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LOVE ME—AND PERISH!

By LYLE D. GUNN

I little thought as I watched the famous star commence her erotic Dance of Doom, that all too soon my sweetheart would be in her place—a willing partner to an invisible monster come out from hell to choose a victim for the Devil's torture mart!

CLAIRE LADD'S dressing gown fluttered to the studio floor, and the glare of the arc lights picked out and accentuated the ravishing body that had made her the idol of a million men and long kept Eldorado Pictures out of bankruptcy. Under the maze of girders, cables and overhead lighting equipment, the stage was set to represent an Oriental seraglio, but no fabled caliph ever possessed so alluring a slave as the smouldering redhead who graced this jumbled movie version of the *Arabian Nights*. In the glaring illumination, even the sheen



of her famous milk-white skin was heightened by her filmy costume, the Hollywood version of a harem girl's attire—an open-fronted blouse that but partially hid the swell of her firm breasts and failed by eight inches of softly molded flesh of meeting the silken pantaloons that hung low on her voluptuous hips. Her full thighs, rounded and perfect, seemed a natural continuation of the alabaster amphora, a tall urn-like vessel of peculiarly suggestive shape, before which she halted.

Again I had the feeling of imminent disaster that had been growing steadily sharper as we approached the last day's shooting of this picture. I could not even characterize the danger I sensed; all I knew was that strange menace hovered over this set. And as my eyes sought out Mary Boyne, for once I wished that the girl I loved were somewhere else.

Mary was Claire Ladd's stand-in and therefore wore the same revealing costume but her refreshing sweetness and the clean grace of her figure made it appear charming rather than suggestive. I might have been prejudiced, for we were engaged to be married whenever I rose from the nonentity of an assistant director, but I found her far more attractive than Claire Ladd.

At last Bogolowski, the director, tore his pig-like eyes from the alluring body of the nearly-nude star and signaled he was ready for the "take"; Castelon rapped his music rack to bring the studio orchestra to attention; and Claire Ladd dropped to her knees before the alabaster amphora, ready to begin the dance that was the climax of the picture and was supposed to invoke "The Jinni in the Bottle." Then it was that Abou Malik, the wealthy importer who had consented to act as technical adviser on this production, slowly shook his head and as the black silk tassel on his red tarboosh cast a flitting shadow over his swarthy face he softly said "It is dangerous to trifle with these things . . ."

His eyes were on the alabaster amphora, and suddenly all my vague dread was crystallized. It was the amphora from which seemed to flow the aura of malignant power! I remembered the peculiar *aliveness* I had felt in its smooth stone when I had helped Quigley, our ancient prop man, fill it with the chemical that was to simulate the materialization of the jinni. And suddenly the fantastic thought came to me that perhaps it *was* in rapport with some unearthly power! Malik, who had lent it to the studio from his private collection, had claimed it was actually a relic of the Second Caliphate, the fabulous age of Scheherazade and the Caliph Haroun El Raschid. Who could say where in legend was the borderline between pure myth and time-garbled truth . . . ?

I attributed the vagaries of my mind to the strain under which we had been working to finish the last two scenes today on schedule. Then the cameras began to grind and as the orchestra went into her number and Claire Ladd started the exotic dance, my only thought was that I was glad it was not Mary who was kneeling and gesturing before that alabaster symbol of evil.

I did not know that all too soon my sweetheart would be in Claire's place, doing that same dance before all these eyes—and one more pair come out of hell to choose a victim for a strange desire!

THE kneeling girl's dance began with a slow undulation of her torso that rippled the soft conformation of her bare waist and stirred even her firm breasts into a subtly sensuous quivering. She added a snake-like writhing of her supple arms, then her contortions became still more abandoned as her stomach muscles shuddered and she slowly rose to her feet, swaying and undulating to the sensuous rhythm of the music.

Then, each part of her body continuing its unique, provocative motion, she slowly

began to bend over the amphora; through the sheer pantaloons could be seen the bunching of her thighs from the pull of her lowering torso. Then her hand snaked down to unstopper the amphora—and abruptly stopped!

Her eyes widened with fear, a sudden dread seemed to grip her. Yet it was so swiftly overcome by her trouper's instinct to go on that the pause was nearly imperceptible. Quickly she composed her face, reached down, unstopped the amphora. And then *I* felt it—something evil, something malign, something that came out of hell through the narrow neck of that sinister bottle!

The very air seemed to throb with a terrible destructive force. But when I flashed my gaze over those near me, I saw no surprise or fear. On Bogolowski's face was an expression that might have been satisfaction at the scene he was getting. For the rest—except Abou Malik, who was not to be seen—there was only desire inflamed by the provocative spectacle; even old Quigley showed it, as he licked his thin lips hungrily.

Yet it was with a sense of horror that I watched the smoke billow from the bottle's neck, rise sluggishly, flatten, and drop into a spreading grey cloud on the floor. As the smoke continued to pour out, the cloud mounted higher, seemed to grasp Claire's legs venomously, to claw at her thighs in rage. But any emotion she might have felt was now well under control and she continued to dance smoothly as the curtain of smoke steadily rose before her. Then, as it suddenly thickened, she was completely hidden from view.

I breathed a sigh of relief; the scene was over and nothing had happened.

But why didn't Bogolowski yell, "Cut!" The cameras still ground at that opaque greyness and my forebodings returned swiftly as it seemed suddenly to stir with life, to gather into a myriad of ectoplasmic globules that shifted and writhed and

formed fantastic shapes and swiftly changing patterns. For a second, it seemed, the illusion persisted and then there was only smoke again, settling and thinning, revealing . . .

God! I can still hear the screams that arose, the hoarse cries, the horrified shouts. For this shapeless flesh weltering in blood, this twisted figure with torn breasts and ripped throat, was all that remained of Claire Ladd!

SAM GOLD, Eldorado's president, climbed to the stage from which Claire Ladd's mutilated body had been removed an hour before. His manner was harried, his heavy-jowled face grey as he faced the assembled cast and staff.

"We must be practical," he said tersely, "even at the risk of being considered callous. The continued existence of my company is at stake. So are your jobs. Despite this—accident, the picture must be finished today!"

Mary's slender body trembled inside the curve of my arm and from the others, except Bogolowski, rose a shocked murmur. But it soon changed to a chorus of grudging agreement, marred only by the director's sharp, "How?"

"Only the sequence in the cave is left," Gold answered, referring to a shooting script. "That scene can be taken as a medium long shot and if we keep the face of the girl taking Miss Ladd's place away from the camera, there need be only a superficial resemblance." He hesitated. "We have such a person in Miss Boyne."

A faint gasp came from Mary and I was already half out of my chair to protest when Gold swept on.

"You may be sure I would not suggest this," he urged, "if I felt I were placing anyone in danger. Granting that a murder had been committed and that we do not know by whom, there is no reason to believe anyone else in danger from that person . . ."

But was it a *person*? That was my chilling thought as Abou Malik's warning ran through my brain again in an insidious whisper: "*It is dangerous to trifle with these things.* I wished he had returned, so that I could ask what he thought of this. A girl killed without a sound heard or anything but a patch of smoke seen by the score of people within a dozen feet of her . . .

"As for any other idea," Gold continued, as though he read my thoughts, "a woman is not torn—is not killed without human hands touching her. In a few minutes the film of that scene will be developed and we can look at the rushes. The inexplicable will be explained, I am sure, by the camera's less emotional eye . . ."

He was right, I supposed, and I had no right to deny Mary this chance. She was eager for it, now that she had gotten over her reluctance to double for a dead girl. Yet I could not shake off my dread, could not keep from feeling that there *was* some connection between Claire Ladd's death and the sinister amphora. But at least that scene was done; the amphora was not used in the one in which Mary would play. A little ashamed at thus admitting to myself that I did fear the thing, I was still glad that Mary would not have to perform the ritualistic dance of invoking the jinni.

Then it was that one of the men from the developing room rushed through the crowd, caught Gold as he was walking off the set. His agitated whisper cut through the sudden silence: "The film must have been exposed. There was nothing on it!"

Gold swore, groans rose, Bogolowski exclaimed, "Then we're licked!"

"I'm damned if we are!" shouted Gold. "We'll still finish this picture today!" A roar of approval went up as he issued his order: "If it takes all night, shoot *both* scenes!"

Only then did the full significance of this accident strike me. *Mary must re-*

peat the dance that had brought Claire Ladd a strange and brutal death!

FOR three hours Bogolowski rehearsed Mary in the dance, and for three hours I struggled with a dilemma that kept growing more frightening but never became clearer. Unquestionably Gold was right and any other attitude was insane. But there was still this horrible thought to torture me: if the other, the incredible, *were* true—Mary was doomed! I couldn't risk it . . .

In the end, my change of feeling came about paradoxically. Abou Malik suddenly was walking beside me as I paced the floor nervously. Into my hand he thrust a smooth, dark object—like an amulet without any inscription. "A charm against certain evils," he said and quickly left my side. An instant later his tall figure passed from the building out onto the lot. And suddenly I felt very foolish; his melodramatic manner and his "charm" had cured me of my ridiculous fears.

But when they were ready for the take, I went to the stand at the side of the set, near Mary but out of range of the cameras. That was just a precautionary measure. I had satisfied myself that there were no trap doors in the stage floor, but I was going to stand where I could see *behind* the screen of smoke.

Then the take began and I was quickly lost in admiration at Mary's performance. It did not have the heavy sensuality of Claire Ladd's, but it seemed to strike closer to the meaning of the dance. She actually seemed a devotee of some ancient cult, sincerely supplicating the jinni to manifest himself. That ring of authenticity robbed the dance of all obscenity and as she rose from the first kneeling position before the amphora and her whole undulating body was revealed, I felt that this was more than wanton exhibitionism. There seemed a real ritualistic significance in the devotional, entreating gesture with

which she unstoppered the evil amphora.

Then I felt it again—some emanation that spread from the amphora in great powerful surges! Yet it was different this time, different in a way I could not characterize until suddenly, as if in response to it, a wave of sheer wantonness seemed to sweep over Mary.

In a second she seemed to have a more lavishly endowed, more provocatively shaped body than Claire Ladd's. And the movements of that body changed at the same time, became slower but stronger and more stirring, seeming to pick up the fierce, deliberate rhythm of passion's own surge!

One part of my brain said that she had only been caught up by the spirit of the dance. The other shrieked that a demoniacal spirit had found her pleasing, that she was responding to his demand, giving herself to a fate *worse than Claire Ladd's!* God! Why didn't I listen to it and stop her before it was too late? But I poor fool, *knew* my thoughts were mad; I could not spoil the take, which would be over in another minute, now that the smoke was rising before Mary. And, from where I stood at the side, I could see that no one else, *nothing* else, stood behind the thickening curtain a foot in front of her.

She was safe, I told myself; the only difficulty was with my imagination. The smoke once more seemed to be gathering into misty shapes that swirled in exotic patterns and strove avidly to press against her body. And she seemed to shudder with ecstasy; her thighs trembled, her soft waist swelled and flattened with her heavy breathing, her whole body began to tremble—as if in the amorous embrace of a lover! God! I was able to endure it only because I *knew* it was smoke I was seeing. And there was a definite space between it and Mary. As two separated things I could see her pulsing white body and the curtain of smoke. Two separate things. I could see them both.

And then I could see only one! The madly gyrating smoke. Before my very eyes, Mary had disappeared—as though she had been *erased* . . .

THE huge, giddy clouds of multi-colored light that filled the sky slowly receded back into my own brain and then I saw that I was walking along upper Hollywood Boulevard. It was nearly midnight, but the five hours since I had left the studio were a blank to me. I remembered the first consternation when the lowering smoke had shown the others what I knew already, the panic that had ensued as the fruitless search went on; the police, their questions, the discovery that again the films were mysteriously spoiled; Bogolowski arguing with Gold, who had been called back, and at last convincing him that nothing could now be done to finish the picture on schedule; everyone being kind to me as together we left the lot for what I knew was to be the last time.

Then I was alone, *thinking* of it for the first time, and I remembered no more.

And now my thoughts began to spin insanely again as I faced the incredible truth—Mary was gone! Gone to the embrace of a creature of hell-born desires and deathly corruption!

I fought for a saner view but it was difficult. Claire Ladd was one matter; there were ways, even if I could not say how, that she could have been killed. But Mary had vanished into thin air! And before she had disappeared with my eyes upon her, I had felt the perverting power from the amphora, seen Mary's passionate response to the embrace of an invisible lover.

Perhaps my subconscious mind was directing my stumbling feet for I was nearly to the Eldorado lot when the wild thought came to me. Where would Mary be but in the grotto where the jinni was supposed to have transported her?

It was insane, but as I broke into a

run I was cackling gleefully. To my shaken mind the thought seemed perfectly logical and evident. Even after I had let myself through the gates and was flying past the false-fronted buildings of a frontier town followed by an English Village, down a street in Montmartre at whose end stood a plaster Taj Mahal, and round a corner through a section of the U. S. Navy Yard, it did not seem incongruous that on a Hollywood movie lot I should be seeking the lair of a demon out of the legendary *Arabian Nights*. I slowed up as I passed the studio building where the weird affair had had its beginning. Quietly I opened the door of the adjoining studio, crept toward the end where the artificial grotto had been built.

It was only partly roofed and as I entered its narrow mouth, far ahead I could see the pale moonlight that pierced the skylight of the building. I went toward it over a thick carpet of moss and gradually I made out the monstrous figures incised on the wall, the huge rocks at the grotto's end. Then, standing beside them, I saw Mary! Exactly as I had seen her last; with one sweep I took in everything from her half-closed eyes to the unmarred beauty of her profiled figure in the flimsy costume that was not even rumped. She was unharmed, had not been touched!

An exultant cry rose to my lips—but was never uttered. Mary had tilted back her head, lifted her lips, extended her arms—as if in invitation! *But no one else was there.*

Incredulously, I watched her torso arch provocatively, her body sway forward. I could not understand. Against this screen of light there was nothing visible except her body, standing out in fine detail. Yet she was seeking an embrace, begging carresses.

Suddenly the silk taut over the curve of her breast was indented—by the print of a man's hand! *The print but not the hand . . .*

PERHAPS I hadn't really been convinced until that second. All I know is that with that physical evidence of a hell-born being who was material yet invisible, fear closed over my heart and chilled its beating. My breath oozed out, my strength trickled away. The jinni actually stood before Mary! The jinni, invisible, yet capable of dimpling Mary's breast with the touch of his hand, capable of fondling her, of—God! It was the horror of that thought which rooted me to the ground, made me look upon the weird wooing as though in a trance.

The separate indentations made by the monster's fingers slid together and I could see her soft flesh firming at the touch—flattening, suddenly under a pressure that could not be seen! An ecstatic shudder rippled Mary's body and she inched forward, her arms curving about empty space, as if enfolding a material lover.

My own hoarse shout snapped me out of my trance and I lurched forward awkwardly. What happened in the next split-second seemed composed of many separate events. Mary stiffened, started to turn. A form shot past me. Mary's turn was arrested and the cloth across her waist tautened, as if a restraining arm had encircled her. The figure ahead of me stopped, whirled, faced me. I saw Sam Gold!

The first thought that flashed through my mind was that Gold, though he had no conceivable motive, had staged this whole weird affair, that I had been mistaken in what I believed I had just seen. Then I looked at Mary again and her provocative expression and sensuous gestures could allow only one meaning. The jinni *did* exist! And Mary was mad with desire for his unholy love. . . .

I sprang forward—but Gold stepped in front of me, blocked my way. I didn't understand, not until I really looked at him for the first time. In the dim light I could see his eyes were black with hate

and in his hand—he held a revolver!

“My God!” I cried. “You don’t think I—?”

He did think so! His lips curved into a sneer. He believed me what I had for a second thought him—a fiend who had engineered these crimes! And he was raising the revolver to point at my heart!

“Wait!” I shrieked. “Look behind you! You don’t understand—*look behind you!*”

Mirthlessly he laughed. “For the ‘jinni’—while you jump me?” His finger tightened on the trigger . . .

God! It was coming, coming quickly even as my eyes darted to Mary for one last look. She was turned toward us and no longer could I see the imprints of invisible hands on her! But her eyes were shifting, *as if watching something stalk toward us . . .*

I heard a click. The revolver was cocked! I braced myself for the shot . . .

Gold fired!

But as he did his arm jerked down spasmodically and the bullet hammered into the grotto floor. He had gone stiff all over—*as if in the bone-crushing grip of an invisible giant!* And without a hand that could be seen touching his throat he began to gag and his eyes bulged monstrously in a face that quickly turned livid, then black!

Something that had been pushed far back in my mind made me plunge my hand into my pocket for a small object there, but it was forgotten again in the horror of what I next saw. Suddenly, as if released from support, Gold’s body crashed to the floor, jerked convulsively once and was still, while from his mouth and nostrils gushed rich claret blood. Then I felt the first crushing agony of the death hold . . .

SUBCONSCIOUSLY I must have been prepared for it, for even as sharp twinges of pain shot through my arms and legs, I was able to fall back a few steps. But the invisible force followed me, pinned me against the grotto wall, and I felt as if

my entrails were being pulped, as if my arteries were swollen to the point of bursting. Iron bands bound my chest and each breath of air I sucked into my lungs was a searing flame. My head pounded and from the excruciating pain deep inside of me, waves of blackness rolled up over my brain. This, I thought, is the end . . .

But I was to live for a far greater agony.

The pressure subsided and though I retched violently I did not lose consciousness. But I could not move; completely paralyzed, my body stood against the wall while my dulled mind struggled to understand why I had not been killed. Then I understood when suddenly I saw Mary raise her arms once more, saw her blouse buffeted under an invisible touch. The monster had been too eager to return to her!

Her thighs were bunching, her torso was inclining backwards, bending her waist into a voluptuous curve; I could almost see the missing parts of the picture, the monster’s hand in the hollow of her back supporting her, his vile body leaning over her white form—causing that sudden flattening of her waist. Her hands swept to her blouse, tore it from her gleaming flesh, then she rose to her toes and as her bare bosom was lifted and arched provocatively—her meaning could not be mistaken!

God! I even stopped struggling then to move my paralyzed limbs. Mary was lost beyond recall. The monster had complete possession of her soul—*as it would soon her body.* Then it was that Mary straightened, for the first time stepped backward!

Wild hope fluttered in my breast—and died, as slowly, languorously, Mary sank down upon a bed of moss! A sound that was half sick horror and half impotent rage filled my throat but I could not give utterance to it.

Time lost all meaning and it might have been one minute later or ten that again

I became conscious of the amulet in my knotted fist. Bitterly I thought that if it were a potent charm, if I did know how to use it, it was probably too late now—

It *was* too late! God! I wished her dead. I *thought* I did—until suddenly she moaned in pain! And then I shrieked as I saw her body stiffen, her eyes begin to bulge. The monster had tired of her and now was going to kill her—crush her to a pulp like Gold!

Like a maniac I struggled to move, and when I had failed and Mary's face was turning livid, I actually became a maniac for a moment, blaspheming, shouting insanely, screaming. But I fell abruptly silent when the blood began to trickle from the corner of her mouth. She was dying. Fiercely I clenched my hands, as if I could hold her back. I barely realized the amulet had broken in my crushing grip. Her color changed again. Her face became black. It was the end . . .

Suddenly an acrid odor was all around me, I was breathing sharp fumes—the paralysis was leaving me! And as my brain swiftly cleared I realized that the broken "amulet" must have been a glass capsule containing something to counteract a poisonous gas that had caused my paralysis and killed Gold and—*Mary?*

On legs that were stiff from inaction I stumbled across the grotto and the acrid fumes seemed to have spread ahead of me. Then I had Mary in my arms and tears filled my eyes—tears of joy as color slowly crept back into her cheeks. . . .

TO me, the most amazing thing is that we knew how it was done before we knew who did it. When the amphora was

unstoppered, a noxious gas was released which was capable of causing unconsciousness and total loss of memory for a few minutes. During that time the fiend did his work unseen. It was one of his chemicals, poisonous in the free gaseous form in which it was escaping from a broken container stored in the grotto, that had endangered Mary and me and killed Gold, whose exertion as he ran past me had caused him to breath deeper.

It was not until the motive had been discovered that we knew the villain had been Gold. Certain that the picture would lose money and plunge him into bankruptcy, he had killed Claire Ladd for the heavy insurance his company carried on her. Mary, he had intended to kill later in the grotto to further the idea of a weird, inexplicable crime and to thoroughly complicate the case.

The "invisible monster", so far as I will ever know, was conjured by my wild imagination solely from the stirring of Mary's costume by currents of air and her own amorous movements, themselves caused by drugs Gold had given her.

—But I wonder sometimes. Abou Malik remains an enigmatic figure. He has never been seen since he gave me the means of saving us both! Even his priceless amphora he left behind. *Why?* Has he some knowledge he is *protecting* us from? . . .

Often, too often, his words come back to me, "It is dangerous to trifle with these things."

What really happened in the grotto? Mary has never spoken of it. And though she is now my wife, something—delicacy, and perhaps fear of the answer—makes me hesitate to question her.
