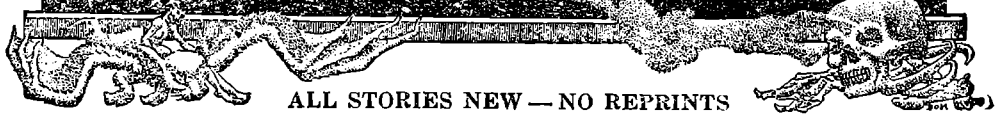


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW — NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1948

Cover by Matt Fox

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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Nemesis

BY HAROLD LAWLOR



SOMETHING was wrong. I'd opened the door of our apartment and stood aside to let Madeline precede me into the reception hall. She hadn't gone three paces when I saw her come to a dead stop, saw her stand there poised warily, sensed rather than saw the slow stiffening of her back as if she were steeling herself against an expected blow.

As quickly as that the air was pregnant with fear.

But of what, I didn't know.

I shut the door behind me and moved till I was standing near her. "What is it?" I asked. And I remember I was faintly annoyed that unconsciously I had whispered.

Madeline threw a glance over her shoulder, a glance that didn't really see me. Her dark eyes were wide with alarm, and her slightly parted lips were trembling.

"George—" Her voice was the merest breath of sound. "George, do you notice—anything?"

I listened, straining, thinking it was some noise she had heard in the darkened apartment that had caused her alarm. But the place was quiet, and all seemed well.

I was puzzled.

And then I caught it. And I could imagine nothing less frightening. Just the faintest aroma, a scent that carried me back six months to our wedding day and the flower I'd worn in my lapel. Spicy. Pungent. Growing somewhat stronger as I sniffed.

"Why, it's only carnations," I said, relieved. "The scent of carnations."

"Yes." Madeline was nodding jerkily. "The scent of carnations. How—how queer!"

It was absurd, but she was really quite pale.

Heading by LEE BROWN COYE

*"Trouble, trouble, go away—
don't come back and kill me!"*

I said, "Some of your perfume must have spilled in the bedroom."

"You know I never use perfume," Madeline said.

"Or maybe Minnie arranged fresh flowers before she left for the day."

"Oh." Madeline grasped at the idea with relief that seemed exaggerated out of all proportion. The color began slowly to seep back into her cheeks. "Of course. Minnie."

We went through the arch into the living room, and looked around. Arranged on the piano in the blue-green crystal vase we'd brought back from our Mexican honeymoon were spikes of gladioli. They were attractive, but even I knew they were quite scentless. And there were no other flowers in the room.

There were no carnations anywhere about.

As she realized this, Madeline sank into a chair, and her face was ghastly. I was completely bewildered and more than a little alarmed—chiefly, I think, because I could see no real reason for alarm.

I said, "My dear, this is ridiculous! Surely there could be nothing less fearsome than the scent of flowers? Why should the odor of carnations—even if we can't explain where it's coming from—cause you to look so—so—"

I stumbled, unable to put into exact words just how she did look.

She smiled wanly, and stood up. "I know. I'm being silly." For a moment her eyes were clouded, remembering. "It's just that—that someone I once knew always used it. It was her favorite scent." She shrugged then, and smiled her wide, gay smile. "Let's forget it. Come on, I'll split a bottle of beer with you before we go to bed."

The odor of carnations had grown fainter as we talked, until now I could no longer smell it. Madeline must have noted its disappearance, too. Or was it merely my fancy that the look of relief on her face seemed to deepen?

We had our beer, and we went to bed, and by morning I'd completely forgotten the odd little incident. But I know now it was the beginning and the end. The beginning of that strange period we were to live through, and the end of all our happiness.

For we'd been incredibly happy. I still couldn't believe my luck. That I, a dull,

prosy bachelor lawyer of forty-two, six years her senior, had succeeded in winning Madeline Ames, the actress, for my wife.

I'd first met her when she'd come to me for help with legal difficulties that had arisen in connection with a contract she'd signed. Business meetings at first led to social ones, liking and admiration developed into love, and we were married at the close of her successful two years' run in *Swampfire*.

Except for her last ten years on the New York stage, I knew literally nothing of her early life. But what did her past matter when I had all her future?

I had no objection to her continuing with her career, but Madeline said no. She'd been continually before the public in the last ten years. She had grown a little stale, and she thought she'd rest a year or two, and give audiences a chance to miss her.

So we were happy. And if there's any comfort to be extracted from the grief I know now, it lies in the memory that at least we had those six perfect months.

Until the night we returned to be met in the hall by the haunting fragrance of carnations, innocent enough seemingly, but so inexplicably disturbing to Madeline.

But as I said, that was only the beginning.

THERE was a bizarre occurrence at dinner the next evening.

Madeline and I were dining alone, sitting at opposite ends of the long mahogany table bearing its delicate litter of lace and silver and crystal. Madeline was in a long flowing hostess gown of Directoire red velvet that made a bright foil for the pallor of her skin, the dusky halo of her hair. We were dawdling over *creme de cacao* and coffee when it happened, and there was no one else in the apartment save Minnie, busy in the kitchen.

That was what puzzled me later.

For as we sat there chatting desultorily to the clink of china being washed in the kitchen by Minnie, the record-playing attachment of our radio-phonograph in the living room at the front of the apartment started up—apparently of itself. For none of the three of us had been in the living room for a half-hour or more.

The strains of the music floated eerily down the long gallery from the living room to where we were sitting in the dining room.

A woman's voice singing softly, softly, weaving a web of dream-like enchantment. I recognized the song, *My Blue Heaven*, popular when I was a young man. . . .

*When whip-poor-wills call
And evening is nigh
We're happy in
My Blue Heaven. . . .*

At first it didn't occur to me to wonder how the phonograph had started up. For I was looking at Madeline. A Madeline who stared at her plate with horror-haunted eyes. I sat there as one in a spell, watching the knuckles leap out whitely to make of Madeline's pale hand a claw. . . .

*A turn to the right
A little white light. . . .*

Madeline's head sank lower, and I saw the bright glitter of tears on her cheeks. And then, evanescently, the faintest fragrance of carnations was wafted into the room, while Madeline's head drooped like a pale flower, and the tears continued to roll slowly down her cheeks. . . .

*Will lead you to
My Blue Heaven.*

I think I would have sat there helpless till the song finished had not Minnie pushed open the swinging door from the kitchen to see if we wanted anything, effectively breaking the enchantment.

Madeline looked up, too, and she said dully, "Go in and shut it off, George, please."

There was something in Madeline's voice, hinting of the breaking point, that made me stifle the questions on my lips and hasten to do as she had asked.

In the living room I stopped the machine, and took the record from the turn-table. It seemed to be a home-recording. I was positive I knew every record in my library, equally positive I'd never owned such a record as this one. And even if I had, how could it possibly have started playing by itself? I stood there, turning it over and over, as if its mute black face could give me some clue.

I was uneasy. And—I don't know why—a faint sensation of chill went slowly up my spine.

When I put it down at last and went back to the dining room, Madeline's behavior didn't serve to allay my disquiet. She was still sitting there, looking numbly before her, like a woman stunned.

"The fragrance of carnations," she said softly, "and the song *My Blue Heaven*. Someone—I used to know—loved them both." She shivered very slightly. Her eyes, wide as a bewildered child's met mine. "How strange that they should come back—*now*—to haunt me."

But before I could speak she said an even stranger thing. And when, startled, I would have pressed her for her meaning, she turned toward me a face so stricken I should have felt myself a brute to harass her.

But I was sorely puzzled.

For, leaning forward in her chair a little, she had asked me intensely, "Do *you* believe in ghosts?"

II

THERE was a hiatus then of a few days before anything happened again. Days in which Madeline was unnaturally quiet. At what seemed to be her tacit request, I forbore to question her. But I often thought of that query she'd put me: "Do you believe in ghosts?" And I couldn't help wondering what particular ghost—if ghosts there were—it was that Madeline feared.

For that she was afraid—of *something*—there could be no doubt.

Nevertheless, I'd almost succeeded in banishing those peculiar incidents from my mind, when I was abruptly and unpleasantly reminded again on that night nearly a week later.

Again we'd been out. We'd had dinner and gone to a play with the Baxters, and the evening had been more of a social duty than a pleasure. I remember Madeline's hand was lifted, politely stifling a yawn, when we entered our apartment alone after dropping the Baxters at their address. As was our habit, we went into the living room for a nightcap.

She had scarcely passed through the archway when I saw Madeline come to an abrupt halt. And again I saw her back stiffen. And

the back of her hand, still stifling the yawn, was frozen at her mouth.

But now it seemed as if it served to repress a scream.

She was staring rigidly before her at the green brocaded lounge chair nearest the fireplace. An open book with a red morocco leather cover lay across its arm, and the down cushion was indented as if from the recent pressure of someone's body.

I was instantly aware of Madeline's alarm, but I understood only imperfectly as yet the cause of it. I sought to dispel it, whatever its cause, by saying in an off-hand manner, "Minnie must have been taking it easy for herself just before she went home."

Madeline shook her head. Unwillingly, it seemed, for I had the fleeting impression that she would have liked to believe me. But she said, "Minnie left tonight before we did. And I plumped up that seat-cushion myself, just before we went."

That was true. I remembered distinctly. Somewhat at a loss, I walked over to the chair and picked up the open book. I glanced at the title engraved in gold on its spine.

"*The Rubaiyat*," I said.

Surprisingly enough, Madeline nodded matter-of-factly. "It *would* be *The Rubaiyat*. She liked it."

It didn't occur to me to ask her *who* liked it. I couldn't seem to take in more than one thing at a time. I was looking at the book numbly. "But this isn't my copy. Mine is bound in black silk."

Again Madeline seemed unsurprised. "Of course, it isn't your copy. Look at the book-plate on the title page. She wants me to know she was here." She was speaking like a woman in a trance. "It belongs to Clelie Shayne."

There *was* a book-plate, I found now. Of a ship in full sail, beneath which was a fluttering phylactery bearing the single word, *Beyond!* And under this, *Ex Libris, Clelie Shayne*.

"Why, how did you know?" I asked wonderingly. I had never even heard of anyone named Clelie Shayne.

Madeline didn't answer. She hadn't moved from where she'd first frozen into position. She just kept looking before her at nothing, and in her eyes was the look of someone remembering something from the

distant past. Something, she would gladly have forgotten. I felt curiously shut out, shut away from Madeline's inmost self, for the first time since we'd been married.

And as we stood there, immobile as any two figures in a frieze, there came again almost mischievously the faint yet pungent, spicy odor of carnations!

It was then Madeline did the thing that really frightened me. She spoke, but not to me, yet there was no one else in the room. She spoke to someone—or some presence—that I couldn't see.

She said despairingly, in tones that almost broke my heart with their hopelessness, "Ah, why did you wait till now? Why did you wait till I was happier than I've ever been?" For a moment she waited, head tilted, as if for an answer. And then she nodded, and answered her own question with a sort of dreadful wisdom and a small smile that chilled me to the marrow. "But of course! That's exactly why you've chosen now, isn't it? *Because* I'm happier than I ever was before!"

I can't begin to describe the terror with which her fey manner filled me. It was as if I were witnessing the slow destruction of her mind! I moved forward, and seized her arm, and shook her. "Madeline! Madeline, dear! What's all this about? Tell me, and perhaps I can help you."

Her head turned at that, and her gaze came back from that far-distant place where I could not follow. "Help me? No, you can't help me." Her shoulders sagged. Her voice was on the edge of hysteria. "No one can help me now! For, you see, I know what she wants! And I cannot; I cannot!"

And she fainted then.

I caught her just before she would have fallen.

MADLINE was ill for a day or two after that. Or perhaps it wasn't illness. Perhaps it was only apathy. She was like a woman who'd been dealt so many blows by Fate that she no longer cared what happened. It seemed as if she only waited with resignation for the next blow to fall, and felt herself powerless to avert it.

She lay there in her darkened bedroom, and when gently I begged her to explain, begged her to let me help her if I could, she

only turned her head on the pillow, turned her face to the wall away from me.

Perhaps this seems like nonsense to you. But—was it nonsense that brought that look of dread to Madeline's face? Was it nonsense that a book we didn't own and a record we'd never possessed were able to strike Madeline with this nameless fear? Was Clelie Shayne stealing like an inspired malevolent gnome into our apartment, deliberately trying to terrorize Madeline, to shatter her mental balance by playing these weird tricks upon her?

Or was—as Madeline had more than hinted—our unwelcome guest a ghost? But surely *that* was nonsense?

Above all, who *was* Clelie Shayne? And what did she hope to gain by such *outré* tactics? What was it she wanted of Madeline?

These were the questions to which I gave voice. These were the questions that Madeline stubbornly refused to answer.

I was baffled.

Ghost or not, our visitant was back again two nights later. Madeline felt better by then, well enough to go with me to a small neighborhood theater to see a movie we'd missed when it had played the larger houses.

And again someone had entered our apartment while we were gone.

We'd recently had the living-room walls painted a deep Williamsburg green, against which our book-bindings and brown mahogany furniture gleamed richly. Along one long wall-space was placed a low mirror-fronted credenza, and above this hung a copy of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, its chrome yellows thick and vivid against the dark background of the wall.

We both saw it at one and the same time. It was inescapable.

In our absence someone had removed the painting from the wall. It stood neatly now in one corner. And on the wall-space thus left blank, that same someone, presumably, had written in white chalk:

The truth, Margaret. Or Doom!

My first bewildered thought was, Who is Margaret? And mystified, I turned to see if Madeline could shed any light on this new facet of the puzzle.

She was standing there, her hand at her

throat, her mouth opening and closing soundlessly, her eyes glaring fixedly at the handwriting on the wall. And her voice, when she did manage to speak, was only the merest whisper.

"The truth?" Her voice broke. "No." Her chin went up defiantly. "I'll never, never tell! Ah, don't you see? I *can't* tell now. He'd leave me if he knew. Have mercy. If you only knew how bitterly I've regretted, how I've punished myself all these years!"

And again I knew that her words were addressed to someone—or some presence—in the room that I couldn't see. For someone was there. Someone from whom emanated the subtle scent of carnations! It floated in the air about us.

But if it were Clelie Shayne, she did not answer. It was obvious to me by this time—as it surely would have been to anyone—that Madeline understood the reason behind these mysterious visitations even if I didn't. And this time, my questions naturally were more insistent. For I knew Madeline knew. I knew she might have answered if she would.

But she steadfastly refused to answer me. Only once did she say dully, by way of explanation, "If I tell the truth now, I'll lose you."

Maybe I was a fool, but subtly flattered by her words, I subsided. Yet, nevertheless, I was grimly determined that at the next recurrence of any of these bizarre events, I would *do* something!

A week elapsed before I was forced to act upon my vow.

We had spent the evening alone at home—I reading in a chair before the fireplace, Madeline on the sofa, engaged in working on a needlepoint bench cover.

All had been quiet, when I heard her draw her breath in sharply. I knew almost with certainty what it presaged. With a sinking heart, I turned. She was looking at the wall over the credenza.

Again *Sunflowers* had been removed. Again bold chalk script leaped from the green wall:

You've had a week, Margaret, and still you haven't told. My patience is exhausted. It's just as I thought: The truth isn't in you. So be it!

There was something grimly ominous about that: *So be it!* Even I sensed it. And Madeline, paler than the gardenias at her shoulder, slumped slowly forward in a faint.

III

OBVIOUSLY this couldn't go on. Madeline was a wraith, and this time I wasted no breath in fruitless argument or questioning. It seemed to me that the best thing, the only thing to do was to get out of the apartment at once. Perhaps in a new setting this seemingly insane persecution would stop.

At any rate, it was worth a try.

Accordingly when I learned of a house for rent near a small town up the Hudson, I leased it and arranged for our removal at once without consulting Madeline. I was taking no chances on her possible objection. But contrary to my expectations, Madeline offered no resistance to the idea, when I finally told her what I'd done. She was like an automaton those days, but an automaton nonetheless with a grimly set jaw. I knew the meaning of that jawline.

The truth, whatever it was, that she was urged to tell, would never knowingly pass her lips.

So we moved, and apparently my ruse was successful. The *poltergeist*, if such it could be called, stopped bothering us, and we had peace for a while. I commuted daily to work, and every evening when I returned from the office, I looked eagerly to see if Madeline's mental and emotional health were improving. And evidently it was. Some of the color she'd lost began to return to her cheeks, and her eyes gradually shed that clouded look of fear.

There was only one drawback to my plan. I was afraid that Madeline might be bored away from the city. But when the leaders of the local Little Theater learned she was living near town, they approached her with a request to act in and direct one of their productions, and she agreed eagerly.

"I've missed the smell of grease paint," she told me later, "and I've always had a yen to direct." Her smile was gay and brilliant as of old. "It must be the ham in me, darling. You don't mind?"

Mind? I couldn't have been more pleased.

I was sure this new interest, if anything, would work the final cure.

But now began an even more puzzling aspect of the affair.

For Madeline began to tell me the most outrageous lies. Absurd lies, stupid lies, utterly meaningless lies that couldn't possibly have gained her a thing even if I'd been fool enough to believe them.

Lying, they say, always has its basis in fear; and as I'd never known Madeline to be afraid of anything (barring the recent *poltergeist*) I'd always found her almost insolently truthful. Which only made her present untruthfulness the more incredible.

I REMEMBER well the first time it happened, marked as it was by absurdity.

I was preparing to leave one morning for the office. It had been threatening rain, and I called to Madeline, "Do you think I ought to take an umbrella? See if it's raining, will you, dear?"

While I waited in the hall, I heard her go and open one of the venetian blinds. Then she answered, "No, it's a beautiful day."

But when I opened the door, it was raining with a quiet, dismal persistence that I knew would keep up for hours!

When Madeline came into the hall for my goodbye kiss, I grumbled fondly, "You must be blind in one eye, darling. Look at that."

Frowning, Madeline looked past me at the rain. "What do you mean?"

"You told me not to take an umbrella, that it was a beautiful day."

"Why, George, I told you no such thing!" She looked at me as if I'd gone out of my mind. "Don't be ridiculous! I distinctly remember telling you that it *was* raining."

Naturally I thought she was joking, though it seemed a pointless jest. But it struck me as odd that she still persisted in it. However, I couldn't pursue the subject further, as I was already late, and had to hurry for my train.

But that evening I caught her in another peculiar falsehood.

Idly, I asked Madeline if she'd been out, and she said, "No, I was home all day because of the rain."

But while we were at dinner, the phone rang and I answered it. It was old Mrs. Bronson on the wire.

"Tell Madeline," she said, "that I have her gloves. I mistakenly picked them up for mine, evidently while I was having luncheon with her in town today."

But Madeline had just told me she'd been home all day!

I said, "Are you sure you had luncheon in town with Madeline *today*?"

"Certainly, I'm sure!" snapped the crotchety old dowager. "I'm not in my dotage yet!"

And she hung up the receiver with an irritated bang.

When I went back to rejoin Madeline, I repeated the conversation in its entirety. She exhibited no confusion in being caught in such a silly, bald-face lie.

I said, "But you told me you weren't out today!"

Madeline turned wide, innocent eyes to mine, and deliberately uttered another lie!

"Really, George! You must be dreaming. I just finished telling you, didn't I, that I had lunch with Mrs. Bronson? She wanted to ask me if I'd let her granddaughter play second lead in the play."

"You told me nothing of the sort!"

We had a heated argument about it, but in the end I apologized. For it seemed I must surely be wrong. As Madeline said, "Why in the world would I bother to lie to you about anything so unimportant?"

I decided I must have been inattentive, though I could have sworn—

But we left it at that, though I was to wish heartily later that we hadn't. For Madeline's next misstatement might have cost me my life.

I ALWAYS drove to the station in the mornings with Madeline accompanying me so that she could drive the car back home for her own use during the day, picking me up again at night.

It was still raining the following morning, and I noticed that the car wasn't braking well. I told Madeline at the station to take it in immediately and have the brakes re-lined, and she promised that she would.

"You'd better take a cab home from the station tonight," Madeline added. "Even if Al fixes the brakes right away, Mrs. Bronson is giving a tea this afternoon, and I may not be able to get away in time to meet you."

It wasn't until after dinner that evening that I remembered about the brakes.

"Did you have them fixed?" I asked.

"Yes, I did," Madeline said. "The mechanic said the brake linings were nearly gone, but what was worse, there was a leak some place that had permitted most of the hydraulic fluid to escape. He said we were lucky we caught it in time." And she went on, in considerable circumstantial detail to describe how long the job had taken, and how much Al had charged her.

I remember distinctly every word she said. This time I couldn't have been mistaken.

I had to drive into town alone later that evening, and where our local road crosses the superhighway, I was going at a good clip when the traffic light went red against me abruptly. I jammed my right foot down, and the brake went all the way to the floor. But the car didn't lessen its speed!

It happened so fast I had time only for a flashing moment of blind panic. I shot straight through the intersection, and crashed into the side of a truck.

The front end of the car was demolished, but I escaped by a miracle with only cuts and bruises, and a bad knock on the head where I'd nearly gone through the windshield.

Naturally I blamed Al at first. I thought he'd been criminally negligent. But when I called him and he came with the tow-truck, he denied ever touching the brakes. Certainly not that day.

"I haven't had your car in the shop since three weeks ago, when I adjusted your carburetor," Al said stoutly.

He convinced me finally that he was speaking the truth. Which left me only one alternative to believe. That Madeline, fantastically, had again deliberately lied.

I had it out with her when I reached home, and as I'd almost expected, she denied that she'd ever told me she'd had the brakes fixed!

"I told you I *didn't* take the car in to Al's today," she said brazenly. "I meant to, but I couldn't find the time."

I could only look at her in amazement. I said, "Really, Madeline, are you aware that three times now I've caught you telling me the most flagrant lies? I can't conceive what your object is."

She looked at me indignantly. "You know

I always tell you the truth!" Which statement in itself was an outrageous lie, considering her recent behavior.

I shook my head. "I can't understand it. But the truth no longer seems to be in you."

I'd no sooner said those words than my head went up sharply, reminded. Where had I heard those words before? And then I remembered. The handwriting on the wall!

The truth isn't in you.

Madeline must have known by the expression on my face what I was thinking. And she was reminded, too. For her face went the color of clay, and I thought she was going to be actively ill.

I pleaded with her then. I told her I feared for her mental health, and I suggested that she see a psychiatrist. But she grew so hysterical at the suggestion, seemed so obviously terrified by what she might reveal under the probing questions of a psychiatrist, that in mercy I was afraid to insist. Perhaps I should have been ruthless, but I loved her, and love makes cowards of us all.

So I said no more about her lies, making it a rule insofar as I could to avoid asking her any direct questions. But it wasn't pleasant to see her going around like a haunted thing, bearing in her eyes the dumb questioning look of a wounded animal.

And I began to wonder if perhaps my own reason were leaving me. Was it really so, or did I only imagine, that the air of this house too was becoming very faintly scented with the odor of carnations?

IV

I ALMOST hesitate to tell of my meeting with Emory Gordon, for I'm afraid you'll say it's too apt, too pat a coincidence. Yet, it happened. And for a time I, too, thought it coincidence, or the blind working of Fate.

But now—I wonder. Wonder if it weren't the spirit of Clelie Shayne that guided my steps that night, that placed in my hands the tangled threads with which ultimately I might unravel the story.

And why should she have done this? I don't know. Perhaps, knowing the tragic end that was to come, she pitied me and

wanted me to understand. For I had done her no harm.

On the night, then, of which I speak, I had absolutely no intention of staying in town or going to the club that evening. Nor can I remember reaching a considered decision to do so. It was quite as if I followed blindly where someone else led.

But about five o'clock, I pulled the telephone to me and put in a long-distance call to Madeline. And when I had her on the wire, I was surprised to find myself telling her not to expect me home to dinner.

"I have to meet a man at the club," I said smoothly.

She took the news equably enough. "We're rehearsing the play tonight," she said, "so when you get back to town, come to the theater and we'll drive home together."

I remember when I hung up the receiver I sat there looking blankly at the telephone. I was amazed at myself. Why in the world had I told Madeline I must go to the club when I had had absolutely no intention of going until the moment of speaking to her? I hadn't even known that was what I was going to say.

But now it seemed absolutely necessary for me to go. I was laboring under some strange compulsion. I strongly felt there was an urgent reason why I should appear there, yet at the same time I could find no reason for my feeling so!

There's a blank in my memory from then on, as if I were one acting under light hypnosis. I must have been able to move and speak without attracting undue attention, for I reached the club without incident. But how I met Gordon, or whose suggestion it was that we dine together, is lost in a vague blur.

It wasn't until I was actually sitting across from him at the table that this queer mental haze lifted, and a curious sense of what I can only call *awareness* stole over me. I knew this man was important to me, for some reason I had yet to learn.

More, I had a wary instinct of dislike for this heavy-set man in his late thirties, who was chatting amiably enough.

"This is fine," he was saying appreciatively. "I'm tired of dining alone. Bachelor life isn't all it's cracked up to be, is it?"

Naturally I told him that I was not a

bachelor, as he was assuming. And as usual I was a trifle smug, I fear, as I said, "My wife is the actress, Madeline Ames."

As Madeline is famous, I've grown somewhat accustomed to the mild sensation this statement usually causes. I'm afraid I've come to expect the exclamations of surprise, like those Gordon was voicing now.

But he didn't stop there.

"You know," he said, reaching for a cracker, "the first time I ever saw Miss Ames on the stage she reminded me of somebody, but I couldn't remember who. You know how resemblances will haunt you? It nearly drove me crazy until I remembered Margaret Shayne, a girl I knew slightly long ago, back home."

"Margaret Shayne?" I repeated, the two names sounding a familiar note that escaped me for the moment. Something made me say, as if reassuring myself, "Ames is Madeline's real name." Which was the truth, so far as I knew.

I DARESAY my voice may have sounded odd. Gordon must have thought I spoke in annoyance, for he went on apologetically, "Oh, I know it isn't the same person. The gestures reminded me, really, more than any close resemblance. Miss Ames is very attractive, but Margaret was a rather plain little thing at the time of her disappearance, eighteen years ago."

For some reason I was beginning to feel vaguely uneasy. There was a faint gnawing sensation of alarm at the pit of my stomach, and the palms of my hands were damp. But I felt that I must go on, however unwillingly. "Disappearance?" I said. "It all sounds very mysterious, as if it might be an interesting story."

"It was, in a way," Gordon admitted. "Though, like the late Will Rogers, I only knew what I read in the papers." He went on reminiscently, "Poor kid, I wonder whatever happened to her? The whole miserable affair must have been a terrible strain for an impressionable young girl. She dropped completely out of sight after the notoriety of Clelie Shayne's trial."

Clelie Shayne!

There it was! The name on the book-plate! And Madeline had known her! And I remembered something else. The hand-

writing on the wail had been addressed to "Margaret."

And I feared in my heart that at one time Madeline must have been known as Margaret Shayne.

I WAS afraid of what I was about to hear. In my distress I choked then, and Gordon leaped up to offer me water and clap me on the back. When this little confusion was over, I returned to the subject. I had to. I couldn't help myself. It had gone too far—now.

"You spoke of a trial?" I asked, trying to keep the eagerness out of my voice. I had no intention of telling a stranger of the recent peculiar events that had befallen Madeline and me. But there was no harm in pumping him for information that might be useful.

Perhaps, dimly, I had some faint hope in my heart of learning something that would help in exorcising our ghost. "Tell me about it," I suggested.

Luckily Gordon wasn't the type to worry for fear he might be boring me. I was a lawyer, and he took for granted my interest in legal cases. He plunged right in.

"Oh," he said, "it all happened about eighteen years ago, in my home town. Margaret Shayne was an orphan, the ward of her father's younger brother, Timothy Shayne. At the time of the tragedy, Shayne was only twelve years older than she, thirty to her eighteen.

"His reputation in the town was none too savory. He drank heavily, and he was emotionally unstable, subject to sudden violent rages. But to give the devil his due, I'm sure he was genuinely fond of Margaret for he behaved well toward her, if to no one else. She was a plain little thing, but from the way he spoiled her, you would have thought she was a raving beauty."

For a moment I wondered fleetingly if I might have been mistaken in thinking Madeline was Margaret Shayne. It was hard to believe Madeline had ever been a "plain little thing," in Gordon's phrase. But still, strictly speaking, Madeline wasn't really beautiful, even today. Artful make-up, poise, clothes, and the glamor attaching to her profession might very well have created the illusion of beauty. Yes, I thought, my heart

sinking again, it was entirely possible that they were one and the same person.

"Well," Gordon was saying, "about a year before the time of which I'm speaking, Shayne went down alone to New Orleans for the Mardi Gras, and he married down there very suddenly and unexpectedly. When he came back he brought his bride, Clelie, with him. And there *was* a beauty! In two months half the men in town were in love with her, married woman or not. Shayne was insanely jealous, but nothing happened until young Jay Mortimer made a fool of himself with his attentions. Everyone could see it was entirely one-sided, that Clelie did her best to discourage him. Everyone, that is, except her husband.

"Shayne flew into one of his passions, and accused her of infidelity. A ridiculous charge, I'm sure. Clelie was merely an unwilling victim of her own attractiveness. But, frightened by Shayne's violence, she only whetted his suspicions by threatening to leave him. This threat brought on one last violent quarrel in the presence of Margaret. Shayne had been drinking heavily, and—well, you know what a combination of temper and alcohol can do. He said he'd kill her first. He pulled a gun on Clelie, and she struggled for it in self-defense. The gun went off, and Shayne was fatally wounded, dying minutes later."

"But," I pointed out here, "you said it reached a trial. Surely if she acted in self-defense—"

Gordon nodded. "You think she should never have been indicted? I think myself she would have been freed, for she had the sympathy of the town, at first. But this was *Clelie's* story, you see, that I've been repeating. And there was something else. There was the testimony of *Margaret* Shayne."

I stirred uneasily.

"Margaret told an entirely different tale," Gordon went on. "*She* said that Clelie shot Timothy Shayne in cold blood, that there hadn't been any quarrel or struggle at all."

"But even so," I objected, "it was only the word of one against the other."

Gordon shrugged. "Well, Margaret's story was sufficient to create a reasonable doubt. The prosecuting attorney was clever, and he made the most of it. What had Margaret to gain by a lie, he asked? Whereas

Clelie had everything to gain. He was able to swing the jury away from the defense. They found Clelie Shayne guilty, and she was sentenced to prison for a term of years."

I felt swift relief, and a certain bewilderment. "Then she wasn't sentenced to death?" I'd expected to hear it.

Gordon was shrugging again. "Technically, no. But Clelie was a gentle, delicate person. I remember I was in court when she was sentenced. She just stood there dully, and when she turned away from the bench her eyes fell on Margaret. And there was the strangest look of bewildered despair on Clelie's face. I tell you, I think she died at that moment. She *did* die, actually, in prison five months later."

I asked, "And the girl, Margaret—?"

"She disappeared right after the trial. As I said, she dropped out of sight completely."

I said, "I see."

But I didn't see then. Not entirely. My thoughts were still too confused. I was anxious to be alone, in order to sort them out.

V

GOING home on the train, I looked blankly out of the dark window beside me, seeing nothing of what passed, my mind in a turmoil, my thoughts seeking this explanation, that one.

The legal profession is hardly conducive to the exercise of imagination, but I tried my best to reconstruct the story I'd just heard, to interpret it according to my suspicions and in the light of the weird things that had been happening to Madeline.

And I thought of that eighteen-year-old girl, Margaret Shayne—plain, petted, spoiled. Surely it followed that she'd been strongly attached to the young bachelor uncle who'd done the spoiling? And how had she felt later about his sudden marriage, his beautiful wife who was everything that she herself was not? Gordon had given me no clue. But it wouldn't be too fantastic, human nature being what it is, to assume that she'd bitterly resented Clelie, had bitterly resented being relegated to second place in her uncle's affections.

Her sense of possessiveness outraged, then, I could imagine this resentment—hid-

den, of necessity—growing like a cancer until it was of appalling proportions in the breast of this young girl.

And then the uncle's death. No matter that Timothy Shayne hadn't been all 'he might have been. He'd been devoted to her, at least, and it is easy for us to find excuses for those who approve highly of us. He'd been killed by the very woman whom Margaret had jealously resented—perhaps, had grown to hate. It took no great intelligence to suspect where her sympathies would lie. Certainly not with Clelie.

Suppose, then, Clelie had told the truth? And when it looked as if she might escape scot-free, Margaret, her mind twisted with grief, anguish, jealousy, had told her lie, sending Clelie to prison and death.

Had Margaret come to New York then to study for the stage and eventually become Madeline Ames? To be haunted eighteen years later by the ghost of Clelie Shayne, insisting that the true story be told at last?

Which brought me to the question: Did I believe in ghosts? Once I would have said, "Certainly not!"

But now—I didn't know.

Maybe I was being wildly imaginative. Maybe I was off on the wrong track altogether. I hoped I was: I hated to think that Madeline ever could have been guilty of sending another woman to her death. For the inference had been plain to be drawn from Gordon's story that it was imprisonment that had killed Clelie Shayne.

But if my surmises were true, why had the spirit of Clelie Shayne waited all these years for revenge? And then I remembered. Remembered Madeline saying she'd been happier than she'd ever been before. And that was why Clelie had come now—that her vengeance might bear a sharper sting.

For I knew one thing. If Madeline had done this, I could no longer go on living with her. For she would never again, in my mind, be the woman I had loved.

And so I had to know. And I determined to question Madeline now, tonight, telling her what I knew, what I suspected. And then I remembered "the truth wasn't in her." Suppose she only lied to me again?

How was I ever to know?

I had no premonition of disaster.

When I arrived at the theater, the cast

was already on-stage, the amateurs among them looking self-conscious and ill-at-ease. Madeline's self-assurance and practised stage presence stood out like a light on a dark night.

She was looking more beautiful than I had ever seen her in a white crepe evening gown that clung to the long lines of her body. Her dark hair shimmered under the single naked light hanging above stage-center.

My heart was heavy with the knowledge of the talk I was going to have with her when we reached home. I dropped into a seat in the auditorium, next to old Mrs. Bronson, the Little Theater's guiding light.

She said, "Sh!" unnecessarily, for I hadn't been making any noise. "They're rehearsing the last act now."

The members of the cast were not as yet making any effort to give their lines dramatic interpretation. They held their "sides" and read from them matter-of-factly, occasionally stopping to ask Madeline for help on some mooted point, or to straighten out a bit of stage business. A young man sat at a piano in the pit, softly playing *Tangerine* for background music.

Madeline was in her element. As Karla Meath, the "heroine" of the play, a lady no better than she should be, Madeline had come now in the third act to taunt the wife of her lover with the fact that she was about to take him away from her entirely, and fly with him to *les Alpes Maritimes*. The wife, played woodenly enough by Mrs. Bronson's granddaughter, Alice, hysterically grabs a revolver and threatens Karla with it.

The scene went on through Madeline's brittle speech as Karla to the point where Alice picked up the revolver. She did it gingerly, holding it as if it were about to explode, an almost laughable expression of distaste on her face.

Madeline clapped her hands. The young man at the piano stopped playing, and Madeline stepped out of character long enough to smile and say, "No, no, Alice, darling! Don't hold the gun as if it were going to bite you! You're supposed to be frightening me."

The members of the cast chuckled, and Alice laughed, too, sheepishly. "I'm sorry, Miss Ames. I've always been afraid of these things."