

# 10¢ DIME MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Number Two

## FEATURE-LENGTH MYSTERY NOVEL

**Dark Bondage**.....By Hugh B. Cave 8  
*The curse of old Benjamin Merritt was upon Milton Perry, blighting all that he touched, sending those he loved to agony and death. . . .*

## TWO MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

**Madman's Bride** .....By Arthur Leo Zagat 54  
*On their wedding night, he carried her across the threshold of their home—into stark horrors beyond the wildest nightmare fancy!*

**Food for Coffins**.....By James Duncan 86  
*What devil's power was it that sent fierce terror prowling through the shadowed rooms of the ancient house of the Ravilliacs?*

## SHORT TERROR TALES

**Harvest of Hate**.....By H. M. Appel 43  
*Swinging his bloody scythe, a black-robed fiend stalked the heat-blasted prairie.*

**Death Walks in Paradise**.....By Donald Barr Chidsey 72  
*The tiny Pacific isle had become a maniac's murder-laboratory!*

**Hostage to Pain**.....By Mindret Lord 105  
*In modern New York, the Medieval Inquisition lived again!*

**Unholy Eyes**.....By Monroe Karasik 119  
*"Kill!" she commanded him. And he could not disobey the power in her eyes. . . .*

—AND—

**Dark Council**.....A Department 127

Cover Painting by Walter M. Baumhofer

Story Illustrations by Amos Sewell

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# Madman's Bride

By  
Arthur Leo Zagat

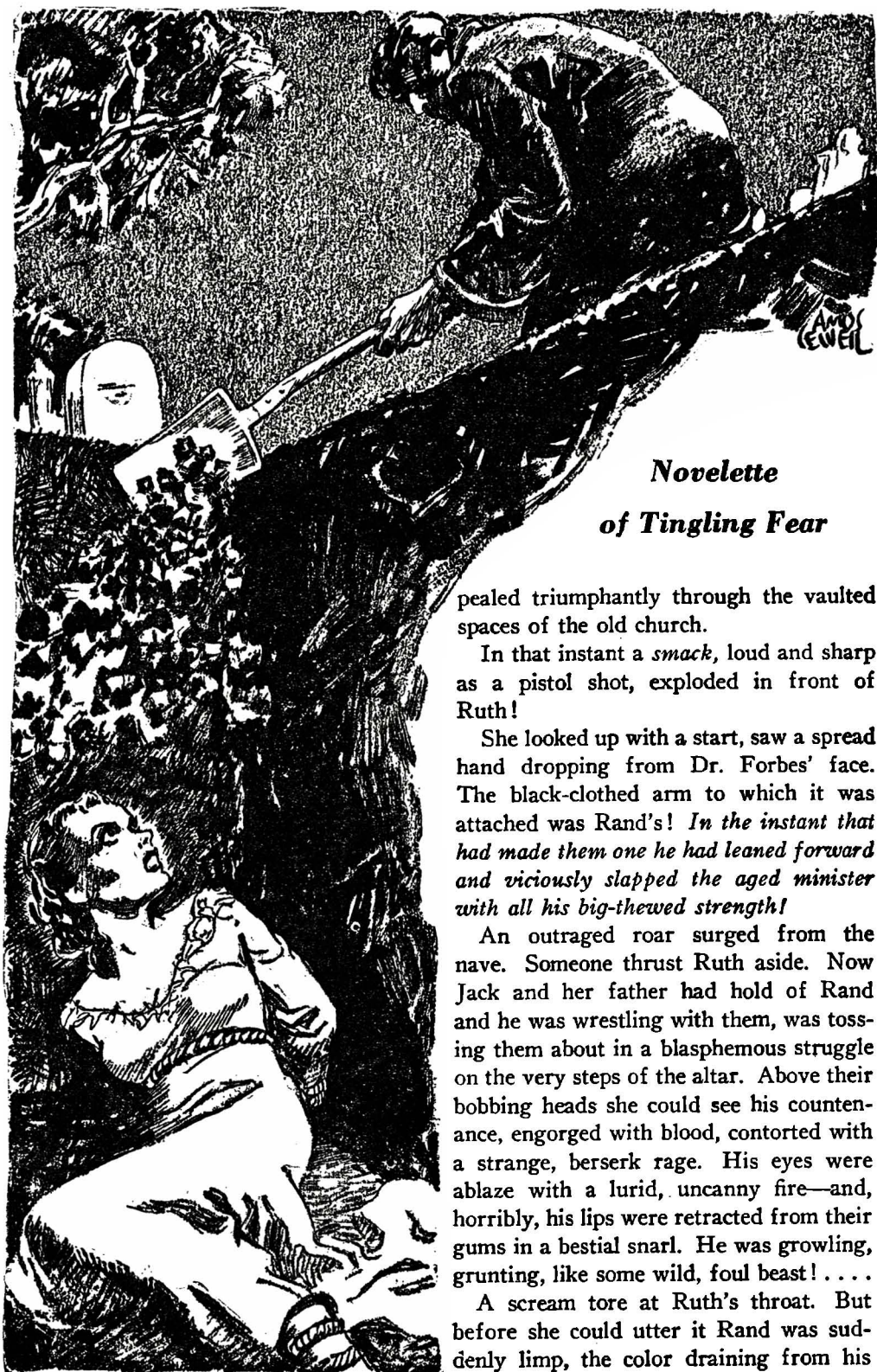
(Author of "Death's Grey Dwarfs," etc.)

*He had taken her to be his wedded wife—and now, on their wedding night, he carried her across the threshold of their home—into stark horrors beyond the wildest nightmare fancy!*

A GOLDEN light bathed the great banks of glowing, varicolored flowers piled high on either side of the altar, and seemed to pulse in time to the happy throb within Ruth Kane. Dr. Forbes' vestmented figure was a vague blur against that glory, the majestic words he intoned a stately rumble. Somewhere at the rail with her were dad, and Jack Storm, awkward in the unaccustomed dignity of the best man's role; and behind her, indicated now by a low, reverent murmur, was the seated host of friends and neighbors come to wish her well. But the only reality to Ruth was Rand's tall form beside her, the strong clasp of his fingers on her hand that he had not released after placing on it the ring, and the ache of her love for him. She had never known that love could *hurt* so much. . . .

"I pronounce you man and wife!" Pent breath gusted like a great sigh from the congregation. The organ's first deep note





*Novelle*  
*of Tingling Fear*

pealed triumphantly through the vaulted spaces of the old church.

In that instant a *smack*, loud and sharp as a pistol shot, exploded in front of Ruth!

She looked up with a start, saw a spread hand dropping from Dr. Forbes' face. The black-clothed arm to which it was attached was Rand's! *In the instant that had made them one he had leaned forward and viciously slapped the aged minister with all his big-thewed strength!*

An outraged roar surged from the nave. Someone thrust Ruth aside. Now Jack and her father had hold of Rand and he was wrestling with them, was tossing them about in a blasphemous struggle on the very steps of the altar. Above their bobbing heads she could see his countenance, engorged with blood, contorted with a strange, berserk rage. His eyes were ablaze with a lurid, uncanny fire—and, horribly, his lips were retracted from their gums in a bestial snarl. He was growling, grunting, like some wild, foul beast! . . .

A scream tore at Ruth's throat. But before she could utter it Rand was suddenly limp, the color draining from his

cheeks, the swelled veins receding, his look dazed, bewildered.

"All right," he gasped. "I'm all right now."

He staggered as they released him, pulled a shaking hand across his forehead. "Sick . . ." he groaned. "So sick . . ."

An angry buzz zoomed around the girl from the sea of pale, gaping faces below; but the organ had commenced again, chanting the noble strains of Meyerbeer's Coronation March.

Rand's mouth twitched. "All dark for a minute. Dizzy."

Then he was turning to her, was reaching out for her, smiling—somehow wistfully. Quite evidently he had no recollection of the thing he had done. But something was in his eyes that chilled Ruth, some lurking, awful fear.

"Ruth," he said. "My wife!"

She came within the circle of his arms, was pressed close against him. His lips, avidly seeking hers for their bridal kiss, were icy cold, clammy. When she should have thrilled in the ecstasy of union at last with the man she loved, a shudder of revulsion swept through her. Past Rand's shoulder her father's face was gaunt, drawn, his bushy iron-grey brows beetling over irate eyes. She felt Rand's body quiver like a frightened child's, felt the pound of his heart against her breast, and suddenly pity for his distress flooded her, poignant pity and love reborn. Love redoubled because of his need for her.

"My dear," she murmured. "My own. My—husband." And she clung to him, warming his lips with the fire of her own. . . .

"Congratulations, Mrs. Parker."—"You are lovely, that gorgeous ivory-white is so becoming to you."—"Kiss the bride."—"Leaving right away? We'll miss you."—"Kiss the bride."

A nightmare crowding around her, of twittering females, of whisky-breathed

males. Of thin lips, and slobbering thick ones, of smooth faces and prickly, mustached ones engaged in the barbaric custom of kissing the bride. Kind people acting just as if nothing had happened. Acting *almost* as if nothing had happened. Flickerings of repressed horror betraying them. Pitying whispers that she was not supposed to hear. Cluckings of dismay. And a glimpse of Dr. Forbes, statuesque, his pure-white hair a saintly aureole and the scarlet stain of Rand's fingers lurid on his pallid cheek. When would this be over? Oh Lord, when would it be over? . . .

A MURMUR, and heads turning. Mouths forming little o's. A break in the crush. Down there, just reaching the door into the vestry room, Ruth's father and Rand, side by side but not looking at each other. Walking stiff-legged and rigid with anger, their faces set, carved out of white marble. What was happening? She must get to them. She must!

"Excuse me." Smile sweetly. Smile! "I'll be right back." Smile while dread squeezes your heart. "No, we're not going now. Not till after breakfast in the Sunday-school rooms."

Ruth's silk rustled down the plush aisle and she felt curious eyes on her, hundreds of eyes peering after her. But she saw only the little arched doorway in the shadows through which her father and her lover had vanished; she knew only that she must get there, that what was going on behind that door was vital to her.

A dim figure was inexplicably at her side, a hand touched her arm. "Wait, Ruth," Jack Storm's voice said. "Don't go in there."

She turned to him. His cheeks were hollow, his mouth a thin gash. Dear, faithful Jack! She had been cruel to make him act the part of best man at her

wedding when he— "Please, Jack. Don't keep me. Rand needs me."

"Rand! That—" He checked himself, veiled the quick blaze in his eyes.

"He's my husband now, don't forget that. My husband." She hadn't meant to say it so sharply. His lips twisted pitifully, and his hand dropped from her arm. Her mind slid away from him, slid to the muffled sound of high, angry voices from the vestry room.

"I'll be damned if you'll take my daughter away from me!" Was it the dark oak between that made dad's voice so thick, so threatening? Rand's, responding, was shrill, thin-edged with passion. "Your daughter! She's my wife. For better or for worse, my wife!"

For better or for worse! The girl had opened the door with an icy hand, was through it. It thudded shut with a curious, dull finality. Rand bulked before her opposing her shorter but thick-set and still powerful father. Although neither moved nor spoke in the instant of her first glimpse of them, their poses were electric with challenge and defiance, quivering with passion and almost tangible hate. The stone embrasure of another doorway framed them, the street door through which she had come a short hour before a thrill with anticipation and happiness.

"Ruth!" Both had whirled to the sound of her entrance, and the agonized exclamation had burst simultaneously from both throats.

Rand surged to her, his broadly sculptured countenance purple with passion, his eyes steely dark orbs glittering with threat. His left arm encircled her waist, lifted her effortlessly from the floor. He swung around, and in his other hand a squat, dull-blue automatic snouted venomously.

"She's mine!" Once more Rand was

snarling like a maddened beast. "Mine! Stand aside!"

He moved, was striding across the small chamber. Ruth's father was planted square in their path, big hands fisted, head thrust forward bull-like, host-pale but indomitable.

"Stand aside, I say, or by God . . ." Rand's knuckles whitened. A muscle twitched at the base of his trigger finger and the gun-muzzle thrust into Ruth's father's vest. A scream tore from her lips.

"Don't! Don't kill my father! Don't!" Her flailing hand struck his wrist, struck down the gun. Her father's fist arced upward.

Rand pounded the blow aside with a slash of his gun, thrust past, his big shoulder staggering the older man. They were through and out in the quiet side-street. Sun blazed whitely around her. The little door crashed behind them and he had flung her into the seat of his grey roadster at the curb, had darted around and was sliding under the wheel.

Someone shouted—her father. Half-way down the block a policeman started to turn. Motor-roar thundered, gears clashed and Ruth was thrust back against leather cushions by the fierce leap of the car.

Hedges, houses, blurred into greyness, streamed past. A screaming skid around a corner past the white, goggling face of a frantically braking truckdriver, then their long, gleaming hood was swallowing the drab ribbon of Middle Road.

IT was still early; the highway was almost deserted. They were going north, and little traffic came from the spread of abandoned farms and drear pine-barrens up-state. Speed was permitted and Rand made the most of it.

Wind beat in on Ruth, snatching the breath from her, chilling her. But it

chilled her no more than she was already chilled by the violence into which her wedding had exploded, by the tragic conflict between her father and her husband—by the ferocity, the animal fury that had twisted Rand's loved countenance into something utterly unfamiliar, utterly abhorrent. What had taken possession of him? What wild passion had transformed him to a rabid, brutal stranger, this man with whom her life was now merged—"For better or for worse" . . . ?

Oh God! All her days, all the days of her life . . . She shuddered . . .

But now the strangeness was draining out of his face. Hawklike it still was, slicing the wind that swept back his brown hair from the high, straight rise of his forehead, hawklike and finely chiseled. His brow was creased and his nostrils expanded as to some poignant mental anguish. But he was again her Rand, the lover who had swirled like a whirlwind through her drowsy, nurtured life and swept her off to soar with him in unexplored, undreamed-of regions.

His sigh was dreary, despairing. The car slowed somewhat. "I had to do it, my dear," he said, brokenly. "I had to do it. He wanted to keep you from me."

Pity for him warmed within her—and then she remembered the gun in his hand, menacing her father. "But you would have shot him. You would have shot dad, if—"

"No." The monosyllable was a throb of pain. "I would not. I could not. Not your father. Not the father of my beloved."

She loved him. Oh, God forgive her, she loved him! How hard it was to pull away from him, to set her face in cold, forbidding lines, to say: "You don't expect me to believe that, do you? You were just about to shoot. If I hadn't screamed . . ." The scene was vivid

again before her eyes, and terror of him again an icy stream in her blood.

His hands were clenched tight on the wheel. He was bolt upright, unmoving. But the lines of his face quivered with agony, and she sensed his spirit reaching out to her, pleading. His head turned, slightly, so that his eyes met hers, and they were bleak, tortured.

"I would not—have shot. Ruth—believe me, dear. And help me. Please—help me."

She feared him—her blood was cold for fear of him, of the beast she had seen him become. Then why did she love him so? Words trembled for utterance. She did not know what they were and she dared not let them come.

"Once—" Rand's tone was flat, dead—"once you said—you loved me. Ruth . . ."

Far back a *put-put-put* rattled in the stillness. Ruth twisted. A dust cloud raced along the road, its dark center was a motorcycle and the bent-forward form of its khaki-clad, begoggled driver.

As she saw it the roadster leaped forward under her, knives of the wind slashed her. She turned. Rand's gaze was tense on the road, his face livid.

Madly they careened between speed-hazed foliage. Rand's lip curled again to show gritted teeth, grey gums—while worms of green fire crawled in his eyes and sinews corded in his swelling neck. Once more fear tore at Ruth, fear not of speed but of this man, this stranger who was her husband. Her skin crawled with the fear, and she sobbed, cringing beneath the almost solid beat of the wind.

The car rocked, taking a curve, slicing around on two wheels as it roared down the wind, tooled by a madman. A madman! Oh God, was that it? Was that why Rand—?

THE *put-put-put* of the following cycle was close behind, close along—

side. A gauntleted hand gestured; light flashed abruptly from a gun that it held. Rand snarled, but slowed—slowed and stopped. The highway-patrolman vaulted from his wheel, lunged toward them, his gun blinding in the sunlight.

"Parker?" he growled. "Rand Parker?" He was on the running-board, and his gun was thrust into Rand's face. "Snatch artist, eh. But you're not gettin' far this time. Reach!"

Rand's hands left the wheel, lifted slowly above his head. Ruth's heart pounded. Here was rescue, safety!

Metal clinked and the officer's other hand came over the car-side, handcuffs dangling. "Gimme your wrists, bozo, while I slip these bracelets on."

The line of jaw that was all Ruth could see of her husband's face whitened, writhed with lumping muscles. His shoulders slumped pathetically.

"What is this, officer?" Ruth asked suddenly. "I didn't know there was a speed limit on Middle Road." And she was startled at what she had said, startled that she spoke at all!

The man's florid, grim face jerked to her, the weather-wrinkles about his eyes deepening. "What the . . .! This ain't no pinch for speedin'. This is—Hey! Ain't you Ruth Kane? Ain't you the dame this guy's snatching?"

"Snatching?" Her eyes went wide, puzzled. "I don't understand." What was she doing, what was she saying? The policeman was heaven-sent to her rescue and she was—

"Kidnaping. Ain't this Parker kidnaping you? I got a flash on the short-wave that—"

"Kidnaping!" Ruth's head went back and a laugh shrilled from her, a thin, hysteric laugh. "Rand! Dear!" she sputtered. "Did you hear that? Jack and dad must have done it. I saw them whispering together just before we started."

Then, to the officer, "Mr. Parker is my husband. We were just married in St. James' Church at Midville and we're starting on our honeymoon. My father and our best man are playing a trick on us."

The patrolman glowered. "Well I'll be—damned." His revolver lowered slowly, and the handcuffs. "An' me near breaking my neck chasing you."

Rand's arms came down; he fumbled in his pocket. "Strikes me," he chuckled, "that the joke's on you rather than on us." Something green crisped between his hand and the policeman's, "Will you drink to our happiness?"

The man grinned. "That I will, and mean it. Good luck to you, sir. The best of luck."

"That I have already. The very best." There was exultation in Rand's voice, and gladness almost ecstatic. "Good-bye, officer."

"Good-bye, and good luck again."

The motorcycle *putted* away. Rand twisted to Ruth, had her in his arms. "Oh my dear. My sweetheart. My wife."

"Be good to me, Rand," Ruth murmured against his greedy lips. "Oh, be good to me. Don't frighten me any more. Please don't let me be frightened any more."

"I'll try, dear. I'll try not to. But you must help me."

**F**ATIGUE and the long monotony of the drive had lulled Ruth to sleep. She awoke with a start to grey dusk over which the inverted drab bowl of an overcast sky was clamped tightly down. The road still stretched unendingly ahead, a ribbon of lighter grey between flat, dun fields where no living thing seemed to move. Rand was a silent, carved image beside her, peering ahead with brooding eyes, and beneath her was the rolling hiss of the tires and tiny rattles as pebbles

sputtered up against the fenders. Otherwise there was no sound, utterly no sound to relieve the uncanny hush of the day's dying. So unchanging was the dreary landscape that almost it seemed to the girl that they were quite still, thrumming a treadmill that would wheel eternally beneath them till the end of time.

Midville was far behind, with its trim, white houses and its spic gardens. Her youth was far behind, her friends, and her stern-faced but kindly-eyed father. It was as if she were in an alien, distant land, wandering alone.

No, not alone. With this man, whom, queerly, she had given up all that was dear to follow. This stranger! Who was he? What was he?

The girl gulped with sudden panic as the realization swept in on her of how little she knew of Rand, of her—husband. Three weeks ago Jack Storm had phoned to ask her if he might bring around a client who would be in town for a while pending some litigation. And a tall, still-faced young man had come up with him through her garden at dusk. Waiting on the porch their eyes had met. Some intelligence had passed between them, and—there had been nobody, nobody in all the world for her but Rand Parker.

Nothing had deterred her, not her father's perturbation, not Jack's stricken pleading. Now she was Rand's wife, her life merged irretrievably with his . . . His life was hers. The dread that brooded in his eyes as they entered into the desolate land that was to be her land, as they neared his home that was to be her home, that dread had come into her eyes too.

It was a leaden lump in her bosom, a crawling fear in her blood, of some unknown menace that waited somewhere on this empty road. This road that lifted imperceptibly for long, grey miles till abruptly it ended against the sky—as if be-

yond were a void, a vast, horrible nothingness.

And suddenly, even as she felt these things, the road was no longer empty. Ahead, so far ahead that at first it was only a black blotch against the grey, a lonely figure plodded toward the ominous horizon. Even at that distance it seemed weary, terribly weary.

At the instant Ruth glimpsed it, an oath slid through Rand's tight lips and the car surged forward with a burst of speed. It pulled the trudging figure nearer. The girl saw now that it was a woman, black hooded, black cloaked, bent with age. Motor-roar crescendoed, the roadster was a juggernaut hurtling through the twilight—hurtling straight at the ancient, quite unaware of the death rushing upon her.

A nightmare paralysis held Ruth; she could not turn, she could not scream. The woman was only a hundred yards away, silhouetted at the top of the ridge. She turned momentarily and within the shadow of her hood her face was cadaverous, skull-like, the yellowed, parchment skin drawn tight.

She dipped behind the crest of the road. The roadster roared over it. And a silent shriek ripped Ruth's throat. . . .

**T**HERE was no one on the road! Slowly descending now, and curving, the concrete stretched away, starkly tenantless. There were flat, treeless fields on either side, and for a mile ahead the highway was visible. There was nowhere the woman could have gone, nowhere she could be hidden. There ahead, true enough, the trail curved behind a gaunt, straight screen of poplars, but she couldn't have reached it in the time that had elapsed. . . .

Brakes squealed. The car slowed, coasted to the poplars and just beyond. Stopped.



Ruth heard a quivering sigh from beside her. But she was in the grip of a cold shudder that ran through her, and her scalp was tight with fear—of the road, and the old woman in black who had vanished, and of Rand. Most of all of Rand. Once again she was afraid of her husband. Her husband! Mad laughter quivered in her breast as she thought the word. *Her husband!*

What was he? In God's name what was he? What strange rage inflamed him that he had slapped Dr. Forbes, that he had threatened her father with a gun, that he had hurled the ton-weight death of his car at an inoffensive old woman alone on a lonely road? Was he a madman? A demon? Her lips twitched. She must be far gone in terror to think that . . . . But he could be so tender, his adoration could fold her to him in ineffable warmth. His voice could thrill so with love for her. As so often before. As now!

"Here we are, dear. At last we are here!" Softly, with just a trace of pleasurable excitement.

Ruth's blurred vision cleared. On the right the level desolation through which they had been riding so long continued. On the left—Good Lord—on the left the dark, swaying poplars screened a graveyard! The ancient burial-ground sloped gently up from the road and its tombstones jutted from the matted weeds and vines that had overgrown it like rotted, defaced fangs from the scummed jaws of some impossibly gigantic monster.

One only of the gravestones was new. It was right at the roadside and Ruth read the inscription, at first mechanically, then with an uneasy stirring.

GRESHAM PARKER  
1866-1934

Living he taught us how to live;  
Dying how to die.

Is there another who can give  
Such claim to immortality?

Pray not for him but for those he left behind

Beyond, gloomy shadows lay heavily in the tangle, black and ominous, and at the very center of the burial plot a deeper shadow blanketed the ground. This was the shadow of a towering mausoleum, still whole but smeared with slimy green, somehow decrepit, somehow more dead than the dead it had been raised to contain. Otherwise there was no sight of a house, no slightest hint of any human being.

An awful premonition froze Ruth's blood. "Here?" she squeezed from between rigid lips. "Here? Where?"

Rand gestured—to the gaunt tomb stark against the grisly sky! "Here, dear. Home. This—is your home."

## CHAPTER TWO

### *In the Tomb*

RUTH stifled a scream. *Home!* Horror stunned her like a physical blow so that she sat rigid, her heart stilled as if in death, her body sheathed with ice. Horror's talons clawed her breast, her shrieking brain. She retched, and the grey, eerie world circled dizzily around her in a mad whirl wherein two things only were still. The monstrous sepulcher loomed, windowless and somehow blind with the awful blindness of the damned, its great bronze door greenly phosphorescent, slimed, corrupt. And Rand leaned over her, gigantic to her distorted vision, gigantic and dreadful, his teeth flashing a white, fearful grin as his arms slid around her. And, queerly, she did not feel their touch at all.

Words dripped from his smile, searing her. "You know the beautiful custom, my dear," he said. "Of the groom carrying his bride across the threshold of their future home?" She knew it. As every other girl she had dreamed of the time when she should pass through the door of happiness in the arms of her

lover. And now . . . *He* had lifted her. She was in *his* arms and he was carrying her through the graveyard.

Shadows that were more and less than shadows slid silently through the rank growth that had nurtured on human bones. Tendrils greyed by the grey dusk coiled about Rand's legs, released them reluctantly. Night's black pall dropped silently down, but the approaching, towering tomb was pallidly luminant with an uncanny glow of putrescence and decay. Home! The gravestones were a ghostly host about her, and dark wings whispered overhead.

Rand reached steps, eroded steps once proudly white. His footfalls thudded dully on their carpeting of moss as he ascended them. Everything else was blotted out by the huge portal across whose ominous high loom a shadow flitted. Wings beat, and a bat wheel flung out of the gloom, dropped straight for Ruth. Somehow it was the final, unbearable touch of horror. A scream of agony sliced the silence, a scream from her own throat—and blackness exploded within her skull, swallowed her in merciful oblivion.

\* \* \*

As Ruth swung up out of weltering darkness the first sensation she knew was that with which she had descended into it. Her body throbbed with horror. Dread was a steely band constricting the pulse of her temples. Fear sent tiny tremors through her slight frame. Despair crawled in her veins.

What was it she had wedded? Was he human at all, this man who had brought her through grey desolation to a rotting tomb? Her husband! Oh God! He was her husband, and the home to which he had brought her was a decrepit sepulcher foul with corruption. What now? What grisly fate awaited her in this dwelling of the dead?

Strange. Warmth beat about her, seep-

ing into the chill within her. That on which she lay was soft to her strength-drained quivering body, and there was no taint of corruption in the warm air she breathed. Warily, fearfully, she opened her eyes—and gasped.

She was lying on her side on a couch, a comfortable, almost luxurious couch. Across the big room she faced flames dancing cheerily in the deep embrasure of a graceful fireplace. Their light was caught in the glowing, ruby sheen of a sumptuous Sarouk rug covering the vast expanse of the floor. Before the hearth a small table was covered with white damask, set with a glittering service for two.

Impossible! No, the other was impossible, the nightmare that had encompassed a grey, endless road stretching into infinity, a black-garbed hag who had vanished, a graveyard and a sepulcher. Exhausted, she had fallen asleep on the long journey, had dreamed awfully. It had been a dream. Of course it had been a dream. But it had been so terribly real.

Ruth sighed in relief. Her lids closed again as the grateful warmth of the fire folded over her. A door opened and closed, somewhere. Footsteps whispered across the rug. She sensed Rand standing above her, sensed that he had knelt beside her. His arm was across her breasts, his hand slid under her armpit, beneath her shoulder. His lips were on hers in a long kiss, and hers responded. Fear, dread were gone in the ecstasy of that embrace. He was her husband, her lover, her other self. . . .

"My sweet." His very voice was a caress. Ruth's eyes opened once more, looked into the fathomless depths of his where love glowed. But there was pain there, also, and suffering. And a lurking fear. A hand seemed to tighten about the girl's heart, and she yearned to assuage his inexplicable agony. Her arm stole up around his neck, pulled his head gently

down to her breast. His head nestled there like a tired child's.

A new log caught flame in the fire, flared. Fingers of orange-red luminance reached higher on the walls of the room and Ruth saw that they were of damp-streaked, green-scummed marble, windowless, lifting to black impenetrable shadows brooding beneath an invisible roof! Saw that those sepulchral walls were unbroken except to one side where rough, verdigris-patinaed bronze was the inner surface of the door she had seen in her dream!

Then it had *not* been a dream! Horror gripped her throat once more, doubly poignant because of the brief relief, and a long shudder quivered through her. Rand's head lifted. His eyes bored into hers, eyes staring with haunting fear out of a livid face.

His mouth twitched and a whisper, husky with dread, slid from it. "Afraid? Are you also afraid, my dear, of death?"

"Of death?" It wasn't death Ruth feared in that moment. "Why should I be afraid of death?"

"Why?" It was a hysteric squeal. "How can you be otherwise? Inescapably to be completely blotted out—the *you* that thinks and dreams and loves—suddenly to be nothing, inevitably to be—ended—like a candle-flame is ended when one blows it out, how can you . . ."

Rand's wail of terror more horrible than any the girl could conceive cut off. Now he was listening, intently listening. The muscles of his face writhed in a paroxysm of fear that flared in his eyes like twin pools of black flame. . . .

His hand clawed on Ruth's breast. The fire-glow in this chamber for the dead seemed to lose its radiance. An invisible shadow filled the room, some awful presence manifest in neither sight nor sound. Ruth also was listening now, her spine prickling. And sound came to her. A tiny

hiss, a minute, sourceless scratching. It was darker in the room. Uncannily it was growing darker though still the girl heard the crackle of the fire. Moving air passed chill fingers through her hair.

The scratching was coming from the bronze portal and it was moving! It was opening slowly, slowly. . . . A great crack showed between its leaves from the threshold to the murk veiling their top. The fading light seeped into it. Ruth saw a vague dark bulk in the aperture, saw gnarled, hairy fingers jag' the door edge. Saw a hand come in; a hand clenched, gripping the hilt of a rusted knife. And then the light was altogether gone!

**D**ARKNESS swallowed Ruth. Metal clanged resoundingly. Rand whimpered. The pressure of him on her taut body was gone. Feet padded in the blackness. Heavy, panting breathing was everywhere. Rand was somewhere in the blackness, and someone, *something* else was there too.

Faint whisperings of fabric, the slither of furtive feet, the soft thud of flesh against some furnishing, peopled the Plutonian lightlessness for Ruth with prowling, fearful life. Death stalked the darkness in his own dwelling, hunting down her husband, hunting down her lover. And she might herself have been a corpse, so cold, so unbreathing, so rigid she lay.

But her throat was sore, rasped with unuttered screams, and fear writhed within her. Fear for herself, unutterable fear for Rand. It was not death alone that prowled the murk. It was something worse than death. It was a fate unspeakable. Lightlessness of the eternal grave was about her, and the dank cold of the grave, and in them horror stalked a pallid prey.

Her couch jarred as something came against it. Slimy, rotten fabric brushed

across her face, leaving behind the stench of corruption in her flared nostrils. Right above her soft bodies impacted. Someone snarled. An unseen struggle swayed above her, the more awesome because of its grim quiet. There was only a rug-muffled thump of pounding feet, a muted grunting not human at all, a hiss of straining body against body, to betray its progress. But she knew that Rand and the— the whatever it was that had come to hunt him down—were locked in mortal combat.

If only this paralysis of terror did not chain her helpless to her couch. If only she could move, leap up, help Rand. Help Rand—but how? She could not see him, she was utterly blinded, she could not tell where he was, could not tell him from his antagonist. How could she help him?

The invisible battle was more noisy now. Animal sounds came from it, slaverings, gruntings, and again the marrow-chilling snarl that twice she had heard before. The combat whirled away. . . .

Then Rand shrieked—once! Horribly. That single screech of awful agony sliced the darkness, sliced the psychic lashings that held her. Ruth heaved from the couch, lunged at the sound, her little fists flailing.

"Rand!" she screamed. "Rand! You—" Her fists found cold and clammy flesh in the darkness, flesh that had no firmness, that quivered under their impact, jelly-like and unresisting as though far gone in decay. Once. Twice. Then a noisome mass pounded across her head, pounded her down, smashed her to the floor, and left her there half-stunned, numbed, unable momentarily to move.

But she could still hear. She could hear a slow slither across the floor, the drag of a heavier body, a moan of pain. She heard the screech of bronze hinges flung wide, and the clang of the closing portal. And she knew then that Rand, her Rand,

was not dead—not dead but injured and in the power of the gruesome Thing that had brought eerie darkness with it, and the stench of an unhallowed grave.

That stench was still foul on her breath, but the darkness was lifting. Uncannily as it had come the blackness was fading. Bulking things were taking form in a lurid glow that deepened to the light of the fire that had not gone out, that never had gone out though its radiance had been completely quenched. The returning light wavered across the incongruously furnished parlor within a sepulcher, and Ruth saw that she was alone, utterly alone.

The girl whimpered, lying there. At the edges of the fire-glow that now did not quite reach the walls of the room, formless shadows were ominous, veiling intangible fears. The fire faded and flared and that which they hid surged toward her, retreated, surged toward her once more.

The rug where she lay was the color of blood—was wetted, stained in a dark pool right at her side! Ruth's eyes widened as she stared at the glistening smear. Her hand crept to it, her fingers touched it. It was warm, still warm, and the tips of her fingers where they had touched it were scarlet. This *was* blood. His blood. Rand's blood!

The rusted knife a shaggy hand had thrust through the tomb's opening door had found its billet in Rand's flesh. Rand was wounded, terribly wounded, and that which had come to attack him had carried him away—to finish him! Yes! There were other stains on the rug, a trail of them, and that trail led straight to the door!

**R**UTH'S small hands beat at the rug and a red burst of wrath seethed in her brain. Suddenly she was on her feet, was reeling to the great bronze barrier, her lips a tight gash across her set face, her eyes ablaze with anger. No! The

damned Thing could not kill him. She wouldn't let it. She wouldn't let it kill her husband!

She reached the portal, stared at it. There was no knob, nothing by which she could open it. Good Lord! She couldn't get out. She couldn't get out to help Rand, to save him. Why was there no knob? Of course! *The dead need none. The dead never arise to leave their tomb!*

But she was not dead, she was alive. And she had to get out. She had to. Rand . . . .

Thinly through the bronze a scream quivered from without. Oh God! Oh merciless God! That was Rand, it must be Rand. He was still alive! He was screaming for help!

Ruth threw herself at the unyielding metal, battered herself against it. It was immovable, ponderous as though embedded in rock. Shifting the attack, she dug nails into the threadlike crack between its huge leaves, broke her nails to the quick in that impenetrable crack, and did not notice the pain, did not notice the oozing blood.

Through her own whimpering, her baffled mewling, she heard Rand scream again, and the tenuous sound was edged with anguish. He was out there, crying for help, crying to her for help against the grisly Thing that he had dreaded and that had taken him, and she could not get to him. Maddeningly she was locked in here and could not get out to help him.

Wild-eyed, Ruth stared around the room, looking for something with which to pound down the bronze barrier, to smash through it.

And she saw another door, there beside the fireplace! A small door of wood—it must be through there that Rand had come while her eyes were closed. Was it another exit?

Ruth hurled herself across the room to it, colliding with a heavy chair, not

feeling the shock of the collision. She clawed at the small door's knob, twisted it, pulled it toward her. The door opened, she was through it. She was in a musty-smelling tunnel. Light filtered into it, and she saw its low roof, its damp-blackened walls, its earthen floor. Then the gallery twisted, cutting off light, and her running footsteps echoed hollowly from a vast, black distance.

The passage twisted, twisted again. Stone rasped her face, her arms, rasped the skin from it as curving walls gave first notice of unseen turns. She lost all sense of direction, all count of time. She seemed to have been running for ages through impenetrable dark, through a meandering gallery that bored musty, dank earth. Grave-stench was foul in her nostrils, unseen creatures of the slime scuttered from before her, slithering and horrible. The thud of her footfalls were loud in that enclosed space.

She slipped, fell . . . .

And as she lay gasping she heard pounding footfalls behind her, an onrushing thud of footsteps that the pound of her own mad dash had hidden. She was not alone! She was no longer alone. Something followed her through the foul dark. Something pursued her.

She choked down a shriek of pure terror, scrambled to get to her feet. Her hand slithered in slime. She rolled to get a better purchase.

The earth gave way beneath her! She was falling—falling . . . . A few feet and she thudded to a stop in soft loam.

Gasping, spitting rank earth from her clogged mouth, Ruth knew that the thud of that which pursued her was close upon her. She tensed in the grip of new terror, tensed to meet its onslaught.

But the footfalls pounded right overhead, pounded past, thudded fainter and fainter in the distance.

**T**HAT slip, that frightening slide had been fortunate. It had thrown her into some depression in the dark tunnel, thrown her out of the way of whatever it was that pursued her, and it had passed her in the blackness. If she turned back now, back to the tomb, she would be safe. She could lock the little door, bar the bronze one, and be safe.

But already she had tried to get out of that room to Rand, and failed. This tunnel must lead to the outer air somewhere, some time—to the outer air, unimaginable peril, and Rand. It could not go on forever underneath the earth. Backward lay comparative safety, ahead was danger, danger the more horrible because its nature was unknown.

Ruth scrambled out of the pit and turned—away from the sepulcher that now was a sanctuary. Toward the dark ahead and its unknown menace. Toward Rand.

A chill breeze fanned her face. Somewhere close ahead there must be an opening to the outer air. Ruth was running again, running though fear clogged her muscles, clamped her breath.

A curving wall swerved her again. Before her an oval of light showed, glimmering light that would have been darkness were it not for contrast with the Stygian gloom through which she had journeyed so long. Ruth spurted on. . . .

Then she saw the glimmer blotted by a still, waiting figure, a black figure whose outlines firmed to those of a little old woman, cloaked and hooded, and bent with age. The little old woman at whom Rand had murderously hurled his car. The spectral old woman who had vanished, inexplicably, in the blinking moment she had been obscured by the dip in the road.

It was too late to stop. Ruth threw herself at the dark, affrighting shape, was tangled in fabric, sleazy, rotted, odorous

with corruption, was blinded by enveloping cloth and thudded against a cadaverous, bony figure within it. She heard a muffled shriek like the cry of a screech-owl. The skeleton-like form collapsed under her, but its tangled draperies pulled her down with it, atop it, and bony fingers raked her face.

The girl's flesh burned with cold fire where those grisly fingers had touched. The vileness of corruption pulled into her lungs with each gasping breath. She tossed about, fighting the clogging cloth, fighting the emaciated body that squirmed beneath her, fighting terror that was a gelid stream in her blood, an icy blade stabbing her brain.

Fingers that were bones covered by dry skin clamped Ruth's throat, squeezed, squeezed till her lungs shrieked for air and a blackness that was not of the night welled up in her brain. Crackling laughter rattled through the roar in her ears. She tore at bony arms, clawed arms imbued with supernatural strength, arms that would not move.

A green and ghastly light flashed into being, striking in between Ruth and the ancient hag in whose arms there was such convulsive strength. The girl saw the face of her antagonist—its yellow skin like parchment drawn together, so tight that every curve, every roughness of the bone beneath showed through and she was staring at a hairless skull—yellow-fanged, sunken-eyed, marrow-melting. The ghastly horror of that face stabbed her with a new terror even through the pain of her extremity. . . .

And abruptly arms shoved past her own head from behind; shaggy, brutal fingers clutched the bony wrists at her throat and ripped them away. Ruth pulled a gasping breath into her tortured lungs, twisted toward her rescuer.

The huge hairy hands moved swiftly. One slapped over her face, covering her

eyes, her nose, her mouth—its leathery skin rasping, its stretch foul, noisome. The other slid across her breasts, slid around her, and its arm constricted, holding her tight. She felt bulging muscles ripple against her body, felt herself lifted effortlessly from the emaciated form of the ancient, felt herself cradled in binding arms that were like gnarled tree-boughs come alive. A grating, triumphant laugh sounded in her ears. . . .

### CHAPTER THREE

#### A Grave for Two

RUTH lay on a mound of loose earth. Ropes lashed her, cutting into her soft flesh, binding her helpless, and a filthy rag was stuffed into her mouth, gagging her. Pain was a living thing, tormenting her—streaks of pain across her face where the hag's fleshless fingers had sliced, pain noosing her throat where those same fingers had clamped to choke. Pain throbbed in her body and her temples.

But the physical hurt was nothing to her mental agony, the torture of her grief and her despair. For in the wan green light coming from a torch stuck into the earth of the abandoned graveyard, another form lay next to hers.

Gruesomely still on the bed of fresh-dug, foul loam, Rand's fine-chiseled face was a ghastly green cameo against the black dirt, its features frozen to a mask of infinite terror. He was not bound—there was no need to bind him. His body did not stir; it crouched there flaccid, unmoving, and across his dark breast a darker stain was his own clotted blood that had ceased to flow. She could see the gash through his jacket—the gaping wound a rusty knife, slashing in the dark, had made.

Dull sound impacted her hearing, the thud of a spade sinking into yielding soil.

The green luminance was blackened by a moving shadow that passed over her, and flattened, momentarily still, on the loam beyond. A twisted, grotesque thing that shadow was; the umbra of an ape-man from the mists of prehistory; a jutting-jawed, barrel-chested, long-armed being one step above the beast, the more foul because human passions tainted the clean cruelty of the beast. The shadow moved again, the thing that cast it grunted, and earth arced, spattered to add to the pile where Ruth and her husband lay.

She had sworn not to look at him again, but the irresistible fascination of infinite fear pulled her aching eyes away from Rand and to the digger. The green torch was behind him, its radiance hazed by the effluvium rising from the ancient graves, and he bulked against it a black, formless silhouette. But Ruth could make out a browless, prognathous-jawed head, huge in itself but incongruously small to the vast spread of shoulder on which it was pressed. She could see the shaggy, enormous black body, the muscle-bulging, simian arms, the short, thick legs spread to the tremendous weight of his torso and curiously bent at the knees. And the green light filtered into the hole the man-beast was digging, the square-sided, rectangular hole the monstrous sexton was cutting in the stinking black loam of the graveyard.

Granules of earth slithered away from her as a shudder Ruth could not repress took her bound, slender form. That hole was a grave—of that there could be no doubt. It was a grave—but it was wide, too wide for one corpse. Too wide for the corpse of her murdered husband alone. *Who else was doomed to lie in that rapidly deepening mortuary pit?*

Once more the question pounded at her brain, and again thought fled gibbering from the obvious answer. That horror, that ultimate horror, could not be. There

must be some other corpse hidden somewhere in the sepulchral gloom of the necropolis, behind one or another of the leaning, decrepit gravestones so ghastly green in the torch's flickering luminance, some other victim of the midnight delver. The woman, perhaps, the old woman who was anyway half a corpse. That was it, he had killed the old woman too and he was going to bury her with Rand.

The spade struck deep. Something white gleamed in the load it brought up, a bone. There were others piled to one side, helter-skelter, the desecrated bones of those who were being dispossessed to make way for new tenants of the soil where so long they had slept undisturbed. Clawed, hairy fingers plucked the newest relic from the shovel-load, flung it to the pile. It rattled, and a skull rolled away, brought up against some roughness, rocked a bit so that some awful return of life seemed to have come to it as it grinned up at Ruth.

Something touched her side, fumbled at her lashings. Somehow the girl resisted the startled jerk of her muscles, kept herself rigid. She rolled her head slowly, neck muscles taut and quivering, icy with fear lest the motion attract the killer. No one was beside her but Rand, no one at all, and he was motionless, death-flaccid as before.

No, not quite as before. His arm had moved, the arm toward her, so stealthily that even she had not heard its slow creep. His arm was extended to reach her and it was his fingers that worked at the knots that bound her. He was not dead! Rand was alive!

**T**HANK God! Oh thank God! Rand was alive! At the moment that was all that mattered. Her lover was not dead. And in minutes he would have her free so that she might fight for him, fight for him and herself. A surge of strength

warmed her chill frame, a surge of determination heated her numb brain. Somehow they two would beat the shaggy killer, somehow they would escape the fate to which he had doomed them.

A change in the tempo of the chunking spade-strokes brought her head around again. The ape-man straightened. The long shovel-handle stuck upright from the earth-bank where he had thrust it. He was finished. Oh God! He had finished the double grave too soon!

From beneath the beetling bush of his eyebrows his little eyes slid to her, caught the light and were twin green orbs glittering menace, grim, reptilian menace. Thick words mumbled from between his protruding lips.

"Enough. Big enough."

His flat-topped, simian head canted a bit to one side, as though he were listening. Ruth heard no sound, but that gargoyle-like head nodded gravely and the brute-formed half-man lumbered into motion, coming toward her.

The fumbling of Rand's fingers had ceased, and the ropes were tight, tight as before. Every cell in Ruth's body shrieked protest, her brain crawled with terror and despair. The killer was coming for Rand, was coming to deposit him in the grave he had dug. The killer was right over her, had paused, was stooping.

His great arms stabbed forward and his hairy hands closed on her. The retreating slope of his animal face writhed as yellowed fangs showed in a cruel grin and his fetid breath stank in her nostrils. He heaved. She came up in his grasp, twisting futilely in the grip of hands that clamped ankles and wrists with a clutch of steel. He half-turned, ignoring her feeble struggles, and threw her—straight into the gaping maw of the grave he had dug!

She thumped to its noisome floor, but did not feel the pound of her body for



the smash of realization that stunned her mind. *She* was the other destined for this earthly crypt. *She*, alive and conscious, was to be buried here. Buried alive!

Thump! Rand pounded down alongside her, threshed, groaned. Her husband lay next to her! A spasm contorted Ruth's body, mad laughter tore at her throat. God! Oh God! This was their wedding night! This grave was their couch, their nuptial bed! From church to sepulcher to grave—was ever honeymoon a nightmare such as this?

He was alive, and she was alive, and they were in a pit that was a grave, and the first clods of earth that were to bury them thumped down. Another!

Rand rolled. Concealment useless now, his fingers tore at the knots that bound her and his voice rattled in her ears. "Ruth. Pull. Try to loosen them." His voice was thin with terror. "Help me."

Useless. Worse than useless to struggle as earth rained down on them from the mad sexton above them. Mad? Of course he was mad, and she was mad, and this wasn't happening at all.

She could see the great, grotesque figure up there, could see the sweep of his spade over the aperture and see the earth slide off it, thud down. She saw misty light behind him.

Abruptly, then, there was a swirl of blackness behind him. A skinny arm darted out of folds of black fabric. A knife arced and suddenly vanished in the jointure between the bullet head and bulking shoulders. Blood spurted, sprayed over Ruth and Rand.

And in that moment the ropes came free! She twisted, clawed at Rand. The two lifted; their heads came up out of the grave as the ape-man slid past them down the grave-side. The gaunt figure of the hag was black against the pale loom of the mausoleum, and the knife in her hand

dripped scarlet. Then she was twisting, turning to run.

Words burst from Rand, a great, sobbing cry. "Wait! Don't go away. Don't!"

He had scrambled from the grave, but the old woman was a flitting shadow among the tombstones. Rand plunged after her. Ruth got hands on the crumbling earth of the grave; her feet groped and found a lift in something that heaved under them, something she knew was the body of the ape-man not yet dead. Fingers clutched her ankle; she kicked viciously, leaped. She was out of the grave, was on her feet; she was running after Rand, already far off in the sepulchral vista of the burial ground.

SHE was running after Rand, and he after the flitting black shape of the woman. "Rand!" Ruth screamed. "Rand!"

"Come on," he flung over his shoulder, not turning. "Come on." And suddenly the woman was gone.

She had vanished in an oval shadow near the road, and Rand plunged into that shadow, vanished too! Ruth skimmed past a leaning stone, twisted to the dark place where the two she followed had flicked into nothingness, saw that it was an arched opening in the earth. Ruth dived into it.

Musty blackness closed around the girl, earth thudded beneath her pounding footfalls and a stone wall scraped her arm. She was again in the tunnel along which she had fled from the tomb—and far ahead of her was Rand, and ahead of him the woman in black. The pound of their feet was a thunder in the passage—the pound of their feet, Rand's shout, and the woman's shrill scream.

It seemed to Ruth that there were fewer turnings in the black passage than when she had fled along it before, and that it was longer. . . .

Then abruptly its floor lifted under her feet. Light burst on her, across which passed the two she pursued—Rand now close upon the black-cloaked woman. Then Ruth was out of the tunnel.

But not in the mausoleum. This was, queerly, an old-fashioned parlor with velour-draped windows, a dusty whatnot crammed with gim-crackery, a fretted table at its center on which burned a round-globed lamp. And in the room's center Rand struggled with the old woman in black.

No! He held her in his arms! The hood was dropped back from her skull-like head, and—Good God!—he was kissing the fleshless lips!

The panting girl's eyes went wide with panic. Was he mad? Was her husband indeed a madman?

Rand's face lifted from the woman's, and it was alight with joy. "Mother! It's all right. I'm over it now. I shall never be afraid of death again."

"Your father was cruel, then, but he was right." The thin, quavering voice was wholly human, and Ruth saw now that her visage was tender somehow, and gentle—that only the tracing of years and suffering had made it seem so horrible. "You will be the happier for this one dreadful night." Her thin, transparent fingers touched his cheek. "You understand and forgive him now, do you not?"

Rand's countenance hardened. "I understand and I forgive him for myself, but not for what he has done to—my wife. If I had known—" He turned, his arm reached for Ruth, and trembling, she slipped into its circle, felt it tighten—"what it would do to my brave and loyal wife. . . ."

"Brave and loyal is right," his mother interrupted, "and very sweet." Her eyes were pleading. "So brave and loyal and sweet that I am sure she too will forgive us when she understands."

There was something so pathetic, so appealing in her tone and her expression that Ruth could not be harsh. "What is it," she asked, "that I am to understand and forgive?"

"The horrors you have passed through tonight." Rand's mother sighed. "The shock of being brought to a tomb to pass your bridal night. Perhaps Rand should not have done it. Perhaps he should have permitted himself to be disinherited. . . ."

"It wasn't the money, Mother. If that were all. . . ." Rand made a gesture of renunciation. "It was because it was father's last wish and I could not refuse."

RUTH looked from one to the other, bewildered. Her husband's cheeks were still waxen-pale, his eyes anxious. His mother smiled wistfully. "You see, my dear, what emotional strife he must have passed through."

"Yes," Rand croaked. "I think I was half-mad with resentment during the ceremony. I don't remember anything but the beginning, and kissing you at the end. Once, even, I thought I saw his face in front of me and that I slapped it. . . ."

So that was why. . . . But the old woman was talking. "My dear, we Parkers are a strange family. My husband Gresham was moody, perhaps eccentric. But a wise man. A very wise man. I had two sons. Paul, the oldest, was born—well, you saw him outside tonight. . . ."

Ruth gasped. "That was your son! Rand, that was your brother. . . .!"

"That was my son, and my cross." Tears showed in the old woman's eyes, and agony. "We were quite sure his deformity was only physical, though he was never very bright. Certainly he was never violent, until—" She stopped, shuddered. "But that comes later. . . ."

"Rand, while otherwise a normal boy, has been afflicted from earliest childhood

with an abnormal fear of death. He used to awaken at night screaming, and sob in my arms that he did not want to die, to stop, as he put it. As he grew older the fear grew worse. . . ."

"I suffered the tortures of the damned," Rand put in. "Sometimes I cursed my parents for bearing me so that I should know what it is to live and be aware that inevitably I must die. . . ."

"Wait, Rand, let me tell Ruth. This omnipresent fear of his preyed on his mind till we were afraid that he would become insane. Gresham tried various schemes to cure him, but never successfully—until, on his dying bed he thought of something.

"He put it in his will. After setting aside a life income for me, his property was to be held in trust until Rand married. On his wedding night Rand was to bring his bride to the mausoleum in the graveyard over the hill, without giving her a word of explanation, and spend that first night there with her. You see, he wanted to tie up his son's happiest experience with the thought of death, and thus invest that thought with something of the glamor of the other.

"If Rand failed to obey, all the property was to go to Paul. If he went through with it Rand would get the estate."

"Oh horrible!" Ruth shuddered.

"Yes, very horrible. But wise, except that Gresham could not have foreseen that Paul would have gone violently insane while Rand was away discussing the trust with Mr. Storm, his lawyer. . . ."

"Was he insane, Mother?" Rand broke in. "After all, if he drove me away from the tomb, or killed me, he would inherit—"

"He was insane, Rand." The old lady's response was peremptory, but Ruth wondered if she quite believed it. "My—my daughter—" Again that wistful smile—

"If your experiences tonight were terrible, what do you think mine were, knowing that Rand was coming with his bride and that my other son was lurking somewhere to kill him? How do you think I felt, watching on the road to intercept Rand? What horror do you think was mine when I saw your car coming, and at the same moment saw Paul crouched in the mouth of the tunnel Rand had dug so that he could get in and out of the sepulcher unobserved—Paul with a knife in his hand that he meant for his brother? I chased my mad son. . . ."

Rand stirred. "When I saw you out on the road I knew something was horribly wrong and speeded up to overtake you. But you were gone by the time I got over the ridge. The first I knew it must be Paul was when the screen I had rigged to cover the fire, whenever the tomb-door opened, began to drop—"

"I caught Paul and locked him in his room, but he got out again and—"

"Wait," Ruth cried. "Wait. I can imagine the rest. I don't want to hear about it. Not ever again."

"Ruth!" Rand's voice was husky, broken. "Then you cannot forgive me! But—I can't blame you. . . . I'll take you home in the morning, and—"

Ruth's hand touched his lips, stopping him. "Silly. You will take me nowhere in the morning." A great wave of pity surged within her. "I am home. *This* is my home. And we'll forget all the horror and I shall try to make you very happy from now on, you—and Mother. . . ."

Rand's exclamation was a great shout of joy as he gathered her into his arms. "Then you forgive me?"

"Of course. Of course, my husband, my lover. Of—"

The pressure of his lips against hers, choking off utterance, was so sweet, so sweet. . . .