

TERROR TALES



VOLUME TWELVE MAY, 1940 NUMBER TWO

A LONG NOVEL OF WEIRD TERROR

The Book of Torment.....Harrison Storm **6**

How could anyone have believed me when I said I had not committed those horrible torture-murders? For they had read the gloating admission of the ghastly crimes—and the handwriting was my own!

FOUR MYSTERY-TERROR NOVELETTES

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Death lay in my lips! I knew this, but some power stronger than myself forced me on to lure men to their destruction. Was I so accused that even the one man I truly loved could not escape my frenzied madness?

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I wanted to destroy that slimy, protoplasmic horror that fed on the flesh of the humans it sought to imitate, but even as I locked with it in a struggle of death, it changed into the lovely form of—my wife!

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THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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PREY FOR THE DAUGHTER

The curse of the Praying Mantis was a madness in my blood—a raging fire that made me lure men to unholy love and horrible death. . . . For the men I kissed were found headless and hideously mutilated. My beloved Norman knew my frenzy, yet he took my yearning body in his arms in a desperate effort to cure me—or die!

CHAPTER ONE

The Dawn of Passion

I HARDLY know when Jura Singh came into my life; he was so much a part of my early years that it seemed he was with us as far back as I can remember. But I will never forget the day he went away—for on that day



OF HELL •

by CONRAD KIMBALL

A novelette of a girl in whose blood were the seeds of madness



all the old ways changed. That day the peace and happiness of my childhood was suddenly ended, and something sinisterly evil came over me that was to transform my life into a ghastly nightmare. That day, at the age of twelve, I became a woman—a woman with unholy passions and a Circe-like lure that beckoned irresistibly to the grave. . . .

Jura Singh's position in our household was unique. My father found him on

one of his numerous exploring trips in the Orient and brought him back to America. He was, I suppose, father's personal man—but he was far more than that. He was a servant without portfolio; almost one of the family—as helpful to mother as to father, and a fascinating man of mystery to the little tousle-head who listened eagerly to his strange stories and patient lectures.

He was a few years younger than father, a few years older than mother; a handsome, brown-skinned, dark-eyed man in his middle thirties. When he spoke, people turned to listen—and when he smiled his thin, inscrutable half-smile they forgot to turn away again until he was finished.

The bug-man, I used to call him, because he kept a marvelous collection of insects in one end of the greenhouse. Often I watched him as he tended them and told me amazing stories about their lives and the strange powers some of them exerted over humans.

And that was where he took me on the day that was to divert the course

of my life into a channel of stark tragedy. . . .

"Watch them closely, Miss Doris," he instructed, when I sat opposite him across a little wire cage. In it was a twig to which two praying mantises clung. "You know the little 'prophets'. That one nearer to you is the female. This one on my side is the male. It is their mating season, the time when they make love very much like human beings."

Something about the curious, half-erect insects fascinated me. Perhaps it was because they looked so human as they clung to each other. I watched them wide-eyed—and across the cage, Jura Singh watched them with eyes that were like great, dark magnets; eyes that furnished a background which reached out for mine and drew them to him irresistibly.

"Watch them now, watch them closely," his low voice seemed to be speaking inside my brain—and suddenly my mouth dropped open in amazement.

The mantises had changed their positions slightly. Now one—the female mantis—had the male locked in an embrace so that he could not move. And she was biting him. She was biting his head. Not only biting—she was *eating* him!

"Stop them, Jura Singh!" I gasped, as soon as I realized what I was witnessing. "Stop them before she kills him!"

But Jura Singh shook his head slowly.

"No, Miss Doris, we must not stop them," he said softly. "That is their nature—the nature of the world. When she has no more need of him the female mantis kills her mate and devours his body. That is the end of their love, just as it is with humans. I brought you here today because I am going away. I shall no longer be here to watch over you—so I am leaving you to the little prophets. You will remember what they have taught you. They will not let you forget—and they will watch over you."

The drone of his voice rang in my ears, but my eyes were riveted on the two insects—and as I watched them horror distilled within my brain. Terrifying horror and a vague sense of hideous evil that chilled my blood and turned my fingers and toes ice-cold.

How long I sat there I do not know—but that grisly feast was only half-finished when my taut nerves snapped and I burst into hysterical sobbing.

JURA SINGH was gone from the greenhouse when I recovered my composure, and he was gone from the big house in which we lived when I went to look for him.

He had left me to the praying mantises. . . .

That night my mother left me also. It was Nelly, her personal maid, who found her. Nelly came running down the stairs shrieking something that was hardly intelligible about Mrs. Bradley and poison. They telephoned for the doctor and would not let me go up to see mother until he came, and then it was too late. She was dead.

My father stayed only a week after that. For some months he had been toying with the idea of undertaking a dangerous expedition into Tibet, and mother's death decided him. He kissed me good-bye—and that was the last I ever was to see of him.

After our house was closed up I went to live with father's older brother, my Uncle Fleming. He and my cousin, Myron, who was fifteen years older than I, did their best to make me feel at home, but it was some time before I recovered from the shock of my loss and sudden transplanting. All that had been connected with my old life seemed to end with that stunning tragedy—all but the praying mantises.

For some strange reason which I could not explain I took with me the

cage with the half dozen mantises from Jura Singh's entomological collection. During the first night in my new home the little door of the wire container was unaccountable opened, and when I awoke in the morning the insects were gone—but as my eyes searched the walls of the room in which they had been left a curious feeling came over me, a feeling that they were not lost but were somewhere close by, watching me.

Jura Singh had left me to the mantises. He had said that they would watch over me, would not let me forget—and the memory sent a cold chill trickling down my spine. The memory of that female mantis greedily devouring the body of her mate. . . .

That ghastly sight remained vivid in my memory for months. It sent tremors coursing through me in the middle of the day and woke me out of a sound sleep at the dead of night. It seemed to be on my mind constantly, and I was aware of the effect it was having upon me. It was making me shy, making me self-conscious and anxious to avoid the society of boys—at the same instant that shocking impulses suddenly flashed into my mind and sent waves of hot blood surging into my cheeks!

Uncle Fleming seemed to realize that something was wrong. Many times I noticed him studying me with a worried expression on his face, and finally he decided that I should be sent away to a girls' school. That was better. There the memory of the mantises dimmed and gradually faded-away. By the time I was sixteen I had all but forgotten about them.

That was when I met Paul Anderson—and for the second time my world came crashing down upon me as I realized the ghastly curse that was rioting in my veins. . . .

Paul's father was the caretaker on Uncle Fleming's summer estate at

Marblehead. He was home from college, spending his vacation with his family, when we arrived to occupy the big house. Several days I stood near the edge of the bluffs and watched him as he swam off the float, hundreds of feet below; watched his lithe, sun-tanned body, naked except for swimming trunks, cut through the blue water of the Atlantic—watched him bound up onto the float and stand basking in the sunshine.

And as I watched, strange, half-sensed desires began to well up within me. A strange, tingling excitement came over me. It set my pulses throbbing and made my breath come faster—until the palpitation of my bosom drove me back farther from the edge, as if his eyes could see and understand my reaction to his presence!

I wanted to be down there with him—wanted him with a tensity that amazed me; but something held me back. It would have been a simple matter to meet him, a natural thing to join him in any of those dips—and yet a faint warning in the back of my brain restrained me.

For almost a week I avoided the water when he would be there—and then I deliberately went down the long stairway to the beach half an hour before I knew he would arrive. Resolutely I had told myself that morning that I would do no such thing—and yet my feet led me to the top of the stairs as if they were quite independent of my control.

I was swimming off the float when he came down the steps. My pulses pounded like miniature tomtoms when I saw him sprint across the beach and dive into the water—and I put every atom of my strength into a sprint that carried me much farther out than I had ever gone. Perhaps that was why I was panting for breath when I got back to the float—but that was not why I dropped one arm so that the shoulder-strap of my suit slipped down when he reached over the side to help me up onto the platform.

THAT innocent-appearing accident was deliberate—and yet I had nothing to do with it! Something within me had taken hold of me, something that gloried in the startled admiration that leaped into his eyes. I could feel the crimson stealing into my cheeks as he stared, but it wasn't a flush of shame.

And when he looked into my eyes I was certain that he could read what was in my mind! He knew that—and yet I didn't care!

"You—you must be Miss Bradley," he finally managed to find words that broke the tension.

"And you are Paul Anderson," I heard a voice answering; my voice, but one that I hardly recognized as my own—for it was husky and low, a voice that throbbed with emotion and with invitation.

We swam together after that; swam and then lay talking on the float—while I fought to restrain the wild, unreasoning desire to take him into my arms. It was I who suggested that we had had enough—I who led the way to the shore—and it was I who tripped and started to fall when we reached a point well hidden by the rocks.

Quickly he sprang to catch me—and then I was in his arms. Wild delirium rioted through my brain as his lips found mine and clung to them in a kiss that I returned a hundred fold. Madness seethed in my blood as I pressed close against his naked chest, as his hands caressed me. . . .

Suddenly something exploded in my brain. Suddenly his face blurred before my eyes—and in its place I saw a female praying mantis devouring the head of its mate!

"That is the end of their love, just as it is with humans!" Jura Singh's voice rang in my ears—and I knew that the mantises were not letting me forget!

They were not letting me forget that

I was one with them. They were not letting me forget that when I had enough of this man I would kill him! They were watching over me when I was in danger—when I was hovering on the brink of murder!

Terror froze me where I stood—and then a flood of revulsion deluged me. With an inarticulate gasp, I sprang back and broke away from his eager arms, hurled him from me as I ran for the stairs and raced up the hundreds of steps until my pounding heart threatened to burst. Not until I reached the house did I slow my frantic pace; not until I was locked safely in my own room did I drop to the bed and give way to the tears that were stinging my eyelids.

I had been deliberately shameless before a man! I had led him on to familiarities, had encouraged him like a wanton of the streets! I had cheapened and disgraced myself—and now the high tide of shame ran strong within me. I despised and excoriated myself; I reviled myself and swore never to look at another man—and yet that night I crept out of bed and slipped into a bathing suit.

The moon was bright as I carefully picked my way across the grounds toward the bluffs in a course that would pass within sight of the caretaker's house. My heart was pounding as I walked on toward the drumming of the surf—and then it leaped into my throat.

My straining ears had caught the sound of footsteps behind me. He was coming! Paul was coming! I glimpsed him as he came toward me. . . .

I stood in the moonlight at the edge of the bluff, the cold luminance bathing my slender body, turning it into gleaming marble—a marble statue that breathed and walked and throbbed with desire. I danced ahead of him—danced ahead of those hands that were so eager to reach me. . . .

His face was alight, eager with antici-

pation as he came running toward me. Utter madness raged in my brain—and then I knew no more. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

My First Corpse

I KNEW no more until I awoke in the morning and found myself in my bed. For long moments I lay there, thinking—desperately thinking; trying to reconstruct what had happened. Warily, like a trapped animal, I got out of bed and looked around me.

There on a chair was the wet bathing suit I had worn last night. So I *had* been down to the beach; that memory was no figment of my imagination. And there, in the center of my dressing table, lay *the half-consumed body of a praying mantis!*

My heart seemed to stop beating as I stared at my hands, at my body, at my face. They were clean—all except faint smudges of crimson at the corners of my mouth; and that was my lipstick. Nothing but lipstick. It *could* be nothing but lipstick!

I was repeating that over and over, drilling it into my brain, when I went down to breakfast—but the moment I stepped into the dining room my mental chant ceased. Something was wrong; I sensed that immediately. Neither Uncle Fleming nor Myron had been to breakfast, and the house seemed stripped of servants.

"They're all down at the beach, Miss Doris," one of the maids finally told me. "Something terrible happened there last night. Paul Anderson must have gone swimming and a shark got him. They found his body, but the head and one of the arms were gone—"

A man-eating shark off the Marble-head beach! That was impossible! I knew it was impossible—and so should every-

one else. They ought to know that Paul had been murdered! They ought to know that he had been lured to his death—by a murderess—by a hell-ridden cannibal!

Yet they did not know. They accepted the absurd theory of the shark, and my monstrous secret was safe, hidden from everyone—except myself. I alone knew what must have happened out there at the edge of the bluff. I alone knew the murderous mania that comes over the female mantis when her mate has fulfilled his mission. I alone must hide that hellish, soul-writing secret that would give me no peace day or night: I alone—

But that night I thought that I was not alone in my damning knowledge. My heart stood still, and cold, clammy perspiration beaded my face and limbs as I crouched in hiding and listened to Myron talking with Uncle Fleming.

"There is something I know about last night that I did not dare mention at the coroner's inquest this morning," my cousin's hesitant words pounded against my eardrums. "Doris had a rendezvous with young Anderson at about eleven-thirty. I was restless and couldn't sleep. I was standing at my window when I saw her leave the house in a bathing suit. Naturally, I followed to see what took her to the beach at such an hour.

"She went down past the Anderson house and Paul came out to her, and then—well, er—it was pretty raw. They were in each other's arms when Paul must have heard me. He warned her, and they darted off into the shadows toward the stairway—"

That was all he had seen. Thank God, that was all! I felt my knees buckling beneath me from sheer relief—but suddenly my uncle's grim voice stabbed through my moiling thoughts.

"It's in her blood—rotten blood!" he muttered in syllables that dripped with bitterness. "Poor devil, she can't help it—she inherited that from her mother.

Perhaps I ought to have told you this before, Myron—but Thomas was my brother, and I am proud of our family. The reason Evelyn Bradley committed suicide was because Thomas had discovered that she was having a beastly affair with that Hindu, Jura Singh! When they knew that the rotten mess was about to be exposed, the Hindu disappeared and she took poison—and poor Tom went off to his death.

"He made me swear to look after that girl when he made me her guardian, and I have tried—but her blood is rotten. There is no use having a row with her, Myron. As long as we are the only ones who know about this, we'll keep it to ourselves—and from now on we'll watch her like hawks. Poor Tom—maybe it is just as well that he never came back."

My mother—and Jura Singh! Those words seared into my brain as if they were written there in acid. My mother—and a Hindu! My mother. . . . Now I understood what Jura Singh had meant.

"—*the female mantis kills her mate and devours his body,*" his words clanged in my brain. "*That is the end of their love, just as it is with humans—*"

And now I understood. . . . He had fled because he feared for his life; because he was afraid she would kill him. And I was like her. Her blood was my blood; hot blood that leaped with passion—and then murdered! Poor Paul Anderson had not had time to flee. . . . I was worse than a wanton; I was a murderous lure that meant death to any man who yielded to my charms. . . .

WITH that realization my cup of horror ran over. Somehow I managed to reach the foot of the stairs before I collapsed. For weeks I lay in bed, followed by weeks in a private sanitarium. From there Myron took me out West, to a ranch that was really another sanitarium. Gradually my strength returned,

and the horrible nightmare receded from my mind. Gradually I again became a human being—and realized that I could be around men without being metamorphosed into a murderous animal.

The doctors at the sanitarium, the hands at the ranch, the ranchman's son—none of them started my blood churning. Grimly I had resolved to eschew any contact with men, but gradually that determination weakened and I began to feel that I was over-stressing what had happened to me.

Perhaps, after all, the shocking effect Paul Anderson had had upon me was only one of those peculiar quirks that often crop up in adolescent girls. Perhaps there *had* been no more to that fatal night than Myron witnessed. Perhaps Paul *had* fallen over the bluff and been battered on the rocks or had been gnawed by a shark. . . .

Myron helped my recovery greatly. He visited me frequently, stayed with me for periods and did all that he could to bring me back to normalcy. It was he who brought me home at the end of two years; brought me home to an uncle who greeted me as if nothing ever had happened.

"This is a gloomy old house for a charming young lady like you, Doris," he grinned at me affectionately after I had been home about a week. "I have a better suggestion—the Moharney Camp in Maine. There you will have a chance to mingle with young people of your own age. Myron needs a vacation, too, so he has agreed to go with you and spend a while at the camp."

A young people's camp. . . . A cold trickle inched its way down my spine and I could feel the blood ebbing from my cheeks—but I resolutely fought off my trepidation. This was my chance to prove to myself that I was cured, my chance to assure myself of a wholesome, normal life. If I failed now—

But I would not fail!

And at the end of a week at Camp Moharney I knew I had not failed. I had entered into every activity with zest. I had been swimming, canoeing, fishing, dancing and just sitting and talking with men—and I had been like any other girl. I was cured; the madness was swept out of my life forever!

That was what I exultingly told myself as I was dressing on the fourth of August; and on that night the Moharney invitation dance was held.

The day was hot, sultry, one of those breathlessly humid days that can make even the Maine woods feel like a tropical jungle. I felt the heat far more than usual; felt it from the moment I got out of bed. By night my nerves were taut, on edge—and that was the night I met Ralph Sabin.

Sabin owned a private hunting camp half a mile down the lake. He was tall and good-looking; a man with an engaging smile and eyes that said more than his lips. Something seemed to pass between us the moment I met him—something that sent a frantic warning scurrying to my brain. Perhaps it was the thrilling tingle that crept up my arm when our hands met; perhaps the strange, half-formed impulses within me.

"Stop! Stop now, before it is too late!" the warning whisper stabbed into my consciousness; but then Ralph Sabin had me in his arms and was leading me onto the

dance floor—and after that I could not stop.

After that we were inseparable. We danced every dance; danced them subconsciously, for our thoughts were not on our feet. I wanted this man, I told myself again and again; I wanted him until the wanting became a livid ache. And his eyes told me that I did not want in vain.

"It's beastly hot here, Doris," he whispered at the end of one of the numbers. "My place is much higher and cooler. Let's go there for a while."

Now the warning to refuse was only a dim, scarcely audible echo. I wanted to go with him, and I went—while the rhythmic beat of the tom-tom began to swell in my pulses. We went to his camp and we danced; danced to soft music in his large galleried living room—and with each note madness crept into my brain. Desperately I tried to stave it off, but I was like a child struggling with a giant. The touch of his fingers maddened me, flooded my brain with impulses that were irresistible. . .

CHAPTER THREE

Damnation Owns Me!

SOMEHOW my lips found his and clung to them avidly. Somehow my trembling fingers found the zippers of

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my strapless gown and drew them downward. And then I danced; danced as I had never danced in my life, as I had never seen anyone dance. I danced in front of him, while the thrills that coursed through me were transmitted to every movement of my body.

His eyes upon me were like potent liquor in my veins.

Suddenly I was in his arms, avidly seeking his lips as I pressed against him. The frenzy of my rush carried him backward—but something must have warned him then.

"No—no!" I heard his startled cry ringing in my ears. "No—no!" And now the exclamations vibrated with fear.

He tried to thrust me away, tried to beat me off—but he was mine, mine. I would not let him go—even though the noise of his frightened yelling filled my whole brain; even though darkness was closing in upon me and wrapping its numbing folds around me. . . .

That darkness did not lift until the light of morning greeted my opening eyes. I was in bed in my cabin at the camp; I knew that at once—and then I knew what had awakened me. It was Myron. He was there in the cabin, bending over the floor with a rag. Through narrowly opened eyes I watched him, while my heart seemed to freeze into deathly stillness.

He was scouring the floor—wiping bloodstains off the boards! My evening dress lay in a little heap beside him—and I could see the dark, damning stains upon it. Blood! Blood on the floor, on my hands, on my pillow! And my hesitantly licking tongue met the salty taste of dried blood on my lips!

The moan that wrenched from my lips was torn out of my very soul. It brought Myron erect immediately, and instantly he came to the bed. His upraised hand cautioned silence as he read the hysteria

that was dawning in my agonized eyes.

"Stop it, Doris!" he snapped. "This is no time for a breakdown. Get out of bed and wash your hands and face. Scour them well, and be sure that the water all goes down the drain."

"But—but this blood?" I managed to gasp. "Ralph—?"

"I don't know a thing about this blood—and neither does anyone else," he pronounced doggedly. "I saw you go off with young Sabin last night, but I don't think anyone else did. When you hadn't returned an hour later I went after you—but I was too late. Sabin was alone—lying in the woods near his— doorway. He was dead. His head was gone, and his arms were gnawed off at the elbows—as if an animal had been at work on him. That's all I know—do you understand?" He drilled his words into me.

"Sabin's body hasn't been discovered yet—and before it is we must get rid of this—" he motioned toward the bloodstained sheets and pillow—"so that nobody will start getting crazy ideas. This is the best plan. I'll get out of here, and you set fire to the bedding. Be sure that the bloodstained parts are in ashes before you shout for help. They will assume that a cigarette set the bed afire."

I hardly heard him, but instinctively I started to obey. Wrapping the sheet around me, I stepped out of the bed—and something crunched under my bare foot. Something that sent a spear of livid horror driving into my tragedy-numbered brain.

It was the half-consumed body of a praying mantis!

MYRON caught me or I would have fallen to the floor. For a moment he held my nearly naked body in his arms, held me tightly, while his eyes looked deep into mine—and his breath came faster.

"Please, Doris," he whispered. "Buck

up and help me carry this thing through."

Somehow I controlled myself. I did as he told me, and the fire I started was extinguished before it had done much harm. It was almost ignored in the excitement that followed the discovery of Ralph Sabin's mangled corpse. Bear tracks had been found in the woods close to his camp, and that was the answer they finally decided upon to account for Ralph's death. He had been killed and chewed by a bear.

But I knew that they were wrong. I knew how Ralph Sabin had died. I knew that no man was safe alone with me—that no man could live once he yielded to my love. I knew that I was doubly damned—damned with my mother's bestial blood and damned by the spell of the mantises her embittered lover had put upon me. . . .

That appalling knowledge drove me to the verge of madness. It gnawed at my brain, wormed into my soul; it was with me every hour, day and night. I was not a fit person to be at large, I told myself again and again; I belonged in an asylum—if not in jail. An asylum—that was my answer. Unless I could be completely cured, unless I could be thoroughly cleansed of this damning taint, I wanted to be put away where I could do no more harm.

To aid me in that purpose I cast about for help and decided upon Dr. Franklin Hewitt, an eminent psychiatrist of whom I had heard. Resolutely I started out for my appointment with him, but on the steps of the building that housed his office and his home I faltered and almost lost my courage. I was about to turn back when the door opened and a man came down the steps, a young man who looked at me—and sent a thrill that was like a charge of electricity through my whole being!

That sensation was nothing like anything I had ever experienced. It was not

at all like my reactions to Paul Anderson and Ralph Sabin. This was clean and fine, a sensation that made me expand, that set my heart to fluttering. That man, I knew instinctively and with certainty, was the man I could love—and in the same instant I remembered that I could love no man. Love was not for me, because my love was death!

I almost fled from him. Suddenly my previous hesitancy vanished, and I rushed up the steps and into the vestibule. He was still looking after me as the doorman admitted me, but I resolutely put him out of my mind and concentrated on what I would tell the doctor.

I told him every thing—except about the murders. Aided by his understanding encouragement, I laid my soul bare to him; and when I was finished he patted my hand and assured me that my trouble would yield to treatment. When I left him I took with me a little box of tablets—sedatives he had said they were—but I was far more conscious of something else that went with me. A vision of a pair of laughing brown eyes, of a square-jawed, clean-cut face with a nose that was too broad and snubby.

Again I drove such thoughts from my mind—until the next time I visited Dr. Hewitt; and then there was no avoiding them. *He* was there at the door to admit me, and a few moments later I knew that he was Norman Hewitt, the doctor's son.

Fear such as I had never known took hold of me as we sat talking while I waited to see his father. Now I was certain of it—this was my man, and I could not have him! I could not let him come near me. I could not trust myself with him.

Again and again and again I told myself that. I tried with all my will-power to cling to that determination—but what chance had I? Norman would not let me. I tried to tell him that I was ill, that it was dangerous for me to see him—but he

laughed at me and would not listen. He found a score of excuses to see me; he would not let me avoid him. He insisted—and soon he became a part of my life; the most precious part.

I loved him completely. I knew that even before the first time he kissed me, but the ecstasy which filled me then left no shadow of doubt. That kiss was heavenly; was clean and wholesome—and even as it lingered on my lips I realized how different it was from any other kiss I had ever received. Dr. Hewitt's treatments had succeeded. I was cured; I was normal! I was free to love—

But in the same instant my love caught me by the throat and warned me that I must be vigilant. I must watch myself, watch my every reaction, must be constantly on guard—for Norman's life depended on it!

And I was true to that trust. I was vigilant; so vigilant, for weeks afterward, that I knew the moment a change came over me. That night I was feeling nervous and out of sorts—and Norman's kiss awoke strange, half-forgotten memories within me. All evening, at the theater, his close proximity bothered me.

TINY fear tendrils began to crawl into my brain; fear tendrils that became full-fledged, encompassing tentacles when we sat in a nightclub and I caught my fingers deliberately lowering the neck of my dress.

Cold terror closed like a vise around my heart and checked me then, but when I kissed Norman good-night the feverish passion that raced through my tingling veins warned me that I must never see him again! I was damned, irrevocably damned! I had been living in a fool's paradise—and now it had been transformed into a hell!

But I would put an end to it. I had seen the last of Norman, I swore to my-

self. We had an important engagement for the next evening, but I would break that. I would plead illness, anything to keep him away, and then I would persist in refusing to see him.

All night I rehearsed that plan, and all the next day. In the afternoon I telephoned him to make my excuse—but he was not at his office. By evening I was desperate. I tried his home; tried to contact his father, to confess what had happened and warn him but Dr. Hewitt was out of the city. I could not reach Norman, but that would not stop me. I would go away, I resolved quickly. I would pack a bag and leave the house, leave the city—but when I tried to do that *I could not get past the front door!*

My legs would not obey my will. Desperately I tried to drive myself to carry out my purpose, but something stronger than my will-power had taken control of me. Instead of leaving, I told Warner, the doorman, that I had changed my mind and was staying in for the evening. I told him that his services would not be needed and he could take the night off!

And then I went up to my room and stared at myself in the mirror; stared at eyes that were wide with horror and the realization of impending tragedy; stared at a body that was—too lovely to be hidden beneath clothing. . . .

I took off the clothing and slipped into a sheer negligee, and when Norman rang I went to the door and received him. All that was decent and fine, all that I had been building up for months, was being strangled within me, but I led him upstairs to the sitting room of my own suite—the room next to my bedroom.

Behind that bedroom door, alone, I fought the battle of my life; fought until my whole body was wet with perspiration. But the madness that raged within me could not be denied. Then my feet

carried me toward the doorway. . . .

He must have seen the madness in my look. I caught the widening of his eyes—and the mania that possessed me swept everything before it. I wanted him to look at me like that! Frantically my will fought its last losing battle—and then I walked through the doorway and up to the man I loved!

How I came to be in his arms I do not know. Perhaps I threw myself into them. Perhaps he seized me and tried to shake me back to sanity. All I know is that my arms closed around him, that my lips found his—and that his voice was shouting in my brain.

"No, Doris darling! You can't do this!" I heard him pleading. "This is madness! Please listen to me!"

CHAPTER FOUR

The Man I Love Must Die!

MY FINGERS were tearing at his clothes, ripping them from him, but suddenly something stabbed into my side. Only for a second, and then he was pleading, pleading—and at last my faltering will rallied! My wild struggling slackened, weakened, and a flood of tears came rushing to my eyes—burning tears that scorched my very soul as I realized the enormity of what I had almost done.

"Go away, darling—go away and leave me!" I begged through my sobs. "I am no good. I am a murderess. You escaped this time, but I will kill you just as I killed two other men—after I was through with them. Please do this for me!"

But he would not listen. He shook his head and stopped my lips with his hand.

"There is nothing the matter with you, Doris," I heard him saying earnestly. "You are perfectly normal, but you have been drugged. You have been victimized heartlessly for your money. Six years

ago your uncle's brokerage firm was headed for certain bankruptcy—"

I hardly realized what he was saying, but a glimmering of the truth began to penetrate my dazed brain. Could my Uncle Fleming—

Before the thought was completed my eyes suddenly flew wide, and a half-scream burst from my lips. In that split-second I had seen a figure materialize in the hall doorway—a man's figure with a black hood over his—head; had seen him come leaping toward Norman with an upraised club!

What happened then all merged into a bewildering kaleidoscope. I saw Norman whirl, saw the club come down over his head, saw him locked in that hooded man's arms—and then swirling darkness closed in around me, and I felt myself falling into unfathomable blackness. . . .

Someone was bathing my forehead with cold water when I came back to my senses. At first I could see only a blood-smearred face above me, but when the mist before my eyes cleared I recognized Myron—Myron with his cheek red with blood that ran down from a nasty cut on his forehead; but Myron, thank God! I sobbed with relief and reached out for him—when Norman's voice halted me. Startled, I glanced around—and then I saw him; saw him tied hand and foot and lashed to a chair!

"There is the answer to all your troubles, darling," he gritted bitterly. "That so-called man leaning over you! I knew that you were being diabolically victimized, but I thought your uncle was responsible for it. I have been investigating the Bradleys very carefully the past few weeks. I discovered how close to ruin they were six years ago—when your mother's death and your father's departure so conveniently placed your fortune in their hands. I discovered more than that; I discovered one of the rottenest pieces of murderous thievery anyone

could conceive—and now I know whose twisted brain schemed it.

"Your precious cousin, Myron, could not face the prospect of the poverty he saw staring him in the face, so he took steps to prevent it. He knew that your father wanted to take a trip to Asia but was staying home because of you and your mother, so he plotted with Jura Singh to make your father believe that the Hindu had been familiar with your mother. Jura Singh was paid well for his part in the filthy deal. He disappeared so as to make his guilt look certain, and when your mother was faced with the shocking structure of lying evidence, her husband's lack of faith in her was too much. She killed herself.

"After that your father went to Asia and left you and your fortune in your Uncle Fleming's hands—where clever Myron could control it and use it for his own purposes through the family brokerage house. But he had no intention of letting your wealth slip out of his hands when you grew up and married. He had taken care to prevent that by conspiring with Jura Singh to work devilishly on your already hypnosis-conditioned mind—to plant a psycho-neurosis in it with his praying mantis exhibition; a neurosis that would make you dread the thought of what loving a man might make you do to him.

"To strengthen that and drive all thought of marriage out of your head, you have been drugged with intensely powerful aphrodisiacs. Under their influence you have been helpless, have had no idea of what you did—especially when you slipped into unconsciousness. Then it was simple to commit murder and make you believe that you were guilty of the atrocious crimes—but you aren't, darling! You aren't!"

"No, as a matter of fact, she isn't," Myron laughed in a way I had never heard. "You missed your vocation,

Hewitt; you ought to have been a Sherlock Holmes. There is just one point you missed. I intended to have Doris committed to an asylum for the criminally insane after the Sabin killing, after which the stewardship of her estate would have remained permanently in our hands. But it seems I am a weakling like most men. The close-up view of her body overcame my better judgment. I decided to postpone her commitment for a while—until I should have had ample opportunity to enjoy her exceptional charms. Then you came into the picture and upset things badly for all of us, yourself included. Now, you understand, there is nothing for me to do but butcher you and let Doris go to an insane cell for the crime."

I HAD heard so much during the past few minutes that I could scarcely make head or tail of the revelations, but out of it all some startling truths loomed. My mother was not a wanton! My blood was not damned! I was not a murderess! Those revelations were singing in my brain when Myron's words knifed through my overwhelming relief.

"Now I shall have to send you away, darling, but first—" He smiled, as he cuddled me in his arms. "As I was reviving you I gave you two more of the capsules I switched yesterday for those Dr. Hewitt prescribed for you. They should make you appreciate me—don't they?"

His hands were stealing over my flesh, and my whole physical being was responding to him! Liquid fire flowed through my veins; my limbs trembled and my body writhed—but my mind was enduring insufferable agony. This time I knew exactly what I was doing; I hated and loathed myself for every thrill, for every responsive gesture—and I could not stop myself!

Even while I mentally cringed in shame and drew back from him in re-

vulsion, my body tingled to his touch!

God in heaven, I prayed, was there nothing that I could do? Must I send the man I loved to his grave with this soul-scaring scene etched into his dying brain?

My agonized eyes turned to him—and an incredible hope leaped into being! Norman was desperately battling with the ropes that bound him. He had gotten his arms free of the chair. His wrists were still tied together—but at least he could move his arms. That would *have* to be sufficient. . . .

With that I abandoned my last effort at resistance. I cradled Myron in my arms and covered his face with kisses. When his grip relaxed I wriggled my way upright to my knees, to my feet, and swayed into the undulating motions of a dance of the damned. A dance that held him spell-bound, wide-eyed, totally unconscious that I was desperately using the only weapon I had to pit against him.

On his knees he stared up at me as I glided closer and closer to him, until I was no more than a foot away—and then I threw myself into his arms in a lunge that carried him off his feet, that swept him backward and dropped him almost in Norman's lap!

Desperately I prayed that Norman would understand—and he did. His wrist-bound arms raised high and came down over Myron's head, to encircle him in a noose of flesh and bone that closed inexorably as my own fingers fastened in the murderer's throat. How long we struggled there I will never know. Myron tugged and strained, threshed and kicked,

until the chair went over and we floundered on the floor, but our grips were steel-fast. My fingers became numb, but still they sank deeper into his throat. Norman's face became mottled, but still his arms pressed inward—until Myron's ribs snapped and his head lolled back.

When we released him, the murderer of Paul Anderson and Ralph Sabin had paid for those crimes and for the death of my mother. . . .

"I knew what you dreaded, darling; I wormed it out of Dad," Norman told me as I untied him. "Last night I recognized the symptoms. When you were not looking I took one of the capsules Dad had given you out of your handbag. I had it analyzed and found it had been switched for a devilish aphrodisiac that would drive you out of your mind. I got an antidote for that and brought it with me in a hypodermic—"

"That was what I felt stabbing into my side," I recalled. "Oh, darling, but if it had not worked! The chance you took, coming to me when you 'knew what I would be like!"

"I wonder—was that such a long chance as it seems," the man who is now my husband said thoughtfully, as he looked deep into my eyes. "It's a strange thing, but even the female praying mantis, who eventually devours her mate, will fight to the death to protect him against all others."

THE END