

TERROR TALES

15¢



MISTRESS
OF
SATAN'S
HOUNDS
by
FREDERICK
C. DAVIS



FEATURE-LENGTH TERROR NOVEL
OF MACABRE MYSTERY

QUEENS OF BEAUTY
AND HORROR

by GEORGE EDSON

QUINLIVEN·ROGERS·CUMMINGS

TERROR TALES



Volume Nine

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Number Two

THIS SEAL PROTECTS YOU  AGAINST REPRINT FICTION!

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TWO LONG NOVELS OF DEMONIC MENACE AND CHILLING HORROR

Queens of Beauty and Horror.....George Edson 6
What had happened to those lovely dancing girls who had vanished so silently, leaving their men behind them—ruthlessly murdered? What monster of evil could have created the satanic orgies which ended so horribly?

Bride of the Serpents.....J. O. Quinliven 34
I struggled blindly in the relentless grip of the deadly quicksands—while the girl I loved was a helpless victim in the hands of the mad sculptor! Could I do nothing to save her from the hell of frightfulness that lay before her?

THREE SOUL-SHAKING NOVELETTES OF GHASTLY TERROR

Mistress of Satan's Hounds.....Frederick C. Davis 52
Once before a lovely woman had fallen before the savage fangs and fendish desires of that hellborn pack—and the whole county still shuddered at the thought of the monstrosity she bore. Now, Jeff and Laura could hear their ominous, lusting calls coming closer. . . .

Pleasure Cruise To Hell.....Donald Graham 78
The yacht rolled heavily in the path of the approaching hurricane, and the only shelter in sight was the home of unfathomable evil—Madman's Isle! Fear raged through their hearts like a roaring sword of fire. . . .

When the Banshee Calls.....Wayne Rogers 106
Would it never come; the merciful thrust of the knife that would put an end to agony almost unendurable? Or was it her doom to be forever one of the living dead. . . .

THREE MYSTERY-TERROR SHORTS

Beauty and the Butcher.....Holden Sanford 25
In my hand is a bloody knife and beside me the crimson fragment of a human ear! And, God help me, I know it's the ear of the woman I love!

Kiss of the Flame Blossom.....Donald Dale 69
Whether she was woman or devil, I will never know, but when she stood before me in all her awful beauty, all thoughts of love and honor fled from my mind and I arose to answer her call—to embrace the Blossom of Fire!

Cat-Woman.....Ray Cummings 94
I feel the eyes of my bride upon me—watchful, waiting, slumberous—like the eyes of a cat on a mouse. Soon, I think, she will . . . *pounce!*

Black Chapel.....A Department 120

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Queens of Beauty

*A Long Novel of a City Gone Mad
With Lust and Fear!*



Through a smoky haze, Kirk stared at the scene in incredulous horror. These were the girls who had disappeared, and whose escorts had been found so brutally murdered! The freshest and loveliest girls in the whole country; and now they were somehow transformed into slathering, lustful beasts!

and Horror

By GEORGE
EDSON

CHAPTER ONE

Beauty on View

THE music stopped, and Kirk reluctantly let Joan Wendell out of his arms. Then, glancing down at her, he saw her face.

"Hey—what's the matter, honey?"

Those lovely features, which had been judged the most perfect in the nation, were twisted by an uneasy frown.

"Let's sit down, Kirk." She said that quickly, taking his arm. "People keep staring at me. And over there—an old man . . ." She gave a wince of revulsion.

"He's looking at me as if—as if he actually—owned me."

Kirk tightened his lips, shot an angry glare around the tiny dance floor of the nightclub. He knew well enough what she meant. He'd seen men staring at her, first at her face, then at her gracefully shaped body, and he'd already socked a couple for what had been in their eyes.

Suddenly he spotted the old man she had mentioned, a shrunken, toothless creature who had too long cheated the grave. He was looking at her as if he actually owned her.

"By heaven, I'll—"



"No—please, Kirk!" Joan clutched his arm harder and tried to draw him toward their table. "Don't have any trouble. Just let's sit down."

He let out a slow breath, relaxed with an effort.

"Okay, honey."

"Well, that's the price of being a beauty queen," he muttered with a grimace as he sat down beside her. "Getting the eye in a pleasure city like this—where guys have only one idea in their heads."

JOAN'S gaze lifted swiftly. There was a hurt look on her face.

"You know I never wanted to be a beauty queen, Kirk." Her voice was low, a little unsteady. "You know I was forced into the contest by the managing editor. And—and at the time you were all for it yourself."

"Yeah, I know," Kirk said bitterly. "I guess I was just so damned proud of you I wanted to show you off. I didn't think what that meant."

Joan's eyes glistened with tears. "That's all I ever cared," she told him. "To have you think I was beautiful—that's all I ever wanted."

Kirk looked at her quickly, swallowed. He reached for one of her hands and pressed it.

"Sweet kid," he murmured huskily. Then straightening and grinning: "Let's forget all this muck. After the banquet tomorrow night we can trek back home. In another month your contract to be a newspaper reporter'll run out, and you can sign a new one—to slave for me—as my wife. Let's just think of that."

Joan forced a responsive smile, but it didn't last. In a moment the same uneasiness, an uneasiness which bordered on fear, began to show through.

"Oh, I wish we didn't have to wait! I wish we were going tonight!" Her free hand clenched her knotted handkerchief. "I can't help feeling those eyes—every-

where!" They stare at me all the time.

"Those eyes?" Kirk was stiff again, his lean face hard. "What do you mean? Whose?"

"I—I don't know. Nobody's in particular. Just eyes—horrible, evil eyes. I—I even feel them looking through the window when I'm in my room."

Kirk relaxed. The hard lines in his face softened.

"But your room's up five stories, dear. And there isn't any fire escape on your end. You haven't actually seen a snooper at the window, have you?"

"No. There's never anything there when I look. But then a minute later I seem to feel them again." She shivered. "Oh, I know I'm foolish! I know nobody could get to my windows! And yet . . ."

"Sure, honey, I understand," Kirk said gently. "It's just your imagination playing tricks on you. Why shouldn't it, though, after you've watched rotten eyes peer at you all day? You're tired, too. That'd help. . . . What do you say we take you right on home for some sleep as soon as Ruth and Morgan show up?"

Joan nodded a relieved acquiescence.

BUT it wasn't quite as easy as that. When Ruth Dennis, another girl who had been in the beauty contest, and Jed Morgan, a reporter who had been covering the event, returned to the table from the dance floor they brought along a couple of men. Kirk and Joan had to wait a bit to chat with them before leaving.

One, chubby and red faced, was Frank Pollard, promoter of the beauty contest in Island City. He was a little high.

"Bigges' show they've ever had in this burg!" he crowed. "Forty-eight most beautiful girls in the country! Forty-eight of 'em!"

"But one much more beautiful than all the rest," the other, a reporter named Gil Goring, said softly. He was a thin man

with a dissipated face and sardonic eyes. The eyes were on Joan. "Will the queen deign to dance with the humble scribe?"

Joan said: "We were just going home, Gil. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" Goring shook his head. "I'm afraid the sorrow's all mine. But I couldn't really expect a dance with me to hold any inducement when you're bound for a private rendezvous with young Lochinvar here."

Kirk glanced sharply around. He had never particularly cared for the reporter from Chicago, and he didn't like the insinuation in the last remark.

"Miss Wendell's my fiancée, Goring," he said in a tight voice.

Goring shrugged his shoulders in a tragic gesture, murmured: "And she could have so much."

Kirk flushed angrily, then felt Joan's hand on his arm and held himself back.

"Now, now, boys," Pollard the promoter, said in a placating tone. "Let's not have any squabbles. Everything's in fun. All just good sport." He glanced toward the dance floor where, with the orchestra playing again, several of the beauty contestants were dancing. "Man, what a collection of honeys!"

"A great time for a bunch of rich playboys," Jed Morgan laughed.

"Or a bunch of degenerates," Goring suggested. "The kind with X-ray eyes and—"

"Please, Gil!" Joan begged. At the mention of eyes she had stiffened against Kirk. Her hand tightened convulsively on his arm.

"Sorry," Goring said with a sardonic expression of apology.

Kirk glowered at him, then looked around at the others. "We've got to be going along," he told them. "Joan's tired. You staying, Jed?"

Morgan glanced at his girl, Ruth Dennis. She nodded, and he said to Kirk: "Yeah, I guess we'll be staying a while."

"Okay—well, so long." Rising, Kirk helped Joan from the booth.

But that was as far as they got. A sudden shrill scream rose above the sound of the music. A girl whom Kirk recognized as one of the beauty contestants, her face a white blotch of terror, came running wildly out of the ladies' room.

"Something—something horrible—tried to come in the window—get me!"

CHAPTER TWO

Horror Begins

AT ALMOST the exact moment the girl ran screaming out of the ladies' room of the Gaiety Club another girl, also one of the forty-eight beauty contestants hurried furtively out the side entrance of a small hotel. She was small, and dark, with cager eyes. She had a date, but had been forced to wait until her chaperon had gone to sleep to keep it.

She didn't take a cab. The appointed spot where her swain was supposed to meet her wasn't far. She started to walk, down the side street away from the boulevard and then along another still darker street.

"Oh, I hope he waited!" she breathed fervently to herself. "I didn't think it would take so long. . . ."

Her thoughts were all on the man she hoped to see. She didn't even glance around. So she wasn't aware of the hunched form which glided from an alley and began to follow her, narrowing the distance between them with each silent step.

She was just a young kid aching to be with a man who intrigued and fascinated her. Not knowing that he was at the Gaiety Club, had never, in fact, intended to keep the date with her himself at all.

She was nearly at the end of the darker street now. Her heart was beating more rapidly; her cheeks were flushed with

anticipation. It was just around the next corner, where he had promised to be waiting for her in his car, near an open lot.

She wondered if she should let him kiss her right off—or if that might make him lose respect for her. Perhaps she had better be more demure.

And then suddenly, through her absorption, she had a vague uneasy feeling. A quick sense of nameless fear. With a cold chill prickling along her spine, a tightness in her throat, she cast a searching glance over her shoulder.

Her breath stopped coming completely when she did. The cold chill prickling along her spine became an icy numbness over her whole body. She tried to scream, but her throat was now so constricted that only a pitiful little whimper worked through.

Something—something with a ghastly inhuman face—was leaping for her!

ALSO at almost the exact moment the girl ran screaming out of the ladies' room of the Gaiety Club—and the moment the poor girl who had been so eager to meet her supposed lover had sneaked furtively out of her hotel—another pretty girl in a different part of the city was stepping into a cab. She, too, had been one of the forty-eight contestants in the beauty contest Joan Wendell had won that afternoon. She was the country type, healthily buxom, with a round frank face.

She wasn't alone. With her was a young man, obviously as much from the country, whose love was in his eyes.

They had just come from a drugstore where, now that the need for abstinence was over, the girl had been eating ice cream. The young man gave the cab driver the name of a hotel.

"You should've won, Mary," he repeated for the twentieth time as the cab rolled off. "Gee, you were by far the prettiest girl here."

The girl smiled indulgently, sweetly. "But I guess there were some politics," the young man continued. "I guess the whole thing was fixed. The contest was run by newspapers and this Wendell girl works on one." He gave a little shrug of burly shoulders. "That is, she did. I s'pose she'll go into the movies now."

The girl was still smiling. There appeared to be no envy about her.

"Joan Wendell's awfully pretty," she said.

"Well, anyway, I'm glad you didn't win," the young man told her. He shook his head. "Gee, I guess you'd never've wanted to marry me if you had. Just a farmer. You'd've wanted to go into the movies."

"Silly!" the girl said. "Of course I'd have married you just the same. But I knew I never would win. I can't see how I ever won the state contest."

"Well, I do!" the young man told her. He gazed at her fondly.

By this time the taxi had taken them from the drugstore on the brightly lighted boulevard to a darker section of narrow twisting streets. Then it careened off one of them onto a lower part of the waterfront.

"Hey!" The young man noticed suddenly where they were. "Hey, driver, I said—"

That was as far as he got. The cab braked to such an abrupt stop that the rest choked in his throat.

The driver swung out to the street, turned. From a dark doorway slouched two misshapen figures.

The young man lunged forward, twisted the cab door open, beginning furiously: "What the devil's the—" And then, just as he leaped down from the running board, he saw the driver's face. His breath caught. For a second he stared numbly, incapable of further movement.

That second was enough for the driver

and one of the two creatures who had slid from the dark doorway, to glide back to the car door. The creature grabbed the young man's arms from behind. The driver sprang forward like an animal, uttering a vicious snarl. Clawlike hands whipped out. Blood gushed from the young man's throat. He slumped into a limp heap there on the pavement.

During all this the poor girl had sat paralyzed, eyes wide with horror. But at last a little sound began to trickle past her stiff lips, work into a scream.

The second creature from the doorway pulled open the other door of the cab and slipped in beside her. He reached for her throat. . . .

JOAN'S face was still pale when she and Kirk finally arrived at the hotel where she was staying with an aunt who had accompanied her to Island City for the contest. She'd been pretty badly shaken by the affair at the Gaiety Club.

"But honey, there was nobody in the ladies' room when they looked," Kirk reiterated for the third or fourth time to her. "And there were no signs that anybody had been in there."

"I—I know," Joan said. But—"

"Look, dear," Kirk interrupted persistently, "it's up two stories. The only way a person could reach the window would be by coming across the alley from the next building—and that's almost inconceivable. Besides, if a man did get over, how could he get back so quickly? No, the girl had been drinking—we found that out—and the liquor inflamed her imagination. Just look how she described the creature she claimed she saw: a face without any features! Good Lord, that proves it was all in her mind!"

"A face without any features—just hideous eyes," Joan mumbled, repeating the whole of the other girl's description.

Kirk gave a silent sigh of hopelessness. He had been afraid she'd never get over

that bit about the eyes; it tied up too well with what she had imagined herself.

"Well, tonight's our last night in this place," he told her. He smiled reassuringly. "You're so tired you'll soon get to sleep and forget the entire business. And then tomorrow night, by this time, we'll be on our way home, and you won't ever have to think of it again."

Joan forced a little answering smile. "Oh, I know I'm foolish to be so uneasy Kirk. And to make you worry about me. Just forget it. I'll be all right in the morning."

"Sure you will, honey," he said gently.

They had reached the door of Joan's and her aunt's suite now. Kirk stepped in to say hello to the aunt, a genial woman of whom he had always been very fond, but he stayed only a couple of minutes.

"Want to give Joan a chance to get to bed," he explained.

"You see that you get to bed, too," Joan said with mock severity. "No more of those all-night poker sessions, my fine fellow."

Kirk grinned.

He was feeling better when he went downstairs. Joan had seemed to snap out of it a little. She was tired; she'd sleep soundly, and in the morning she'd be okay. He hummed softly as he swung through the lobby to the street and hailed a cab.

He didn't see the misshapen figure watching him from the shadows opposite the hotel. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

The Beauty Thieves

KIRK had been bunking in the flat of the Associated Press correspondent in Island City, a man named Bob Carlton. Several years before he had been on a paper with him in a small southern city.

When he got back there after leaving Joan he found the place cluttered, as usual, with bottles and reporters. Among the reporters was Gil Goring. Goring had brought along Frank Pollard, the chubby little promoter of the beauty contest.

Kirk's host, Bob Carlton, a big genial chap, sat behind a littered desk in one corner, his legs crossed over one edge, and was regaling the others with a story.

"Hi, guy," he tossed at Kirk. "Get in on this. It'll give you a tip for married life."

Goring was smirking questioningly. "Did she show you the door for trying to play too rough, Lochinvar? You didn't stay very long."

Kirk's fists clenched.

"Stow it, Goring!" Carlton growled over his shoulder. To Kirk: "Pour yourself a drink, fella. . . . Well, starting again, it seems a young chap married a widow who—"

But he didn't get any farther. The door suddenly burst open, and the United Press correspondent in Island City rushed wildly into the apartment.

"Jeez, hell's broken loose!" he blurted. "Three guys've been found murdered in different parts of the city in the last few minutes!" He gulped. "Their throats had been torn—as if by something with claws!"

Every man in the room had come to his feet.

"Throats—*torn!*" somebody echoed hoarsely.

"And that ain't all!" the United Press man babbled. "One of the girls from the contest had been with each one of those guys—and now they're missing!"

"You mean—*they* did it?" an incredulous voice croaked.

Kirk breathed: "God—Joan!" and lunged for the telephone on Carlton's desk. Was she safe? Frantically he gave the number of her hotel.

He got the hotel operator, called for her suite. He heard the buzzer, once, twice, three times, but still there was no response. And then, abruptly, the line went dead.

White-faced, he dropped the receiver, whirled toward the door.

Bob Carlton, who had been watching him intently, said: "I'll go with you, Kirk," and strode after him.

But two more things happened before they even reached the middle of the room. Suddenly, with one brief warning flicker, all the lights went out. And from somewhere in the distance outside came a terrific blast.

"God—look!" a horrified voice husked.

A fiery red glow was streaming in the windows on one side of the room.

"The bridge to the mainland's been blown up!" somebody cried excitedly. "Blown all to hell!"

Kirk had been so startled by the explosion that he had halted in his tracks for a moment. But now he continued his rush for the door again. These queer happenings, first the telephone going dead, then the lights, then the explosion, made the menace in the city take on a gigantic significance. Something hellish was at work.

Carlton was still behind him. And behind Carlton came the rest of the gang who had been in the room, all chattering crazily.

Though the street lamps were also out, the street was bathed in a red glow from the burning timbers of the ancient bridge. Kirk stopped on the sidewalk to look for a stray taxi. Carlton and the others straggled from the apartment building after him.

Suddenly a figure appeared from another direction. It was Jed Morgan, the reporter who had been in the foursome with Joan and Kirk at the Gaiety Club.

"Jeez, that was the bridge!" he jabbered when he got near them. "I could

see it from the corner! They blew it up!"

"Yeah, we know," somebody said.

"Good God, what's happening in this city?" Morgan demanded in his shaly voice. "The only bridge from the mainland blasted! No lights—no telephone! Someone must want to make the whole place helpless!"

"Someone's after the girls," Pollard, the promoter, told him hoarsely. "Three of 'em've already been snatched."

"The girls!" Morgan echoed. He trembled. "And I've just left Ruth alone!"

By now Kirk had given up hope of finding a cab anywhere near there. He whirled and started to run down toward the boulevard. . . .

JOAN went to her bedroom soon after Kirk left. Pulling down the shades, she started to undress. She repeated to herself all the arguments he had given her, trying to convince herself that the faceless creature the girl had claimed to see in the ladies' room at the Gaiety Club and the eyes she was always sensing on her were just figments of the imagination.

"That's what they've got to be!" she mumbled aloud. "They can't be anything else!"

And then, as she shed her last filmy undergarment and stood nude, she felt them. Eyes—horrible lustful eyes. Fixed on her body, hot, desirous.

She grabbed some of her clothes again to hide her nakedness, spun fearfully around, flicking a searching glance at each window. But there was no space under the shades, no possible opening for eyes to peer through. She looked swiftly around the room, under the bed, in the little closet. All was just as it should be.

"That proves it—it is my imagination," she whispered with a quivery sigh of relief. And she let the shield of clothes slide down from her breasts, drop back to the chair.

She tried to laugh at herself for having been so foolish, but she couldn't quite throw off the shakiness the illusion had given her. She went over to the bed and turned on the bedside radio. A little music might help. Pulling on her nightdress, she sat on the edge of the bed and struggled to relax. . . .

While Joan was listening to the radio, hearing no other sounds because of the blare of the dance orchestra, the glazed window in the bathroom of the suite slid slowly up. A grey, clawlike hand was pushing it. A shadowy grey face was at the opening. . . .

Joan's aunt, hearing the music from the bedroom, began to hum in tune with it. She smiled contentedly. She had been very relieved to find that Joan was still satisfied with the prospect of marriage to Kirk, that winning the beauty contest hadn't turned her head and given her ideas about the stage or the movies.

"I guess everything's going to be all right," the old lady said half aloud to herself during a brief pause between two pieces from the orchestra.

She didn't see the bathroom door swing slowly outward. And because of the music, which had commenced again, she didn't hear the whisper of creeping footsteps. Too late she sensed the menace behind her.

She started to her feet, whirling around at the same time and what she saw made her eyes widen with sick horror.

But no scream came from her mouth. For grey clawlike hands clamped on her throat. She choked once, and that was all. . . .

In the bedroom Joan yawned sleepily, and went over to turn the main lights off. She raised the window and then came back to the bed, where the reading lamp still burned. A moment later she darkened the room and settled herself for sleep.

Yet even in the dark these lusting evil

eyes seemed to burn at her. The dimness all about her was filled with fantastic flitting shapes—horribly menacing.

She made herself lie still on the pillows, and tried desperately to relax and fix her mind on other things. But it was impossible. The feeling of eyes burning at her out of the darkness wouldn't be stifled.

"No—no—they're not there!" she whispered in a frantic voice. "They're not—*God! Kirk! Help!*"

She leaped completely out of bed now, quaking with terror. For she had actually seen them! Eyes—awful glowing eyes! This was no illusion. It was real! And so was that hideous, featureless face!

She stumbled wildly across the room toward the door. One foot caught on the bottom of her nightgown. She went down. With a hysterical whimper she tried frantically to regain her feet.

Too late. Clawlike hands seized her throat. She tried to fight free, but they held like claws of steel. Her head began to whirl, her strength fail, and slowly, with the sound of a gloating chuckle in her ears, she felt herself slip toward unconsciousness. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

City of Chaos

KIRK was nearly crazy by the time he and Carlton finally reached the hotel where Joan and her aunt had been staying. It had taken them almost twenty minutes to get there. Kirk jumped out of the cab before it stopped, and with Carlton coming right after him, raced to the dark entrance.

Two feeble candles in the lobby gave them enough light to locate the stairs. They pushed through a huddle of frightened people in front of the desk, started up.

"If only I'd stayed near her!" Kirk moaned hoarsely. "If only I'd believed

her about those eyes! God, if she's gone—"

"She may be all right, Kirk," Carlton panted in a hopeful voice.

"Then why didn't she answer the phone when I called her? They rang her three times before the line went dead—three times!"

They were at the top of the third flight of stairs now, going through utter darkness. They climbed the other two in tense silence. Kirk led the way down the hall, striking a match with a shaky hand.

"Here's the door!" he panted, and hurried to it.

He tried it first, wildly, frenziedly. It was locked. He began to batter on it.

But there was no response.

"Come on—help me break it in!" he said to Carlton.

He hunched his own shoulder and rammed the door. Carlton followed suit. In a few moments the door gave, burst open, and they plunged into the room.

Kirk shouted: "Joan—Joan!" He fumbled in his pocket for another match and struck it.

Carlton whispered: "God!"

Then Kirk saw the same thing—Joan's aunt, lolling back in a motionless heap in the big chair, her glassy eyes bulging from a discolored face, her throat torn horribly as if by some clawing creature in a fiendish rage.

Sick with horror, trembling with fear for what he would find, Kirk stumbled to the door of the bedroom he knew had been Joan's. The match in his hand sputtered, went out. He managed to get another one going.

His terrified eyes swept the empty room in one swift glance, took in the rumpled bedclothes, the torn bit of silk, obviously from a nightgown, on the floor. He twisted frenziedly, rushed to the door of the bathroom, then the aunt's bedroom. A moan quavered past his lips.

Carlton husked: "Is she . . . ?"

"Gone!" Kirk sobbed. "She's gone! The thing that killed her aunt's taken her!"

He slumped back against the door casing, his shoulders hunched, and let the match drop to the floor.

"But maybe—maybe she isn't—" Carlton began, and then stopped.

They were both thinking the same thing. Maybe she wasn't yet dead. Maybe the creature hadn't yet strangled her or torn her throat. But he certainly would as soon as he'd finished with her.

As soon as he'd finished with her. . . . Kirk uttered an anguished groan. That might give them a little time before her death. But . . .

"Come on!" He whirled toward the hall door again. "We've got to find her! God, we've got to—quick!"

HE LED Carlton back down to the lobby and at a headlong run through the huddle of people in front of the desk to the street door.

"Go around that side of the building," he told the other reporter. "I'll go around this. Shout if you see anything." And he plunged in the direction he had chosen for himself.

They met in the open space behind the hotel, neither of them having seen a thing.

"We'll have to get the cops on it, Kirk," Carlton panted. "We haven't got

a chance by ourselves. Just us two—and all the city to cover."

"If only we had some lead!" Kirk muttered desperately. He had started back toward the street again. "Something to go on—but we haven't got a thing!"

They reached the front of the hotel once more, stopped. Kirk licked his lips.

"I suppose you're right," he said dully. "The only thing to do is get the police." His lean face grew even more haggard. "God, the damned loss of time! With the telephones dead we'll have to go all the way down to headquarters ourselves. Let's get going!"

He whirled.

"Wait a minute," Carlton said, grabbing his arm. "Listen, you go down to headquarters and get the cops started on a search. I'll hurry over to the mayor's apartment at the Hotel Arden and get him to deputize a party of citizens. . . . Good idea?"

Kirk nodded, and again swung off.

He found a parked cab a couple of blocks away, located the driver among a babbling mob of people on the corner, forced him into reluctant service. And a few minutes later he was in front of a looming building downtown.

Kerosene lamps were burning in the main room on the first floor. Kirk immediately spotted the police commissioner. He was standing near the desk with Gil Goring, whose face still held a

sardonic smirk, and tall strange man.

The other man was jabbering: "I tell you I saw three of 'em—three of 'em!" His whole body quaked as he talked. "And they didn't have any faces! Just grey heads—with holes where eyes should've been!"

"Curious creatures, eh?" Goring murmured casually to the commissioner.

But the commissioner, who seemed to have aged ten years since Kirk had last seen him, ignored the remark.

"God," he muttered, "if only we could get the militia here! But the damned muck between here and the mainland at low tide—they must've counted on that. It's why they blew up the bridge. Now we're helpless—helpless!"

"Boy, is this going to make a yarn!" Goring gloated. "I can see the—"

"What do you mean—helpless?" Kirk demanded hoarsely. He had elbowed through a throng of tense listeners near the doorway. "Where are your men? They can comb this city until they find these girls and the devils who kidnaped them! That's what they've got to do!"

"And meanwhile leave other people—and the few girls from the contest who haven't already been taken—unprotected?" the commissioner sighed wearily. "I haven't got enough men. Pollard, the promoter, took the last two to guard some girls at the Arden Hotel." He shrugged. "All we can do is wait for morning—and then, with high tide, we can get the militia over here."

"Wait for morning!" Kirk cracked out bitterly. "Don't you realize what'll happen to those girls before ever morning comes?"

The commissioner looked at the floor.

"Being loved by things without faces," Goring mused. "That certainly wouldn't be such a hot prospect."

The obscenity made outraged fury flare in Kirk's eyes. Fists clenching, he took one impulsive step toward the other re-

porter. But then he restrained himself. There was no time to waste on personal fights. He wheeled to the throng of people in civilian clothes near the door.

"You men—how many of you'll come with me?" he demanded. "We'll do what the police can't do. Drag the city! Find the girls and these damned fiends!"

He strode swiftly back through them to the hall, gesturing for them to follow him.

"All of you who call yourselves men—come on!"

But he walked down the hall alone. Not one of the men in that crowd made a move to go after him.

HE HURRIED over to the cab which had brought him down to headquarters. Apparently the driver had been afraid to continue on anywhere by himself.

"Arden Hotel," Kirk snapped at him, climbing in. Some of the girls were still there if Pollard had taken two cops there to guard them.

He sat on the edge of the seat, face taut, as the taxi jolted off. For the last little while something had been stirring deep down in his mind. It had started just before he had arrived at headquarters. Some vague memory which had some connection with this horror in the city.

"God, if I could only get it!" he mumbled haggardly. "It might give me a lead to what's behind this thing! If I could only remember! Somebody did something tonight—said something—made a mistake. . . ."

His cab was halfway across town to the Arden Hotel now. He clenched his hands over his knees, lost in utter concentration.

Abruptly his body stiffened. For a long moment he sat absolutely motionless, an incredulous expression on his lean face. No! It was impossible! Yet there it was,

as clear in his mind as his own name. There it was, pointing a definite finger of guilt.

He leaned forward.

"Hey—hurry! Get me to the Arden!"

THE ARDEN was a huge old hotel on a corner of the boulevard. Kirk's cab pulled in behind a line of cars whose headlamps were furnishing the street in front of the entrance its only light. Kirk jabbed a bill at the driver, jumped out. His lips were set in a hard line as he strode swiftly toward the door.

But suddenly, before he reached it, he stopped. A man had stepped through into the glare from the headlamps and, without noticing him, had hurried the other way along the street.

It was the man he had hoped to find still here!

He started after him impulsively, body quivering, eyes feverish. No. That wouldn't do. The devil would certainly deny all guilt, and somebody would prevent the beating which would finally make him confess. Better follow him to a more isolated spot.

He began to do that, staying just near enough to keep track of the moving figure in the darkness beyond the reach of the headlights of the first cab in the line.

The trail led straight down the boulevard for several blocks. Kirk kept his distance, and at last the figure turned down a side street toward the waterfront.

He went on following the figure instead of overtaking it. Straight down the side street, block after block, until they reached the waterfront itself. There the figure suddenly paused, twisted around. Kirk ducked into a doorway, cursing. He held his breath for a moment, then let it out in a quick sigh of relief. No, he hadn't been seen.

The trail now led down the waterfront toward a district of more ramshackle piers and warehouses. It ended at the

mouth of an alley between two of the warehouses. There the figure suddenly disappeared.

Kirk hurried forward, and he too ducked into the alley, abandoning caution in the frantic fear of losing his quarry. But not even the dim light from the sky penetrated that narrow gap; he could see nothing. He thought he heard a squeak which sounded like a door swinging on rusty hinges.

HE GROPED wildly up the alley. If that had been a door he must be at the place where the fiends had taken the girls! But if it hadn't, and he had lost the trail—God! Once more a picture of Joan struggling in the vile embrace of one of those creatures rose in his mind. He stifled a sob which tore at his throat.

"It's got to be the place!" he whispered hoarsely. "I've got to find her!"

He felt along the walls, stumbling frantically from one side of the alley to the other. He struck one spot where a door had been boarded up, groaned, plunged on. And then, abruptly his heart leaped.

He'd reached another—not boarded up!

Swiftly, with a hand that shook, he pawed for the latch, tried it. He drew in a quick breath. The door was unlocked! He started a wild push, restrained himself suddenly. He remembered the squeak he had heard. God only knew how many of the creatures might be inside. Maybe he'd better get help. . . . But again the vision of Joan's luscious body being defiled by one of those damned fiends burned through his mind. No, he couldn't waste the time to go for help! Every minute, every second, might be infinitely precious!

Once more he began to push on the door. But now with care to keep it from squeaking, making a desperate effort to control his frenzy to hurry.

And in a moment he had it open enough

to slide through, quietly and carefully.

He stopped for a second as soon as he got inside, held his breath and listened. Yes—the faint murmur of voices! He was in the right place! Grimly he groped forward.

After a few steps he came to another door. He eased that open. Dim light flickered from some sort of a passage off to his right. He headed toward it.

But suddenly his ears caught a little scuffling noise. He stopped, whirled.

Whirled—too late. The faceless monster was on him. Grey clawlike hands were at his neck, tearing, tearing, before he could strike a blow to protect himself, and then horrible pain streaked down his body and numbed him. He felt himself go limp. One anguished sob worked past the agony in his throat just as blackness closed over him like a dark veil. "Joan. . .!"

CHAPTER FIVE

House of Wanton Laughter

SLOWLY Kirk swam back to consciousness—a hell of remembrance. There was an excruciating ache in his throat and churning nausea in his stomach. A groan surged up from his chest.

Joan! God, how long had he been out? What had she been forced to suffer?

He tried to push himself to his knees, found he couldn't. Pain almost made him faint again when he attempted to move. But he finally managed to roll over on his side.

He discovered that he was on the floor just where the creature had attacked him. Light was still flickering from the passageway toward which he had been headed, and there was still the sound of voices.

With a desperate effort he forced himself to relax. He must conserve his

strength for the work ahead. For long seconds of mental torture he made himself lie motionless, gritting his teeth against the agony each breath caused in his torn throat.

The voices in the distance rose from a low murmur to an excited babble as he waited there. Then he heard a sudden burst of raucous male laughter and above it, shrill and abandoned, the laughter of women.

That sound gave him a shock. Good God, women—those creatures! Getting pleasure out of the suffering of their own sex!

But an instant later he heard something which gave him more than a sickening shock, something which made him stiffen with incredulous horror.

The general clamor of mirth dwindled off. One laugh, however, stayed at top pitch longer than the others—and it was a laugh Kirk recognized.

It was the laugh of the girl he loved!

For a moment he remained utterly numb, not even breathing. Joan, down there with those monsters—laughing—laughing like a wanton harlot! Dear God, what had happened to her?

In an insane frenzy he pushed up to his knees. Pounding in his head was the single wild thought that he must somehow get her out of here.

The blackness of oblivion kept trying to close down on him again, as he wobbled crazily to the passageway.

From beyond a half open door came the sounds of the revelry. He staggered on.

Each step took a terrific toll. His throat seemed to be on fire, send consuming flames to every part of his body. He managed to get almost to the end of the passage, but there his legs, utterly spent, suddenly gave away under him.

He was near enough, though, to see through the doorway. It gave on some stairs descending into a subterranean

chamber, and he stared down in sick horror.

For dancing lewdly before an audience of leering old men, their young bodies stripped almost naked, eyes burning with passion, were a group of girls from the beauty contest—who had supposedly been kidnaped against their wills!

And one of them was Joan!

AS HE watched, the dance grew wilder, and suddenly Joan gave an abandoned toss of her head, flung herself into the eager embrace of one of the men. The same toothless creature, Kirk saw, whose possessive stare earlier at the Gaiety Club had made her shudder! But now she let his foul hands paw her, rip away more of her clothes!

"No—no!"

Those two hoarse cries tore past the agony in Kirk's throat, but they were drowned out by the bedlam of noise in the cellar. Frenziedly he struggled back to his feet. All reason, all sense of caution, had left him. The sight of the girl he loved giving herself to that lecherous ancient had driven him stark mad.

He stumbled through the doorway and down the stairs.

He got nearly to the bottom before any-

one noticed him. Then, abruptly, one of the old men saw him and shouted. Two of the ghastly faceless creatures came running from somewhere, rushed at him.

Desperately Kirk leaped the rest of the way down to the chamber floor, tried to duck and get past them. But it was hopeless. One of them caught his arm, swung him around, and the other smashed him viciously on the jaw. He reeled back.

They sprang after him, eyes gleaming madly out of holes in their faceless skulls, grey clawlike hands slashing at his head, his throat, his chest. He made a frantic attempt to fight them off. But there was no use; more faceless monsters had joined them and were clawing at him. Strength flowed from his body with the blood from new wounds. He tottered dizzily and went down. They were on him like a pack of wolves lusting for the kill.

But then, above the whimpers of the faceless creatures, a terrified voice shrilled: "Those things—they're killing him! Make them stop! Good God, make them stop!"

Other terrified voices echoed the plea.

And abruptly a firm voice snapped a command. The fiends ceased their clawing, straightened, shuffled back into a ragged line.

The firm voice Kirk had recognized as that of the man he had followed to this hellish place. Peering painfully up, he saw a figure in a black robe and hood. Sardonic eyes were gazing at him through slits in the hood.

"Ah, no, we wouldn't let you be killed for the world. Not for the world. That would be murder—and we can't have such a thing on our consciences."

Uttering a little chuckle, the man turned to the ancients who had forgotten their orgy in the sudden burst of fear.

"Don't be upset, gentlemen." Now he spoke in a soothing tone, gesturing with a black-gloved hand. "This intruder will be taken care of. Oh, quite harmlessly, quite harmlessly—but I assure you he will never talk about what he has seen. He's just a callow youth who imagined one of these girls loved him. He didn't realize they could really love only mature men like yourselves, men who know how to inspire passion."

THE soothing tone kept growing more unctuous.

"Look at them. Don't worry about this foolish kid. He'll be fixed, as I promised you the girls also would, to remember nothing of this night. So feast your eyes on these luscious beauties you've picked. See how they've fallen for you! Didn't I tell you they would? . . . Go on with your dancing, girls."

The girls, who were still swaying their hips, appearing to have hardly noticed the interruption, again continued their obscene posturing. Several grabbed hold of ancients who had drawn away, pulled them back into shameless embraces.

Joan was one of these, tugging the toothless old man of the Gaiety Club into her arms, pressing her almost naked body lasciviously against him.

Kirk stared at her in sick horror. She must have seen him plunge into the chamber, seen him almost be killed—yet even

that hadn't stifled her perverted lust.

"Joan—Joan!" he croaked.

But she paid no attention.

The hooded man laughed, murmured: "She isn't very faithful, is she?"

"You—you damned devil!" Kirk rasped past the agony in his throat. "You've done something to her—given her some drug!"

And with insane fury he pushed to his knees.

"Slap him down—a couple of you," the hooded man tossed calmly toward the line of faceless creatures. "Then tie him."

That was done swiftly, despite Kirk's struggles, and in a moment he had to watch the unholy orgy progress with no hope of being able to interfere.

It grew wilder and wilder. The ancients, their momentary fright forgotten, responded eagerly to the advances of the girls. Mottled, flabby hands caressed firm white breasts and thighs. Withered mouths groped for smooth young lips, pressed against them.

But finally the hooded man broke it up.

"All right. Get your money ready. I'll assign a room to each of you when you pay the agreed sum."

KIRK stared bitterly around the chamber as the old men fumbled in their pockets, produced rolls of bills. So this was it. Each of them had bought one of the poor kids. Contracted for her in advance, obviously—and that explained why the one who now was with Joan had looked at her in the Gaiety Club as if he owned her.

"For God's sake—all of you—listen!" Desperately, clenching his fists against pain. Kirk grated the words out. "You can't do this! These girls—they're only kids. You can't ruin their lives! You've had yours. Give them theirs!"

"Gag him," the hooded man snapped to one of the faceless creatures.

The creature nodded, hunched across

the room, laid powerful hands on Kirk.

"Please—please!" Kirk begged frantically. "Let them go! Let—"

That was as far as he got. The creature clamped one hand over his neck, ripped off a piece of his bloody shirt with the other, and stuffed it brutally into his mouth.

"Pay no attention to that prattle," the hooded man told the ancients. "The girls are young, yes—but they're just ripe for love."

And Kirk knew his last forlorn hope had been futile. Any spark of decency these ancients might have once possessed had been stifled by lust. They had paid no attention to him. They jammed around the hooded man, impatient to be assigned a room for further debauchery.

"All right, sir, you're the first." The hooded man took a sheaf of bills a quivering hand proffered him, counted them, nodded. "Correct. . . . Number one."

The business progressed rapidly, and each old man, as soon as he was given a number, hurried from the chamber with his willing property.

Kirk yanked wildly at his bonds. But it was useless. They wouldn't give. And he could only watch the clamoring group dwindle until the loathesome ancient who had bought Joan got his chance with the hooded man.

"Ah, the queen of them all," the hooded man murmured. "You are lucky, sir. A night with the most beautiful girl in the whole country. . . . Room number ten."

The ancient leered gloatingly.

Kirk writhed in terrible anguish. His Joan—defiled by that lecher! Her sweet young body contaminated forever by that loathesome debauchée who should be mouldering in his grave!

Twisting with a superhuman effort, Kirk tried to shout to her through the gag. She didn't even glance at him. Her eyes looked straight ahead.

And then she was gone.

FOR a few minutes utter insanity gripped Kirk's brain. Gone! Gone! The girl he loved! To sate her unnatural desires in a monstrous embrace! Frenziedly he strained at his bonds again, tore at them until the coils dug through the skin on his wrists, bit into the flesh.

The voice of the hooded man, the voice he would once have thought that of a friendly acquaintance, murmured: "My, my, such activity."

Kirk realized dimly that he was the only one of the mob left in the chamber. All the old men had departed with their girls. The faceless creatures had disappeared.

"It's very amusing to watch you," the devil went on. "I think I'll let you live another hour. It will be most entertaining. . . . But for the moment I have a little duty."

He glided to a doorway opposite the one leading to the rooms.

Entirely alone in the chamber now, Kirk began to yank even more feverishly at the bonds. For an instant they had seemed to give. He gritted his teeth, braced one hand on the stone floor and twisted the other.

Dear God, would the rope loosen more? Yes! It had—just a bit! Hope welled into his heart and he worked madly, unmindful of the excruciating pain. Braced first his left hand, then right, on the floor. Kept yanking and twisting, yanking and twisting. And every few seconds the coils eased under the constant pressure.

At last, suddenly, one hand slipped through them! He was free!

Swiftly he pushed to a sitting position, tore at the rope around his ankles. That came loose in a couple of seconds. He clawed up to his feet.

Three faltering steps brought him to the doorway through which the old men had taken their girls. It gave into a long corridor dimly lighted by a single kerosene lamp in a bracket fixture on one

wall. He started stumbling past closed doors with crude chalked numbers on them.

Number ten was the room he wanted. There was number one—two—three—four. . . .

And abruptly a door just ahead of him began to open. He jumped sideways, slid behind it as it swung back toward the wall.

"But I—I didn't do it!" a terrified voice croaked. "Oh God, I didn't!"

Through the crack between the door and the jamb Kirk could see into the room. One of the old men was being dragged toward him by two of the faceless creatures. His mouth and hands were covered with blood.

Then the thing on the floor was visible, the thing away from which he was being dragged. God! Kirk gave a convulsive shudder. The old man's girl—horribly mutilated! So mutilated that there was no chance that she still lived!

"I DIDN'T do it—I didn't do it!" the terrified voice kept repeating wildly. "I just got dizzy and—"

"I'm afraid that won't do," the cold voice of the hooded man interrupted from just inside the doorway. Evidently he had come around here by some back route. "We caught you in the act. This'll be a pretty serious business. However, maybe we can find an out."

Kirk pressed himself flatter against the wall. The whole inside of him was frozen with fear for Joan. The same thing would happen to her, too, if he didn't save her quickly. Clearly it was a part of the diabolical scheme of horror. Yet he couldn't go to her now. That would be utter folly, complete disaster. He had to wait.

Seconds dragged like hours while the faceless creatures pulled the whimpering ancient into the corridor, started down it with him. Kirk held his breath, and prayed

that none of the men would think to close the door. He waited until their voices were dim with distance, then slowly, cautiously, he edged out where he could watch the little group. After what seemed an interminable age they reached the end of the corridor. He pushed away from the wall, staggered on to the door marked number ten and flung it open.

With one quick glance he took in the sickening scene on the couch near the table holding the small lamp: the girl he loved writhing passionately under those pawing hands.

As he lunged across the room the old man had jumped up and tried wildly to avoid the rush. Terror crawled in his eyes, made his shrill cry break. But Kirk didn't stop. He slammed one fist to the side of the distorted face and the other to the point of the quivering jaw.

The old man crumpled.

Staggering drunkenly in exhaustion, Kirk started to get Joan. Then he heard the faint scrape of a footstep and whirled around. The black-hooded figure was coming at him with a knife.

He managed to sway sideways in time to avoid the first vicious thrust, but dizziness made him lose his balance. One hand clutched at the man's knife arm, missed it, and he went down. Through the nauseating hum of approaching oblivion he heard a snarl of triumph.

He shook his head frantically. He mustn't go out! Joan would be lost! He mustn't—mustn't! And with the sheer power of his will he forced back the cloud which was trying to swallow him.

The hooded man had crouched down now, knife raised high. It flashed through the air like a streak of fire. Desperately Kirk heaved himself over. Hot flame seared the point of his shoulder. He heaved back then, grabbed the arm which had swung the knife and wrenched it. The weapon plopped to the floor. He got hold of it, raised it as the hooded figure

tried to crush down on him. The blade drove through the black robe.

With the hilt protruding from his chest, the fiend slumped into a motionless heap beside Kirk. The hood had slipped up to expose his face. It was the face of Jed Morgan, the reporter who had been with Ruth Dennis in the foursome at the Gaiety Club.

Kirk gave the features one bitter glance and turned to Joan. The lust had faded from her eyes suddenly; she stared at him in dazed fright.

"What—what—"

"Quick—we've got to find a way out of here!" he managed to croak. Feebly he wavered to his knees, to his feet, stumbled toward her. "Try to—" And then a moan tore past the hell of pain in his throat.

It was too late! Footsteps—the faceless devils—they were coming!

With feverish desperation he spun, staggered back to Morgan, pulled the knife from his chest. There was no hope against that pack in this tiny room. But the knife could be put to another use—and far better that she die now by his hand than be left to live through the rest of this night.

He returned to her, the knife gripped tight. She stared at him in questioning terror. Her fingers fumbled up to her neck.

"Kirk. . . ?"

He raised the knife. The footsteps had pounded closer, were almost at the door. He steeled himself and began to swing down.

"Kirk—Kirk!"

He stopped the thrust just before the point of the blade would have plunged into her heart, twisted wildly. Those cries had come from behind him and had sounded like. . . . Yes! It was Bob Carlton! Bob Carlton and two policemen! He uttered a hoarse sob of thanks to a merciful God. . . .

HE WAS lying in a bed in the hospital eight days later, and he had just been allowed his first company. They had been afraid he might try to talk before his throat had time to heal sufficiently.

The first visitor, of course, was Joan. She crouched by the side of the bed with tears glistening in her eyes, her hands clutching his.

"Oh, Kirk—they hurt you so terribly!" she whispered. "You—you might have died!"

Kirk smiled tenderly. "I was scheduled to—but they made the mistake of waiting."

Joan was silent for a minute. But then with a shudder: "It was so horrible. I was in bed—and suddenly I really saw eyes. I—I hadn't heard a thing from the other room when—when he killed—" Her voice broke.

Kirk didn't attempt to say anything. He just pressed her hands tighter. He knew how she had loved her aunt and knew that only time would soften her grief.

"I tried to run," she continued after a minute, "but he caught me. Caught me and started to strangle me—and then I don't remember anything until I suddenly saw you fighting in that room." She shuddered. "I—I've heard, though, about how we'd been bought by those old men. How—how they'd each had the choice of a girl in the contest for one night. And then that we were all meant to be killed after—after. . . ."

Grim little lines etched themselves into Kirk's face.

"It was a hellish plan," he muttered. "Those behind it intended to have it to bring them plenty of money. That's why they were willing to go to such incredible lengths to get it started.

"Of course all the old men were rich. Well, they'd been given drugs in drinks, and when the drugs took effect each of their girls would be murdered. Horribly

—as Margery Lane was. Then blood was going to be smeared on every man's hands, even on his mouth, so that he'd think he'd done the thing in a fit of perverted passion. That figured to be a sweet set-up for blackmail."

"With the bridge blasted, telephones and lights dead, the city was helpless. The masked thugs had the place to themselves."

There was a moment of silence. Then Joan frowned.

"What did they do to us—I mean did they drug us too? To keep us from trying to fight?"

Kirk nodded. He didn't explain that the drug had also been an aphrodisiac to make them crazy with passion in order to keep the old men excited until the rest of the hoax was worked.

"How did you ever know Jed Morgan was behind it?" Joan asked. "You must have known, because Bob Carlton says that you followed Morgan to the place where the creatures had taken us. Says that's how he got there, followed you and then went for the police."

"I should've spotted the devil sooner," Kirk grunted in a bitter voice. "It was all a little thing he said. I was trying to get you on the telephone when the line went dead. I started for your hotel, but before I even left the room the bridge was blasted and the lights put out. We all ran down to the street. Morgan appeared

while I was looking around for a cab. He said he'd seen the bridge go from the corner. Then in a sham tone of horror he wanted to know what was going on in the city with the bridge blasted, lights out and telephones dead.

"It was all right about the bridge, of course, and the lights. Those on the street were out too. But how could he have known that the phones weren't working either? Nobody'd told him, and he couldn't have been on the corner when the bridge blew if he'd been in a phone booth somewhere when the lines went dead."

"I—I don't see how you ever noticed that little slip," Joan marveled.

"I didn't for a long while," Kirk said wryly.

Joan smiled through her tears.

"So I rushed to the Arden where Ruth had been staying," Kirk explained. "I thought he might be there putting on some kind of an act of grief over her disappearance. Luckily he was. . . . Yet, despite that break, we wouldn't be here now if it weren't for good old Bob. He saved the day by following me and then going for help."

"He ought to get a decoration," Joan said. "But—but you ought to get a dozen."

Kirk grinned, wanly yet happily. "I'm getting you," he told her. "But we'll decorate Bob by tricking him up in a dress suit to be our best man."

THE END