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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.



**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

# Mortmain

BY SEABURY QUINN

*A peculiar tale of a beautiful Russian vampire from Manchukuo—a  
ch'ing shih—who could not sleep quiet in her grave, and  
could not be given a true death by the stake*

RANLEIGH looked up, puzzled, as the mellow radio-chime of the mortuary's doorbell boomed its triple-note of warning. One might expect a 'phone call half an hour after midnight, but who would ring the bell at this time? He was alone in the office, for it was Jim Atherholt's evening off and Basset, his junior assistant, had gone to the corner for sandwiches and coffee. Burglars generally shun funeral homes, but . . . he took the pistol from his desk drawer and dropped it in the pocket of his well-cut oxford-gray jacket as he rose to answer the summons which was sounding again, insistently, irritably, as though the caller kept his finger on the bell button.

In the coned-down light of the porch lamp he descried a figure muffled to the ears in upturned collar, caught the glint of beaver fur on the visitor's overcoat, and appraised the stylish Homburg hat. His fingers relaxed on the pistol grip. The caller might be mysterious, but he was obviously no burglar.

"Good evening—ah, good evening, Mr. Steadman!" he greeted as he snapped off the latch and drew the door back. "Come in, please." Then, as his visitor stepped into the lobby he stood waiting, brows raised politely in interrogation. Doctors, lawyers and morticians are denied the layman's right to give way to their curiosity; the cardinal rule of their callings is to maintain a poker face, whatever their

impulses may be. "It's very cold," he hazarded. There was always safety in banalities, they gave the caller time to catch his mental breath.

Steadman ignored the remark, as Ranleigh had expected. But the rejoinder he shot back was entirely unlooked for: "I'd like to see some caskets. Right away."

For a fraction of a second Ranleigh's carefully maintained calm faltered. Ninety patrons out of every hundred began conversation with the announcement that some relative or friend was dead. The other ten announced superfluously that they wished to make arrangements for a funeral. Albert Steadman, always poised, assured and self-possessed, asked to look at caskets—"some caskets"—as if he shopped for a new car or motorboat or some entirely ordinary piece of merchandise.

Then experience triumphed over surprise. "Certainly, Mr. Steadman," he answered blandly. This way, if you please."

Ranleigh looked upon his caskets much as a dentist regards dentures and bridges, tangible and visible accessories to service, but the least important of the things he had for sale. Each casket in his display room bore a neatly-lettered card announcing it was furnished in conjunction with a complete funeral service. It was not priced separately; indeed, it was not priced at all, any more than are the buttons on a suit or ornaments upon a lady's dress in a depart-



"Ko'en Cheng kept her bound in a cellar, reciting charms and incantations over her."

ment store. But Steadman asked to look at caskets. Probably a layman's inept statement of his wishes, but . . . "Give him time to get adjusted, let him get hold of himself," Ranleigh warned himself as he switched the lights of his display room on.

In the indirect glow of the torches Steadman looked about him. Here were caskets made of metal, silver finished, or with the dull gleam of bronze or copper; cases of mahogany, beautiful as furniture designed by master-craftsmen; caskets covered with fine, rich brocades—"This one," Steadman announced shortly, stopping by a case of pale silver-bronze satin lining. "How much?"

Ranleigh glanced at the price card, not that his memory needed refreshing, but to gain time. "A service with that particular casket would be six hundred and fifty dollars, unless——"

"I want no services; I want that casket, just as it is, and right away. How much, man?"

"We don't usually price our caskets separately, Mr. Steadman," Ranleigh began. "Easy on, Gordon," he thought, "this man's not hysterical with grief, there's something more here; if he isn't crazy. . . ."

"Never mind your usual practise," Steadman jerked back. "It's imperative I have this casket—immediately. How much'll you take for it?"

Ranleigh temporized, edging toward the door. "If you could give me some idea whom you want it for—that's a lady's casket, entirely unsuitable for a man, or even an elderly woman. . . ."

With apparent effort Steadman brought his twitching features under control. "I want this casket—this particular casket," he replied, with slow emphasis upon each word, like one who speaks to a foreigner or a person handicapped by deafness, "and I want it delivered to me as soon as possible; sometime tomorrow, surely. I don't

want it for a funeral, I just want it in my house—I must have it. You've served my family, and you know me. I've come to you because I know and trust you. I can't buy a casket direct from a wholesale house, but if you won't sell me this one there are other undertakers who will——" He broke off, drawing out his billfold.

When he spoke like this he seemed sane enough, and there was certainly nothing abnormal in the sheaf of bills he handled, except their number and denominations. "Will you take six hundred dollars for this coffin just as it stands, without services or anything else, except delivery?" He laid twelve fifty-dollar bills upon the casket's gleaming top.

Ranleigh nodded. After all, as Steadman said, there were other funeral directors . . . and six hundred dollars was six hundred dollars. "What inscription on the name plate?" he asked.

"None. But be sure you have this coffin at my house before sunset tomorrow. Good night, Mr. Ranleigh."

THE odd transaction preyed on Ranleigh's mind all next day. During his direction of three funerals and arrangements for two more the memory of Albert Steadman's drait manner and his strange insistence that he needed a casket immediately hovered in the back of his mind. Several times he decided to send a check to Steadman with a note advising he could not make delivery of a casket in such circumstances; once he actually drew out his checkbook, but with his pen poised he paused and rationalized the sale. Steadman's manner had seemed strange, but what right had Ranleigh to say that he was crazy? How many of us could escape incarceration if eccentric actions branded us as lunatics? Almost every day you read about the death of some unusual character who had kept a casket in his house for years—Sarah Bernhardt had been so ob-

sessed with thoughts of death that she took a specially-selected casket on her world tours with her. "Don't be a fool," he told himself. "If Steadman wants that casket, sell it to him, or someone else will. He surely seemed to know what he was about." Still, to take advantage of a crazy man, or even one whose judgment had been warped by grief, was not the way that Gordon Ranleigh did things. He could have retired on the profits he'd passed up when he kept his patrons from incurring funeral bills beyond their means. Then back again his thoughts swung in the vicious spiral: Was Steadman crazy? . . . who was he to judge?

A feeling of vague unease oppressed him as the highway reeled away beneath his whirling hearse wheels. Entirely devoid of superstition, especially concerning death, he still felt slightly "creepy" on this errand of delivering a casket for which no corpse waited. The roadway, smooth and gray as a steel ribbon, ran between tall stands of pine trees, and it seemed to Ranleigh that there was an air of hidden menace, or at least of warning, in the long blue shadows that they threw. Far away the hills were indigo that shaded into purplish-black. The sun was going down behind them and little bits of frayed-out clouds of cotton-wool began to tinge themselves with lavender and golden-pearl, with here and there a fleeting glow of sunset-flame. Somehow, it seemed to him, the pine trees evoked from their depths primeval spirits, elementals menacing and hostile; their black boughs did not seem to whisper with the soft and friendly rustle he had always associated with evergreens, but, gaunt, lonely and aloof, they stretched their dark limbs upward, as if to share dark secrets with the darkling sky. From the dooryard of a cabin which stood in the center of a patch of brown cleared land a dog howled mournfully, and the ululating echo of its lamentation rolled back eerily

from the hills, then died abruptly, snuffed out by the smothering weight of wooded shadows.

He glanced up at the sinking sun, then at his speedometer. Steadman had been emphatic in his request that the casket be delivered before sunset. He notched his throttle forward a little. How much farther was it to Mortmain Manor?

Funny name that, Mortmain. A lawyer friend had told him it came from the Latin, meaning a dead hand, and signified a permanently entailed estate. A Steadman in Colonial days had tried to make it impossible for his heirs to sell the homestead, and though the courts had overturned the will, the Steadmans still lived on the property, and the place was known as Mortmain. "Dead Hand House," a devilish uncanny name.

Idly, he reconstructed Albert Steadman's history. His was the tenth generation to occupy Mortmain, and unless he remarried and had children, he would be the last. Like his father and his grandfather he had been a banker, but unlike them he had practised his profession abroad. Financial adviser to South American and small Balkan countries, traveling in the Near and Far East, going anywhere and everywhere his advice could be marketed, he had lived most of his life in foreign lands, coming home for only fleeting visits till his father's death called him to the presidency of the Sixth National Bank. And when he returned after five years' stay in Harbin he brought a Russian bride with him, Natacha Kovalchuk, a White refugee from the revolution.

She was a riddle-woman, enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's smile, tall, slender, fair-skinned, red-haired, with a far-off vision in her green eyes, as though she had looked long upon the sufferings of the hidden places of the world. Slow grace personified, she was making every movement in the manner of a silky, lithesome cat.

Ranleigh had been close to her only twice: once when she came with Steadman to arrange for setting up a monument above his father's grave. She had disturbed him. Her white face framed between the darkly lustrous sable of her coat and the gleaming fur of her tall Cossack hat had reminded him of something he could not recall for a moment; then he placed it with a sudden inward qualm—the face of a girl he had helped take from the river, a pale drowned face with seaweed tangled in its unbound, floating hair. And there was something secret in her long green eyes, something half sardonic, half inviting, as if to say, "You think you know the mystery of death, my little man? How bold—and droll—you are!" He had felt relieved when she left with her husband.

The second time he saw her he was called professionally. Steadman was somewhere in the interior of Mexico and could not be communicated with, but Musya, the old half-breed Tartar woman who had come with Natacha as nurse and lady's maid, made all arrangements. "The *gaspadin*\* must understand these were milady's wishes: She is to be dressed in this green gown, with this underwear, these stockings and these shoes. Musya is to braid her hair; these rings shall be put on her fingers, these in her ears. Her casket must be silver-bronze with écreu satin lining, and the plate upon it shall bear but the single word 'Natacha'."

She had been beautiful—and disturbing—in death as in life. She did not look dead when he came for her—she looked merely tired, and sad. Lying in her great four-poster bed, with silk sheets pulled up to her throat and her hands at rest upon the counterpane, there was no look of death about her, no half-closed, glassy-staring eyes, no fallen jaw, no flaccid, sagging muscles. It was simply as if she were grieving for herself, sorrowing at being

cut off from the world she loved, yet not too sorrowful at leaving it. Her cheeks were hollow and her red lips had a tragic downward curve; yet somehow her calm countenance reminded him of a mask, aloof and serene, yet curiously, even frighteningly, watchful . . . as though she looked from beneath lowered lids and saw all that occurred.

He carried out instructions to the final letter and the last small comma. Acting on the suggestion of the doctor he took her body to his funeral home and had services in his chapel. There were no relatives nor any intimate friends, for Steadman and his wife had lived almost entirely to themselves, but some of Steadman's business associates and their wives came to the funeral and viewed the pale and lovely corpse with something of the emotions the living woman inspired.

In the course of long experience Gordon Ranleigh had become an expert in embalming. None knew better than he how to simulate the look of life upon the dead, but this case needed little help from him. It was incredible how beautiful and how life-like she appeared. Couched on the écreu satin of the casket lining, clothed in the long and closely clinging robe of Nile green, she lay with her head turned a little to the side, and soft black lashes swept her flawless cheeks so naturally it seemed that any moment they would rise and show the gleaming emerald of her eyes. One hand lay loosely on her breast, the fingers slightly curved as if in quiet sleep; the other rested by her side, and in it, by Musya's directions, she held a purple orchid with a scarlet center. In the flickering gleam of candelabra placed at the casket's head and foot, it seemed as if her bosom rose and fell in light slumber. When the services were finished and the time for final leave-taking arrived, they stood and stared at her, those bankers, lawyers, merchants and their women, as if

\* Gentleman (Russian).

they could not believe it was a dead woman they saw. Those slim-red-tipped white fingers, those tiny satin-encased feet . . . it seemed impossible that they were now forever quiet with the quietness of death.

They buried her in Oakdale Park, opening a grave in Steadman's family plot, but they put no tombstone over her. Time enough for that when he came back from Mexico. Old Musya potted round the place for several days, planting a wild rose bush at the grave head, sowing little spiny seeds in the fresh turf. Then she disappeared and it was not until they found her hanging by her scrawny neck from an oak tree in Mortmain Manor park that people realized how great her grief for her dead mistress was.

She had no relatives, no friends, no money. Steadman's friends refused to pledge his credit or assume responsibility for her funeral. "Let the county bury her. That's what we pay taxes for." But Ranleigh took the poor old twisted body to his place, embalmed it, dressed it in a decent robe, put it in a cheap—but not a pauper's—casket, and buried it in a grave which he bought with his own funds.

Now his thought swung back to Steadman. What prompted him to buy a casket? What possible use could he have for— A red light swinging in the darkening roadway called him from the profitless task of attempting to rationalize the irrational. Behind the warning lantern was a wooden barrier striped vividly in black and white diagonals and supporting a stenciled announcement:

BRIDGE OUT AHEAD  
Detour by Way of Royston Road

Jammed in the highway by the barricade were two vehicles, one from Maison Blanche, the fashionable women's outfitters, the other from the Murray Laboratories. Gears ground protestingly as

drivers backed and reversed, stopped to twist steering-wheels with savage force, then edged their cars across the macadam and back again, jockeying for turning-room in the narrow road.

"Where you goin', buddy?" called the Maison Blanche chauffeur as he brought his vehicle about and rested for a moment with his clutch in neutral.

"Out to Mortmain, fifteen miles th' other side o' Gawd knows where," the laboratory driver answered. "This would have to happen to me with a date tonight at eight, an' orders to git this blood out there before th' sun goes down. Before sundown, hell! I know that Royston Road. Be lucky if I git out there by nine o'clock. My girl frien'll think I stood her up, sure as shootin', and——"

"You're tellin' me!" the other interrupted. "My supper'll be as cold as a dead baby's nose, time I git home, an' my old woman'll give me hell. Can you beat it? This here now Steadman blows inter th' place 'bout three o'clock an' orders enough stuff for a glammer gal's debutt, sayin' it's all gotta be delivered to his house before sunset. It wuz amost four by th' time they gits it boxed and through th' shippin'-room an' tags me wid it. 'Git it out there before sunset,' they tells me—an' th' sun goes down by five o'clock these days. I coulda made it, at that, if this dam' bridge wuzn't out."

RANLEIGH drew his funeral car to the extreme edge of the road, making passage room for the other two, then, backing skilfully, brought his vehicle about and started toward the detour. No longer blue, but dark-green in the fading light, a wave-like barrier of hills obscured the horizon. It was through them his road led, almost ten miles of steady climb, with curves and switch-backs which increased the distance almost half. Much of it would have to be negotiated in second

gear and the possibility of reaching Mortmain by sunset was nil. But to a practised driver like him the work was purely mechanical, like walking. This left his thoughts free—to race helter-skelter back and forth, like rats chased by a terrier.

Almost desperately he fumbled with the facts, trying to reduce them to coherent design. He had a feeling the solution was in reach of his brain if he could only find the key; somewhere in all this jumble of irrationality was the missing integer, the jigsaw-puzzle piece which would give relevancy to the rebus. With increasing perplexity he rehearsed the clues: Albert Steadman, widower, buys a casket, selecting from a roomful of exhibits one almost identical to that in which his wife had been buried. Next day he orders lady's clothing in sufficient quantity and variety for, as the chauffeur put it, "a glammer gal's debutt." Both orders must be delivered before sundown. Aside from the requirement of immediate delivery, such divergent purchases are enough to excite wonder, but there is the added mystery of the order from the Murray Laboratories. Largest dealers in biologicals in the city, they are often sought in emergency by hospitals whose blood banks have run low or when blood donors cannot be found immediately. With them he places a rush order for blood, and it, like the casket and the clothes, must be brought to his house by sundown.

Blood—casket—clothing. Casket—clothing—blood, the absurdly ill-assorted combination rang and echoed through his puzzled mind as he breasted the long climb through the hills. Where was there—where could there be—a connection between these things? And why must all be delivered before the sun went down?

**M**MORTMAIN MANOR stood upon a hilltop, four-square to the elements, sound and sturdy as it had been on the day

Colonial artizans laid their saws and hammers by and repaired to the great hall to receive their final pay and drink the health of His Majesty George II. Sixty feet from earth to eaves its brick walls reared, stained and mellowed with the rains of two hundred summers, scarred and bitten with the snows and frosts of a bicentenary of winters. Against the bricks tall pilasters of gray stone mounted to the support of a crenellated cornice; the roof was tiled with scales of sheet-lead; the door was wide and high enough to let a coach-and-four through.

A high wall fenced the front yard, green with lichen; broken flagstones made a path to the low porch before the massive iron-strapped and spike-knobbed door. As Ranleigh turned into the gateway he heard the grinding of gears and a quartet of sharp beams stabbed through the darkness as the drivers of the two delivery wagons flashed their headlights on, lashing out at the gloom that seemed gathering like a pool inside the walled garden. They slid past him down the graveled drive and he drew up at the doorway, backing till his hearse doors overhung the low porch, then jumping down to set his casket truck in place and easing the long burial case along the rollers in the hearse floor till with a light bump it rested on the wheeled conveyer. Everything in readiness, he turned and drew the verdigris-stained knocker back and hammered on the door.

Steadman answered his summons, so quickly that it seemed he must have been waiting by the door. "I know, the bridge is out," he forestalled Ranleigh's apology. "Never mind, I dare say you came as quickly as you could. Wheel it this way, please." It was characteristic of him that he made no tender of assistance.

Time-stained wainscot rose three floors to a beamed ceiling in the entrance hall, a wide stair curved up at the rear, letting



out on balconies with heavy balustrades of carved oak at second and third story levels. The red glow from a massive fireplace flowed across the tiles of a wide hearth, and from antique chandeliers of cut glass gas flames flared, for Mortmain Manor lacked both electricity and telephone, and trusted to its carbide gas plant for cooking-fuel and lighting. But if the lighting-plant were late Victorian, the furnishings were elegantly Georgian. Deep mahogany bookshelves hoarded rows of calf and morocco bindings; a grand piano flashed back highlights from the chandeliers; underfoot were rugs from China, India and Persia; from small cabinets came the muted glow of purple, blue and mulberry Ming porcelain. Only wealth could have such things; only wealth assisted by good taste would choose them.

Following in his host's steps, Ranleigh wheeled the casket to a curtained doorway, paused a moment while the other drew the hangings back, then with an effort forced the wheeled bier across the doorsill. It was a large, beautiful room. The rose-wood-paneled walls were rubbed with oil until they gleamed like satin; the brightly waxed oak floor was spread with Isphahan prayer rugs so precious that to walk on them seemed desecration. Between twin cut-glass gas brackets a Sheraton lowboy was placed, and on it had been put a set of toilet accessories, little crystal flacons of perfume, small porcelain pots of rouge, face powders with their lamb's wool puffs in silver-topped containers of etched glass, nail polish, combs of tortoise-shell and brushed with rich silver backs. *Récamier* chaise-longue upholstered in Nile-green satin brocade was flanked by two low chairs of gilded applewood. It was a lady's boudoir, elegant and lovely as a jewel case waiting for the gem it should enfold, a dainty, tasteful apartment, feminine as a ruffle or a hairpin; yet somehow, somewhere, Ranleigh's instinct told him, was a

note of discord—something only very little out of harmony, like dark lipstick on a blond, or a soprano who sang slightly flat, yet which spoiled the perfection of the ensemble. What was it, something lacking . . . something just a little overdone? He couldn't put his finger on it, but it was there.

"Put it right here, please," Steadman's order broke his rumination. Then, as he wheeled the casket into place—"where the bed should be," he thought—his host gave way to an annoyed ejaculation. "The devil! I should have thought of that!"

"What is it?" Ranleigh countered. "Something missing?"

"Yes, I forgot to get a stand for it. Too heavy to stand on a table or chairs; don't want it on the floor—see here, sell me that wheeled bier of yours, will you?"

Ranleigh considered. He had several church trucks, and a replacement could be obtained in a few days. This one had cost him forty dollars. Figuring the inconvenience he might be put to while he waited for a new one, a fair price would be—

"Sixty dollars cover it? Of course, I don't know anything about your prices, but if that's not enough——" Steadman paused and raised his brows interrogatively.

"Yes, I'll take that for it," responded Ranleigh. He was beginning to be nettled. People came to him in trouble, and he prided himself on ability to soothe their hurts, make the pain of bereavement less heart-rending. Steadman had been brusque from first to last, barking orders at him, treating him almost as if he were a menial. Now he seemed intent on hurrying him away; there would have been no more compulsion in a physical push than there was in his urgent, impatient manner.

Again his thought was interrupted by the other's fretful, eager voice. "Have to give you a check. That all right?"

"That will be quite satisfactory, Mr. Steadman," Ranleigh answered, annoyance whetting a slight edge on his voice.

STEADMAN crossed the hall and sat down at a kneehole desk that must have been an heirloom when Washington and Jefferson were lads, rummaging through the drawer a moment for his checkbook. Ranleigh dropped into a chair and bent his head in thought. Odd, Steadman's answering the door; when he'd been there before there'd been a houseman and a chambermaid-cook. Where were they now? It was out of character for Steadman to serve himself. . . . That room where he had left the casket . . . what was wrong with it? Something in its composition jarred his sense of propriety, but what? By George! Involuntarily, he snapped his fingers softly. Cataloging the furniture in his mind he'd stumbled on the key. There were no mirrors—not even a hand-glass—in the place. What sort of boudoir was it that lacked mirrors? What woman ever made her toilet without benefit of looking-glass? Odd oversight, that. Or was it an oversight?

Pondering, he glanced across the rug-set floor, and leaned forward with a smile. Stepping soundlessly on dainty feet came a blue-point Siamese cat toward him. He liked cats. Comfortable, homey brutes. There were seldom less than four or five around his house, for Lady Jane, his Maltese tabby, was unalterably opposed to race suicide. "Here, puss!" he whispered in the voice he reserved for his special pets. "Pretty pussy!"

The cat dropped to its belly eight or ten feet from him, ears pricked alertly forward, green eyes fixed in a stare. Yet they did not stare at him. As far as he was concerned, they seemed to notice nothing, but to be fixed levelly upon some object just behind him. He became aware of a slight irritation just above his collar, as if

the short hair on his neck were rising. It was uncanny, eery, this being stared through by an animal.

For a moment he sat at a loss, then stretched a hand in invitation to the cat. "Nice kitty—pretty puss!" he wheedled. The hard eyes gleamed in the gaslight, unrecognizing, unseeing; then the beast rose to its padded feet and turned toward the room where the casket stood, stalking off with the light graceful gait of its tribe and never a backward look.

"Here you are," he heard Steadman say, and turned with something like a start to see the freshly blotted check extended toward him. There was no breeze, no air that stirred sufficiently to make the gas flames waver, but the check was quivering as if a strong wind ruffled it. Steadman's hand was trembling as with palsy, and around his lips there was a tightening of the muscles that spelled but one thing—fear. The man was bordering on panic, almost hysterical with haste and wild desire to be rid of him.

"Thank you," Ranleigh murmured as he rose to put the folded check into his pocket. "I'm sorry I was delayed by——" His partially expressed apology faded on his lips as if his voice had come through a radio and the dial had been abruptly turned.

For the curtains at the boudoir doorway parted, and framed between their iridescent folds a woman stood. Her gown of Nile-green silken tissue hung loosely from her lissome form, no more concealing the perfection of her ivory body than a passing wisp of cumulus cloud hides the disk of the full moon. The rich luxuriance of her burnished-copper hair, unbound and smoothly parted in the middle, swept like a cloven cascade down her high white forehead and swirled like sun-flecked flowing water round her bare white shoulders. About her incredibly slender waist was clasped a girdle fashioned like a golden

snake which held its tail in its mouth and from whose head flashed the glint of emerald eyes. Halted in the act of advancing, one long slim, high-arched foot, shod in a gilded sandal buckled with an emerald clasp, was like a spot of moonlight on the deep red of the rug that brought its blue-veined white perfection into startling definition. As her gaze met Ranleigh's startled eyes she paused with a sibilant intake of breath, and her right hand, from which the loose sleeve of her gown fell back, clutched at the silk curtain as if for support.

Her half-gasp found an echo in the panting exclamation of surprise which he gave. His heart gave a cold, nauseating lurch, and he dropped back in his chair, weak with sudden sickening weakness. He knew that slender, perfect body, that pale exquisite face. Once he'd seen them living; later. . . . She raised a hand as if to put back the fine misty rose-gold hair that flowed across her brow, the sleeve of her gown was attached to the shoulder at top, but had no seams, being really two silk gores connected by a series of short lengths of gilded cord, and her gesture bared the junction of her under-arm and shoulder. Across the milk-white skin of her armpit there showed an inch-long wound—he remembered—he had made it with his bistoury when he raised her axillary vein and artery to inject embalming fluid.

A chill as of a breath of icy wind ran through him. His reason told him not to be afraid. Who knows better than the embalmer that never till the Day of Judgment shall the dead walk in their mortal flesh again? But reason plays no part when outraged instinct runs amok. Terror, blind, insensate, irresistible, spread on his mind like moss on sodden ground.

Steadman was as white as any corpse. His lips moved slowly, laboredly, as if they had been numbed with cold. "Natacha!"

he called in the thin tone of hysteria, then followed the name with a spate of pouring words which seemed to be all consonants.

The frail, pale woman smiled at him with bright vermilion lips and long, green, slanting eyes, answering lazily in a throaty caressing voice. Yet there was an indefinable, eery undercurrent to her tones that sent a fresh chill tingling up Ranleigh's spine, especially when she cast a momentary sidelong glance at him, and her foreign, unintelligible words became more slowly languorous. There was fascination in those long, green, secret eyes: they had a trick of sliding off obliquely from the thing they contemplated to lose themselves beneath the shadows of their long, black, silky lashes. "*Nichevo*,"\* she finally pronounced with a shrug of her sleek shoulders, and silently as if she were a breath of breeze she turned and vanished between the curtains.

STEADMAN turned on Ranleigh, eyes ablaze: "Anything you've seen or heard tonight is under the seal of your profession!" he cried.

Ranleigh answered with a mirthless laugh. "I haven't any wish to be shut up in a madhouse. If I told anybody what I've just seen——"

"Of course"—something like vindictive glee edged Steadman's high, sharp laugh—"you wouldn't be believed. They'd say you're crazy——"

"Quite," Ranleigh interrupted evenly. "Even if the ethics of my calling didn't make me keep your confidence, it would be hard for me to find a person who'd believe me, but——" He stopped upon the conjunction. He had remembered something which his lawyer friend let drop one day in the shower room of the country club. Here was a way to force an explanation.

"Yes—but?" the other smiled sarcastic-

\* No matter (Russian).

ally. "You'd better decide your eyes played tricks on you, my friend."

"I've told you I'm bound by professional ethics to respect your confidence," repeated Ranleigh, "but if I chose to disregard my obligation it might prove awkward. Perhaps you didn't know it, but the statute against sorcery and witchcraft has never been repealed in this state. It's a dead-letter, certainly; but if Murray Laboratories' order sheets were subpoenaed, showing that you ordered canned blood from them today, and the record of your purchases of lady's wear at Maison Blanche were added to my testimony—don't you think you owe me something in the way of explanation, Mr. Steadman?"

Steadman shrugged resignedly. It was curious how his shell of brusqueness melted, leaving him a tired and prematurely aged man, sitting inert in his chair as though pressed there by an insufferable weight of melancholy. "I don't know why I tell you," he answered in a weary voice. "You won't believe it. Nobody would. Sometimes I don't myself, until——" He paused, fumbled for a cigar in the silver humidior, then continued as he set it alight:

"You know I was in Harbin when my father died, and that I came home with a Russian wife. You don't know how I met her, though; I've never told before.

"The Japanese invasion of Mongolia and their setting up of Manchukuo marked the end of business for the Western bankers, and I was making ready to come home before I learned of Father's death. Termination of my work gave me a chance to do some things I'd never had time for. One of these was tiger hunting.

"Word had come of a big brute that terrorized the countryside around Koshan, so I collected a party and set out. Things went well enough for the first few kilometers, but as we neared the tiger country the rumors began to change. By the time

we reached Koshan we heard that it was not a natural tiger, but a *ch'ing shih*, or vampire. D'ye know what a vampire is?"

"You mean like the one in the book—*Dracula*?" hazarded Ranleigh.

"That's near enough. In China and Mongolia the *ch'ing shih* may be an animated corpse, like *Dracula*, or an evil spirit which is sometimes disembodied, sometimes as substantial as a natural person. Generally they're the souls or corpses of black sorcerers, or their victims. For instance, a *ch'ing shih* may be a person who has met his death by sorcery and had a spell put on him by the magician, so that while he seems dead he revives occasionally, issues from his tomb, and nourishes himself on the blood he sucks from the living. Sometimes he doesn't seem to die at all, but leads a normal life, eating and drinking like everyone else; only he has to have a dose of human blood occasionally. Failing this he starves. In this form the *ch'ing shih* is relatively harmless, but if he dies what seems to be a natural death, or if he's killed, he comes back as a full-fledged vampire, savage as a tiger and wicked as a snake. Also, in this second state, he's capable of shape-shifting, and can take whatever form he pleases, though generally he assumes the shape of a tiger or jackal, or sometimes just a domestic cat.

"According to the Slavic tradition the only way to lay a vampire is to come on him in daylight when he's helpless in his tomb and drive an ash stake through his heart before you cut his head off. Such treatment's unavailing with a *ch'ing shih*. As long as any part of him remains he can materialize, so you have to track him down and burn him till there's nothing left.

"WELL, the upshot of it was I told the village headman that if they'd help me hunt a tiger, and we found nothing in a week, I'd turn to and help them get rid

of their *ch'ing shih*. It seemed as if the tiger—or the *ch'ing shih*—heard about our bargain, for they both lay low, and for a solid week there were no killings. Then on a Sunday night all hell broke loose. A peasant girl was caught just outside her hut and so badly mauled and torn that you could hardly recognize her as the remnants of a human being, and almost at the same time a swineherd twenty miles away was slashed to ribbons. The third case happened twenty kilos west of Koshan. It was a woman who was attacked in bed, and not only her body, but her pallet and sleeping-rug were ripped to shreds.

"Suspicion centered in a man known as Ko'en Cheng whose yeaman was some fifteen kilos north and west of Koshan. He'd been noted as a sorcerer—not the white kind—and also as a heartless usurer. Three months or so before he'd been killed in a bandit raid, and left besides an evil reputation a young widow, a White Russian refugee whom he'd married several years before.

"I don't suppose you know these 'refugees.' Taken by and large they're pretty scabious. Some of 'em, of course, are the genuine article, but a lot more are just off-scum from the jails and slums and brothels who found no tolerance in the new régime and ran away to save their hides and ply their various unsavory trades wherever they could find a refuge. So I was pretty suspicious concerning what I'd find when I set out for Ko'en Cheng's yeaman.

"I certainly had a surprise in store. The place was small, but exquisite. It was surrounded by a gray-brick wall with yellow tiles set like a gabled roof along its top. The gate was made of cedar and ornamented with carved timbers, and inside the wall was a tiled courtyard with the familiar spirit-screen just beyond the gate. The house was roofed with green tiles and from the eaves hung little bronze bells which rang musically at every gust of

breeze. As I walked between the rows of dwarf quince trees to the door I heard somebody singing in the house.

"It was an odd, deep, throaty voice, and the singer evidently sang for her own amusement, a sort of crooning lullaby of contentment:

The birds have all flown from their trees,

The last, last fleecy cloud has drifted by,  
But never shall we tire in our companionship,  
O my beloved, thou and I.

"A verse from China's classic poet Li Po, rendered into Russian and set to hauntingly-sad Russian music. The timbre of that deep, sweet, thrilling voice did things to my throat—and heart. I wondered what I'd find when I knocked on the lacquered door.

"The woman whose voice made manifest, the incarnation of her song. I needn't describe her; you've seen her——" He nodded toward the curtained room; then:

"When I told her what we'd come for she made no objection. Her husband had been buried in a nearby field, and she took us to his grave and told us we might look into his coffin if we wished, but he had been dead three months and the summer had been hot. Then she left us without another word.

"My coolies shoveled the earth off the coffin, but when we'd bared it they balked. I had undertaken to find the *ch'ing shih*; it was my place to force the coffin. So I took a crowbar and prized up the lid.

"In your work you must have done the same thing many times. I never had, and when I felt the wooden dowels give and saw the heavy coffin-top come loose I went positively sick. But surprise drove disgust away, for the body in the coffin was as fresh as if it had been dead no more than an hour. Fresher, I'd say, for there was no look of death about it.

"It was an old, old man with thin, straggling gray hair and a wisp of white beard

on his chin, but the lips were full and slightly colored and there was a healthy tint in the cheeks. If I hadn't known that he was dead I'd have sworn he'd crawled into the coffin for a nap, and when I touched his hands and cheeks the flesh was warm.

"Now that I'd taken the odium of grave-robbery on me the coolies' courage came back with a rush, and they crowded round the coffin, jabbering and pointing. In a few moments they had made a pile of brush and straw around it, and shouted for me to apply the match.

"The fuel burned fiercely, and the coffin, of Mongolian cedar, caught the flames like tinder. As the fire began to eat into the lacquered hollow log that formed the coffin the corpse began to writhe. I don't mean that it struggled to get out. It didn't. It seemed unable to raise itself, but it turned from side to side, twisting and contorting as in dreadful agony, and waved its hands and kicked its feet. But even then the face retained its calm, serene expression until, just as the blazing coffin-sides were about to fall in, the mouth gaped open and a sudden geyser of red, bright blood spouted up, six feet at least, I'd say, and spattered with a vicious hiss into the fire. Then the coffin fell like a log burned in two, and the flames licked up around the body, hiding it from us.

"Several of my coolies had been spattered by the blood, and next day I took them to an Armenian doctor at Koshan, for everywhere the blood had touched them ulcers formed. The lesions seemed like rodent ulcerations, eating right through skin and flesh and bone, and the doctor finally had to amputate in every case.

"Strangely, the old man's widow not only was not resentful, but seemed actually grateful to me, and as I had to stay at Koshan while my boys were being

treated I went to see her several times.

"I think I must have loved her from the moment I first heard her voice. I know I loved her by my third trip to her yeaman. We were married just before I left Koshan for Harbin, and when I got back to my hotel there I found the cable announcing my father's death.

"I NEVER spoke to Natacha about her life with Ko'en Cheng. One doesn't do such things. And she never vouchsafed any information, but old Musya her ayah\* was less reticent. If I hadn't shut her off, she'd have told me everything about their life at Ko'en Cheng's yeaman. Once, before I forbade her to tell anything about my wife's past, she declared Ko'en Cheng had 'magicked milady to death,' but whether she meant he'd performed tricks of sorcery till Natacha was wearied of them, or that he'd actually killed her I could not determine. She spoke execrable English.

"You remember, of course, Natacha died while I was in Mexico. When I came home I found old Musya had smothered her grave with garlic, and in addition stuck a wild rose bush right where I wanted to set up the headstone."

Somewhere in Ranleigh's inner consciousness a small alarm bell seemed to ring. He knew but little of such things, but vaguely he remembered hearing that a vampire could not stand the touch or smell of garlic, or the nearness of a wild rose thorn or blossom—that it could not pass a place where either was. Who was it told him that, or had he read it somewhere? He gave the matter up, for Steadman was continuing:

"I had the cemetery grub the weeds up and remound the grave. They finished work two days ago."

"Yes?" prompted Ranleigh as the other paused.

\* Nurse.

"Night before last—the night before I called on you—I was reading late in my study when I heard a tapping at the window. I thought it was a wind-blown branch striking the pane at first, but it came again, louder and more insistently, as if someone outside sought admission, and when I looked up, there was Natacha. Her lovely eyes were open wide, looking longingly at me, and she held her hands out imploringly. Of course, I thought it was a dream, but I threw the window open and called her, and she came in.

"It was no ghost or figment of a dream, but my own Natacha in the solid flesh, glowing and vibrant, but as cold as death's own self. I took her to the fire and wrapped her in a rug, but she grew no warmer; just huddled there and shivered like a frightened, trembling bird. At last she seemed to gain a little strength, and held her hands out to me. 'Kiss me!' she implored, as though she starved for a caress.

"I took her in my arms, but instead of putting her lips against mine she put them around them, covering my mouth completely and seeming to draw the very breath out of my lungs. I felt myself grow faint, like a swimmer mauled and pounded by the surf until his lungs are full of water, and my eyes seemed blinded by a sort of mist. I could hear a ringing in my ears; then everything went black as I dropped to my knees. I wasn't quite unconscious; I could still feel her arms round me, gripping me with a hold which seemed stronger every minute, and it seemed as if she'd transferred her lips to my throat. I kept growing weaker, but I felt no pain nor fear. A sort of languorous ecstasy was spreading through me. Then I went completely out, and the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor before the fire with Natacha bending over me, holding my cheeks between her palms and murmuring Russian love-names to me. She was warm

now; warm and glowing with vitality, and, weak as I was, the flame of my love rose to meet the glowing fire of hers.

"We counted every minute of that night as misers count their gold. I heaped logs upon the fire until the flames leaped up the chimney like a holocaust, but in a little while she began to be chilled again, and presently she gasped for air until I let her put her mouth to mine and draw breath from me. That revived her somewhat, and when she'd sucked a little more blood from my throat she seemed herself once more, though I could not feel the movement of her heart against mine as she lay in my arms.

"Before the morning came she told me. Old Musya had not spoken figuratively when she said Ko'en Cheng 'magicked Natacha to death.' He'd done just that—kept her bound and starved her for days in a cellar, reciting charms and incantations over her until she died, or seemed to. Then he revived her by his magic arts, and after that she lived normally, except that every once in a while she had a sudden inordinate craving for warm human blood. Then he'd go out with a small silver vase and bring it back filled to the brim with blood. She'd drink it, almost at a draft, and the craving passed away, sometimes for a few weeks, sometimes for months together.

"But the whole point was this: Ko'en Cheng had infected her as a *ch'ing shih*. As yet she was in the primary stage, being able to subsist on ordinary food and drink, and only needing human blood occasionally, but when she fell ill here and seemed to die again she really passed into the tertiary stage of vampirism. She is now a true *ch'ing shih*, a complete vampire, able to support existence only by repeated drafts of human blood, unable to draw breath from the air for any considerable time, and forced to steal her breath from living people.

"Not only that: Her appetite increases

constantly. The little blood she drew from me night before last will be inadequate to nourish her in a short time. Within a week she'll need a pint of blood a day, and after that a quart; in a month or two a gallon will be scarcely adequate to sustain her from one day to the next.

"Like Ko'en Cheng when I found him in his grave, she lies in pseudo-death from cock-crow to sunset, and during that time she must rest in her coffin, either that in which she was originally buried, or one substantially like it, and some earth from her original grave must be in it, or she cannot find rest.

"Natacha was my first and only love. Women never had meant much to me until I met her, and the thought of having her with me again, on any terms—in any way—was like the offer of a cool drink to a man who dies of thirst. She had to go back to her grave at sunrise yesterday, but I determined to make preparations to enable her to stay here with me. First I came to you and bought a casket; then I ordered clothes for her at Maison Blanche, and a supply of blood—enough for several days at her present appetite—from the Murray Laboratories. On my way home I visited the cemetery and took a shovelful of earth from her grave. Now everything has been arranged. She need never leave me, day or night."

He turned defiantly on Ranleigh. "You think I'm crazy, of course. You don't believe a word of this——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Steadman, but I do," the funeral director denied. "I only wish that I could think you're crazy and this whole thing the illusion of a deranged mind, but—I know that body—Mrs. Steadman, I mean. I can identify it—her—positively. But would you mind explaining one thing more?"

"I will if I can."

"I noticed that there are no mirrors in the room where you had me take the

casket. It's furnished like a lady's powder room, but——"

Steadman nodded sadly as his interrogator paused. "A mirror would be useless there. Substantial as they are in every other way, vampires cannot cast a shadow in the sun or strike back reflections from a mirror. She has to make her toilet without looking-glasses, or depend on me to help her.

"Of course, in the circumstances, I don't dare keep the servants here after sundown. I have them come at ten o'clock in the morning, and leave by four in the afternoon. During daylight I shall keep the door to my wife's room locked."

Ranleigh rose and held his hand out. "Only two men in America, you and I, know about this," he declared. "I think that we're the only ones who would believe it, too. You won't tell; I can't. Your secret is safe——"

"For the present, yes," his host broke in, "but there's something else I want you to do for me, Mr. Ranleigh. I'm not a well man. Only last week Dr. Draper warned me I might drop off any minute with a heart attack. I'd like to know that when I die you'll take charge of my body and inter it in Natacha's grave. Also, I want you to make sure she's cremated. As long as I live I can see her wants are supplied, but with my death she'll have no one to procure blood for her, and when that happens she'll go raging through the countryside, exactly as Ko'en Cheng did in Mongolia, killing anyone she comes on for his breath and blood. . . . You can arrange it, can't you?"

"Of course," responded Ranleigh. Practically, he knew there would be almost insuperable difficulties. How could he get a transit permit for a body long since certified as buried? Who would sign a death certificate for a woman dead and in her grave almost a year? But these were things for him to worry over. His first duty was



to ease his patron's mind, so he nodded confidently again.

RANLEIGH'S thoughts were circling and spinning like a squirrel in its cage as he shot his self-starter and turned his car toward home. With his own eyes he'd seen the dead walk, looked into the eyes he'd sealed, heard words issue from the mouth he'd closed—Steadman's story must be true: he could not doubt the testimony of his senses. But who but he and Steadman would believe it? What jury would give even momentary credence if he told them what he'd seen and heard, what lunacy commission would delay a moment to pronounce him insane when they heard the narrative of his experience tonight? This was an issue he must face alone, a problem he must solve by himself.

Dog-tired, exhausted mentally as well as physically, he put the car in the garage. Mechanically rather than consciously he refilled the gas tank and checked oil and water. Funeral directors, like the fire department, must keep vehicles in readiness for instant response to the unexpected call. A final check-up of the tires' pressure gage. "Now that's done, thank heaven. Good Lord but I'm sleepy!" he yawned as he stumbled rather than walked to his bedroom.

Sleep was instantaneous and almost as deep as anesthesia, but when he wakened it was to complete consciousness. The moon had long since set, and in the sky there was the changing light that heralds dawn. Involuntarily he sat up in bed, breathing quickly, and his breath plumed out before him in the frosty early-morning air, ash-gray, like cigarette smoke. Someone—something—stood between him and the window, silhouetted dimly in the wan light. It was a woman's form, small, wizened, bent with rheumatism, and—this was utterly absurd, of course!—it

seemed garbed in one of his ten-fifty burial dresses.

But was it absurd? Ranleigh knew his merchandize as he knew the lines of his hand. Those rather sleazy rayon crêpe dresses were furnished with his cheaper funerals, such as that he'd conducted for—the figure made a little abrupt movement, brought its face into the slowly strengthening light, and he recognized the withered wrinkled countenance—Musya. Musya the old nurse and lady's maid who hanged herself when Natacha died, and whom he'd buried without pay!

Now, surely, he was dreaming. The things he'd seen at Mortmain Manor, the bizarre story Steadman told him, these had induced this vision . . . he stopped the rationalizing thought and leant toward the cereumented figure, for she was speaking in the high, cracked voice he remembered, and bobbing at him with a stiff-kneed curtsy.

"The *gaspadin* must not be frightened. Musya means him no harm; she has come—it is permitted her—to ask a favor from him. A favor which will give the dead peace and the living safety. Yes, the *gaspadin* must listen, please.

"He does not know, nor does anybody else, but Musya—old ugly Musya the Tartar half-caste—was the mother of the beauteous Natacha. Who her father was it makes no matter, time is pressing, and the *gaspadin* must understand. When Natacha wed the evil Ko'en Cheng she was desperate. She and Musya were starving; but had she known the thing he was, the thing that he would make of her, she would gladly have faced hunger's pangs, or given her fair body to the wolves or tigers. *Nichevo*—never mind—it is too late for vain regrets. Milord Steadman has told the *gaspadin* Natacha's history, how she came back from the grave to greet him with a kiss. Ahee! It was the kiss of death! Had he not had the safety-giving garlic

rooted up and torn the wild rose from its place, she would be lying in her grave all harmless.

"Musya put the garlic and the wild rose there, for Musya knew what would befall when Natacha had seemed to die, but really had become *ch'ing shih*. Musya should have had the *gaspadin* burn Natacha's fair body with the fire that cleanses, but when she saw her child all beautiful in her false death she could not do it. Besides, she would do that which is required to make the vampire's grave a safe one. Then, when she'd sown the garlic seed and planted the wild rose, because she had no further need of life, she would destroy herself. How was foolish old Musya to know that Milord Steadman would undo her work?

"Aie—aie! The *gaspadin* must rise and dress all quickly and hasten to the house of Milord Steadman. The fate which no man may escape however last or far he travels has found him, and he lies cold in death beside the coffin of Natacha. The dawning comes and all will be well till the evening sun goes down, but then Natacha will awaken and find no food to ease her craving, so she will go out ravening and killing. For that is what the *ch'ing shih* does. Oh, yes!

"The *gaspadin* will go at once and give the bodies of Natacha and Milord Steadman to the cleansing flames? Only so can he prevent the night-terror from going forth upon its raids. Only thus can he give Natacha the peaceful rest the true dead have, protect the poor ones who may be her victims otherwise, and keep Milord Steadman from being even such as she. Oh, yes; he, too, will be *ch'ing shih*. Has she not drunk his breath and blood, has she not fleshed her lips in his throat? And does not the mad wolf make all other wolves he bites go mad?"

Something of the urgency of her appeal communicated itself to him. It was not

her words alone, but something undefinable, a sort of psychic fluid which seemed flowing from her mind to his. Despite himself he was convinced. He felt the exigency of the entreaty; the sudden compulsion for haste—this must be done quickly, or the countryside would reek with a vile virus. Dozens, scores, perhaps hundreds of graves would become lairs for fetid demons of the night. . . . Oh, hurry—*hurry!*

"All right," he answered. "I'll go there——"

"Bless you! Oh, kindly heaven bless you, *gaspadin!*"

He turned away a moment, feeling for the light switch. The lamps flashed on, but when he faced around old Musya was nowhere in sight.

THE house was very still as he forced the front door back. Fading in the strengthening light of the bright winter sun the gas lamps burned with a faint hissing; despite his rubber heels his footsteps echoed hollowly on the waxed floors. The whole place seemed to hold its breath as if it gasped in awe-struck horror at a tragedy it had witnessed—or waited for.

Steadman half knelt, half lay by the casket, his hands, already stiffening in rigor mortis, grasping at the écru lining of the burial case, as though death paralyzed him as he attempted to climb into it. His head was thrown back to expose his throat, on which there showed a series of small perforated wounds, as though the skin had been repeatedly stabbed with long sharp needles. But there was no blood on or near the punctures. His face was very pale. His eyes were not quite closed, and a thin thread of white showed through his lashes. His mouth was slightly opened, lax and curved down at the corners, as if he were very tired.

Ranleigh bent and felt his wrist, knowing in advance there would be no pulsation

there. He had not dealt with death for thirty years for nothing.

Natacha lay in her casket as in a bed. Her head was turned a little to the side; one slim hand rested on her breast, the other lay beside her, and in the flickering light of the gas jet it seemed her bosom rose and fell in a light peaceful sleep.

"Lovely," murmured Ranleigh as he looked at her, "so lovely!" It would be a desecration—worse, a murder—to destroy this glowing, vibrant beauty. How could he do it?

He was tempted. He could close the casket, take her to his funeral home and keep her there until . . . yes, until? Until the sun went down, and those black silken lashes fluttered up, disclosing long green eyes . . . then when the red lips parted and the deep, melodious voice addressed him . . . what madness was this? He was a funeral director, one who disposed of the dead. But he served the living, too. Yes, the living! Old Musya's pleading echoed in his inward ear: "Give the dead peace and the living safety!"

The plan came to him full-formed, complete. From lamp to lamp he went, turning from the burners. He tested every window, every door, making sure they were closed tightly, then hurried to the kitchen to turn the burners of the gas range on full force. The disagreeable pungent odor of acetylene was growing stronger every second . . . if only there were enough in the storage tank. No matter, he would have to chance that. Only

embers glowed upon the hearth, but he dragged logs from the wood box, piled them in log-cabin formation upon the andirons and blew on the ashes until a little curl of orange flame rose flickering in a spiral. Now, hurry!

He slammed the door behind him, threw his clutch in and rode racing from the courtyard of the old house. The dashboard clock said 9:15; the servants would report at ten o'clock. He must be well away before then.

Five miles had clicked off on his speedometer when the blast roared through the quiet winter morning. From the hilltop where the manor house stood lighted in the slanting rays of the pale winter sun a shaft of white fire geysered up, sank for an instant like a guttering candle, then volcanoed up again. Then came the rushing, leaping, coruscating, roaring wall of yellow flame. Pouring from the opened jets and mixing with the air in the closed house the carbide gas had been ignited by the blaze in the fireplace, exploded with a blast of almost incalculable heat, and fired the centuries-old, oil-soaked woodwork of the building as if it had been celluloid touched by live fire. In half an hour Mortmain Manor would be only a charred mass of glowing embers and a heap of fire-blasted brick.

What was it Musya begged him to do—give them to the cleansing fire? She could rest easy in her grave—the grave he'd purchased for her—till the Judgment Day. He'd carried her request out to the letter.

