and its jaws opened and clashed and closed on the limp body. There was a swirl and splash, and a trail of green light going down.

The running men and women had reached us, and there were voices, and it was all too late. A man and two women had come in time to see. The man was sick on the pier, the two women were screaming and gabbling:

"Someone had gone overboard, and *that thing*—I tell you it was a *crocodile!*"

"The phosphorescence! I never saw such phosphorus. And I tell you, I could see the monster's eyes. They glared—red!"

"Its jaws opened—so wide. And—being sick and stunned, I had the wildest impression that it was a crocodile without any teeth. A toothless crocodile!"

Miranda giggled, a high, mad little titter.

"She hasn't any—of her own. Slovani!"

Then she collapsed into my arms, drawing her veil down over her face as she fell. I thought I heard her say:

"Don't look at me. Don't look at my face!"

IT WAS the aged hag Miranda that I drove home through the night hours. The hideous, old Miranda who had worked a spell, though imperfectly—and

expended for a while the youth that wasn't hers by right.

Around us frogs called, for the night had turned wet and a light rain was falling. Where there were trees, there seemed too many bats; and from high up in the sky—and worse, sometimes, from low and near—bird cries sounded that were not like any birds I had ever heard. Will-of-the-wisps slid through the valley places. It was a long night, the longest night I had ever lived, a real Walpurgis night. But the rain that fell didn't touch the windshield or the car. Rain doesn't fall, I have learned since, on witches.

Ina's body was found down-shore the next morning. The tide brought it in. It wasn't torn or mangled, though the clothes were torn and it showed where it had been mauled, they said.

None of us had gone to Mrs. Nugent's funeral, but Miranda and I were at her husband's, and at Ina's. Miranda stayed alone with Vermio until the funerals, and at them she was beautiful. A vision of lovely, yearning sorrow. An angel of grief, exiled from heaven.

We are married now. We live in the apartment that was mine, where I found the little clay doe fallen down and limp and like a melted thing when I returned there first alone. I found, too,

that the innocent looking golden braid around the little neck had been drawn so tight that it had cut a deep groove in the unbaked clay. And I was sure the mauling by the toothless crocodile would have obscured a corresponding stricture under the braided necklace around my childhood playmate's throat. At the appointed time of the witch-spell, when "Marguerite" fell, Ina's breath failed and she swooned—to be carried to her bed in the dark waters of the Atlantic.

The doe is gone. Miranda got rid of it. But Vermio lives with us.

I do not think I will ever have a familiar. I do not think Miranda needs Vermio as much as she did, and I am sure Vermio hates me.

I am becoming, I believe, Miranda's familiar. I looked the word up in Roget's Thesaurus, and it said—giving the meaning that mattered to me: "Familiar: One bound by a supernatural law of servitude."

There is no doubt about the servitude. Or about the supernatural part of the life that is ours. It is a horrible life. We are to join Madame Slovani and her troupe somewhere in mid-Europe soon, and I think it will be even more horrible. But with the black dog and the monkey, the frog

and the toad and the chameleon for company, perhaps Vermio will have something to do beside stare at me night and day with his evil, hating eyes.

And some time, like Adam Wallace, perhaps I will have the luck to die.

Not that I dare hope death will really solve my problems.

Like the heroine of Goethe's drama and Gounod's opera, Ina's prayer was not for life, but for the opening of Heaven's gates. I must believe in Heaven, being well acquainted with Hell. Ina's life would have been worth little to her on earth, seeing me indissolubly linked with Miranda. As it is, I know that Ina and I will not meet in any other place than earth. My road leads down. It is a sick imagining of mine of late, that even my appearance is changing. Something looks at me from my mirror that is not quite human, that seems to peer from my own eyes as through a window, and then slyly to withdraw. I look again, and see only the haggard face of shame and torture—and cowardice.

And I know, then, that I will never anger Slovani, nor fail to serve Miranda. I will tolerate the vicious caresses of Vermio.

As long as I can, I will postpone passing through the last door of all.
