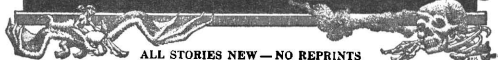


Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1950

Cover by Frank Kelly Freas

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor

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Something Old

*Thoughts are things
... as the saying goes*

BY ELIZABETH COUNSELMAN

IT WAS a home wedding. Perhaps if it had been held in a church, even in the pastor's chapel, the whole bideous thing would not have happened. In the holy atmosphere of a church, standing before an actual altar, when Celia Mitchell said: "I do!" she would have been safe from the evil Force that . . .

But it was a home wedding. In the Mitchells' big living room, cleared of furniture now except for folding chairs borrowed from the city auditorium, flowers were banked along the walls. Guests were seated already, facing the picture window against which the pastor would stand to perform the ceremony. They kept up a low murmur of conversation, which died down only when Mary McPherson, near the piano, began to sing "O Promise Me" in her low sweet contralto.

In the library Bob Hanson, the young assistant curator of the museum, was standing first on one foot, then on the other. He grinned feebly at his white-haired "best man," who was also his superior and his uncle. Walter Ferris grinned back at him, patting his vest pocket.

"Yes, yes, I've got the ring!" he chuckled. "It's right here. In fact," he added humorously, "I happen to have six *more* rings on my person—if the one you bought for Celia gets lost!" At his nephew's puzzled look, the curator pulled out a small leather case and flipped it open, revealing half a dozen curious-looking circles of metal and semi-precious mineral. "Ran into Peabody on my way over here," he explained, "and he handed me the shipment from London. Nice specimens, aren't they?"



Mr. and Mrs.
*have the honor of announcing
the marriage of their daughter*
Celia Mitchell
to
Mr. Robert Hanson
Thursday, the first of June
One thousand nine hundred and fifty

Heading by Charles Kennedy

The bridegroom nodded absently, tugging at his collar. For perhaps the tenth time in the past three minutes, he glanced at his watch, muttering something about medieval torture as a way to start two people off on a happy marriage. Then he started nervously, as the study door flung open and a little girl in a frilly white dress dashed in, swinging her basket of rose petals. She beamed at her brother-in-law to-be and caught at his hand affectionately, displaying a missing front tooth in a smile.

"Bob! Thelia thaid would you or Mither Ferrith let her have thomething out of the mutheum? Anything little, for her to wear or hold. Mary lent her a garter to wear for 'borrowed,' and she'h got thomething 'new' and 'blue' on her underclothes. But not anything 'old'. . .!" the child, a seven-year-old edition of her sister, brought out the words in a breathless rush. "Thelia won't thart without it! Mama thays it'hd bad luck!"

Both men laughed, grateful for any diversion to ease the tension of waiting. Ferris, amused, reached for the phone, then suddenly remembered the leather case he had thrust back into his pocket. Snapping it open again, still laughing, he regarded the rings for a moment—a Fifth Century Syrian ring of banded agate, an Irish one of twisted wire, a leather English band cut from the finger of a glove, an East Indian thumb-ring of iron and silver. The white-haired curator of the museum peered at the collection briefly, then selected one of heavy black metal, hexagonal in shape, on each face of which was inscribed a queer symbol. He handed this to the little flower girl with an exaggerated bow.

"Here you are, my dear! This is probably the oldest relic in our collection—an old Babylonian betrothal ring, from the looks of it. You may tell the fair bride," he added with a twinkle in his faded blue eyes, "that the inscription reads . . . oh, something like: '*Mine, beloved; mine through eternity.*' Very romantic, eh?" He winked at the child, adding gallantly, "Don't tell your sister I sent it. Tell her it was Bob! Hmm?"

The little flower girl nodded, with the

sly giggle of a conspirator in romance. She disappeared through the study doorway again—and in a moment, the first strains of *Lohengrin* seeped into the quiet room. Bob straightened like a doomed man marching to the Chair, then laughed at his uncle sheepishly.

"The things we helpless men go through!" he complained as they walked out together to stand beside the altar. There already, the fat pastor was beaming beneficently out over the throng, waiting for the bride to come pacing slowly down the aisle on her father's arm.

THEN she appeared, a pale blond vision in white satin with a chaplet of orange blossoms around the crown of her veil. If there had been a small white silk-covered Bible in her hands, instead of a bouquet of orchids and lilies-of-the-valley. . . . But it was a bouquet Celia carried, smiling tremulously at her baby sister, dancing ahead of her to scatter rose petals. On her right hand—the only ring she wore—Bob noticed the heavy antique circlet. He grinned, casting a grateful glance at his uncle. The old rascal: wouldn't give him a raise in salary large enough to cover a diamond, along with the lovely little cottage Bob had built for Celia. But at the last minute, he *would* make a gesture like this—giving his nephew's bride an ancient betrothal ring that must have cost the museum a sum well into five figures! Old Walter Ferris, his nephew suspected fondly, was constantly at war within himself between what he wanted to be, a hard-boiled executive, and what he was, a sentimental dreamer.

At that moment Celia stepped to a place beside him, and the young assistant curator could see nothing else beyond her lovely excited face.

"Dearly beloved," intoned the pastor, "we are gathered here together in the sight of God to unite this man and this woman in . . ."

Bob sighed, slipping a loving little wink at the girl by his side. Then, abruptly, his eyes went grave and anxious, observing on the face of his bride a sudden startled expression. She was not looking at him, but

beyond him, beyond his uncle also, at a shadowy spot beyond the altar. Her slim white throat contracted all at once, as though she were fighting hard to stifle a scream that welled up from her inmost being. Bob followed her gaze, but could see nothing. Then he noticed that Celia was tugging at the heavy ring on her finger, trying to get it off. This in itself was puzzling, as the thing had seemed at least two sizes too large for her slender hand. Now, though, it would not come off, not even turn. As she twisted at it frantically, a tiny drop of blood welled out from under the broad dark metal and splashed redly upon her white satin skirt.

"Do you, Robert Edward Hanson, take this woman to be. . . ?" the pastor was asking in a ringing voice.

Bob replied in an absent murmur, staring at his bride's hand. Celia glanced at him with a helpless little grimace, and whispered:

"Darling, the ring—it won't come off! What'll I do? It's so *tight* all at once. . . ."

Her husband-to-be moved closer to her, with a protective gesture that caused watching matrons to breathe a fluttery sigh of reminiscence.

"Don't worry about it, sweetheart," Bob whispered back, smiling. "We'll have it filed off later. Does it hurt you?"

"Yes!" Celia whispered. "It . . . My finger must be swelling. It's cutting me terribly!"

"Do you, Celia Anne Mitchell, take this man. . . ?" the pastor pursued, frowning sternly at this whispered interruption.

"I do!" the bride pronounced—followed by a little gasp, quickly suppressed. Again Bob, and his uncle as well, saw her tug at the ring, as a second, then a third drop of blood ooze from beneath it to splash over the virgin whiteness of her wedding dress.

Then in a swift rush of words and ritual, the ceremony was over, and the young couple were climbing into Bob's waiting car, laughing and dodging the rain of rice that was thrown at them. Celia, in a pale blue suit and straw hat with tiny pink flowers under the brim, nestled close to her new husband as they drove away, followed

by a clanking tail of tin cans and old shoes tied to the rear bumper.

"Thank heavens that's over!" the girl laughed, breathlessly. "Now you're supposed to put your arm around me and say, 'Alone at last! That's part of the ceremony!'"

Bob obeyed, reciting "Alone-at-last" with such mechanical lack of expression that Celia pinched his arm.

"My cavalier!" she peered, then her expression softened as she glanced down at the massive ring on her right hand, looking awkward and ill-fashioned in contrast to the slim platinum band on her left hand. "But you *are* romantic, after all," she sighed. "Oh, Bob, it was such a dear thing to do—giving me this old, old ring from a collection. A Babylonian betrothal ring, your uncle said. And the inscription is just perfect!"

Her husband gulped guiltily, then decided that this was one of the few things he would not tell her. Instead, he patted her hand.

"I picked it out just for you," he lied happily. "You wouldn't let me spend our refrigerator fund on a solitaire, remember! Frugal little housewife already, aren't you?" he teased, then frowned. "But I was worried at the ceremony. About that ring, I mean." He poked at the dark band, which now hung loosely on the girl's finger. "Wonder why your knuckle swelled up like that? Some sort of allergy to the metal, do you suppose?"

THE bride shrugged, slipping off her hat and nestling her head on his shoulder. "Oh—nerves, probably. But it . . . it seemed all at once to have *tightened*. And . . . then . . ." She stopped, laughing and shrugging. "Oh, for goodness sake! I haven't seen a bogeyman in a dark corner since I was Betsy's age! And didn't she look darling?" Celia prattled on happily. "Bob . . . Let's not wait too long to start having children of our own. First, I'd like to have a—"

"Bogeyman?" Bob interrupted, amused. "What did you mean by—?"

"Oh—nerves again!" The girl tossed off his solicitude. "It was when the minister

started— And then again, just as I said: "I do!" Over there in that shadowy corner beyond the piano. I . . . I thought I saw something, that's all." She laughed lightly, but the man noticed a small shiver ripple down her bare arms, in a wake of goose-flesh that felt rough to his caressive touch.

"Saw what? The ghost of your wicked past?" he jibed pleasantly. "All those poor broken-hearted guys who promptly jumped off ninety-nine bridges when they read our wedding announcement in the paper?"

Celia made a face at him, then dropped her eyes uncertainly. Once again that odd little shiver swept over her like a breath of cold wind.

"No; it was—well, at first it looked like a dog! A huge shaggy wet dog, like a Saint Bernard. And—dark gray all over, except that the *head*——" She shuddered now visibly, pressing closer to the man at the wheel and pulling his arm around her shoulders. "Oh, let's not talk about it any more!" she begged. "It was just a silly fancy! Here, darling, keep this for me. It's so heavy, and it keeps slipping off. I wouldn't ever, ever want to lose it! *'Mine, beloved; mine through eternity!'*" she quoted the inscription softly, then slipped the big ring into Bob's pocket.

THE small mountain hotel they had chosen for their honeymoon was perched on a laurel-crested ridge overlooking five states. As they entered the lobby self-consciously and approached the desk, a benign little man popped up from nowhere, snapping his fingers at a sleepy-eyed Negro porter.

"Bridal suite?" he whispered, winking at Bob in a way that sent a titter over those wandering about in the lobby. "Oh, the Hansons—of course! Have your reservation right here. Yes, yes," he added archly, still in that stage whisper that left the young couple flushed and giggling. "Honeymooners? You'll be happy to know that our bridal suite is sound-proofed! Nobody listening in to those sweet nothings you'll want to say to this charming young lady!"

Closing the door after the grinning porter a few minutes later, Bob and Celia burst

out laughing, and melted together in a long kiss. Arms entwined, they stood for a moment, looking out through a broad French door that opened upon a small balcony. Below it, the mountain fell away in a green sweep of tree tops, completing the illusion that they were alone on some tiny planet suspended far above the earth. The girl sighed.

"Oh, Bob, I'm so glad we could get the bridal suite! Mother and Dad spent their honeymoon here, I think I told you. And . . . and that's why I wanted so much to . . ." She broke off shyly, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. "Darling?" she whispered. "Let me have my ring back—I want to wear it while—while you run down and get me a pack of cigarettes, or something. Would you? That's part of the ceremony, too! Then we'll have dinner sent up to us, and watch the sun go down. Oh, Bob, I love you so much!" She flung herself into his arms happily, then shoved him toward the door, laughing.

Bob handed her the ring, and went out, smiling softly to himself.

Because of his solicitude for his bride, for her shy feeling of strangeness, he wandered about the lobby below for perhaps half an hour.

(Perhaps if he had not done so—But there are so many ifs, as Walter Ferris remarked to me later, when he told me the strange story.)

Actually it had begun at the ceremony. But, to Bob, knocking on the locked door of his bridal suite, it began just there—

For, Celia, his bride, would not open the door. Dusk had fallen over the mountains outside, and a few faint stars were already creeping into the sky. Bob knocked again, more loudly, calling his wife's name. There was an answer—a harsh shrill voice, shouting at him in a language he had never heard before. A woman's voice. It sounded, he said, like Celia's and yet not like her soft mellow tones. He was able to distinguish one or two words: "ziggarat," and "shimtu," then a string of words that sounded peculiarly like a chant: "innuma ilu-awelum. . ."

At that, startled and anxious, he began

to hammer on the door, aware of other sounds that issued through the locked portal. There was, as he described it, a *rushing* sound, as of a high wind blowing—although the night outside was still and warm, with heat-lightning flickering across the southern sky. Twice he heard what he described as "a deep, horrible growling noise, like an ape, but with a queer suggestion of words."

Then, frantic, he began to batter the door down by charging against it with his broad young shoulder. It splintered at the third impact, and the young bridegroom almost fell inside, followed closely by the porter and the benign-faced clerk who had heard the commotion from below.

Celia lay on the broad bed, clad in a pale green negligee that hung in ribbons, all but torn from her body. Blood ran from her bruised mouth, and there was hardly a spot on her slender half-nude body that did not bear some mark of violence. She lay face up, moaning, her eyes half closed. But as all three men noted as they ran to her side, her expression was not one of horror or pain, but of ineffable *ecstasy*; of a wild, almost hysterical *happiness*! Her bruised lips moved once, uttering a single syllable, as Bob bent over her, his young face contorted with distress.

"Bell—?" he repeated. "What bell, darling? Oh, couldn't you ring for help? Who was it? How the devil did that . . . that fiend get in, whoever it was that . . . !" He whirled on the frightened desk clerk, then glared beyond them at the cluster of guests who hovered in the doorway. "Do something!" Bob grated. "Call the police! My . . . my wife has been. . . ." He left the ugly words mercifully unspoken, then turned to press Celia's hand to his cheek, cursing and crooning to her.

As he did so, the massive Babylonian ring slipped from her finger and rolled at his feet. A section of the hexagonal outer part fell open, and the young husband picked it up distractedly, staring at the concealed compartment. Inside, framed in a thin gold triangle, was a tiny piece of fabric that at first seemed to be silk, yellow silk, interwoven with a coarse dark thread.

Then Bob glanced up as the hotel doctor shoved his way into the room, firmly closing the door after him. Ordering all but the distraught bridegroom out into the hall, he bent over the half-conscious girl, who was now beginning to moan and toss in pain. His face was bleak as he turned on Bob, lips compressed.

"You did this?" he snapped coldly. "Young man, I certainly recommend psychiatric treatment—and an immediate annulment of your marriage!—if you . . . Veteran, are you? Sometimes, in delayed cases of combat fatigue—"

"Oh, stop it!" Bob ground out through his teeth. "I was down in the lobby! Somebody must have knocked after I left. And Celia opened the door, thinking it was I! It's a cinch nobody could have got in by way of the balcony!"

THE medico stared at him, bewildered but unconvinced. He shook his graying head, shrugged helplessly, and tried to calm this pleasant-looking young man—who might or might not be a violent lunatic.

"All right, all right, boy. Take it easy. My name's Markham. I've been hotel doctor here for eighteen years, but nothing of this sort has ever—Tell me," he broke off, "was there some rival suitor who might have—? It's the work of a deranged person, obviously. A—a sex maniac, with marked sadistic tendencies. I don't recommend," he added gently, "that your wife be moved for a few days. She's . . . she's been very badly mauled. No serious injury; mostly shock. But—is there anyone you'd like me to notify?"

"No! Yes! My uncle, Walter Ferris, curator of the state museum," Bob blurted out distractedly, running a hand through his hair. "Oh, why, why did I leave her, even for a few minutes?" he groaned. "She just seemed to want a minute alone, like most brides. And I—I—"

The doctor laid a hand on his shoulder. "Of course," he said kindly, but with a wary look in his eyes. "Now, my boy, tell me—do you ever suffer from—intense headaches? Er—loss of memory? Recurrent nightmares, in which you—?"

Bob Hanson jerked up his head, glaring at him.

"Good lord!" he gasped. "You think I did this to poor Celia? That I'm a— a mental case, and just don't remember having. . . ? But I do remember!" he insisted helplessly. "We talked about the view, and having our dinner sent up. Then I . . . I went down after a pack of cigarettes, because Celia wanted to address—"

"Yes," Dr. Markham said quietly. "But—the desk clerk tells me you were up here with your young bride for almost an hour, before you came down to the lobby alone. Looking rather nervous, one of the porters said." He smiled. "Of course, that's natural for a groom. Still—" The smile faded.

Bob gaped at him, his straightforward blue eyes flinching before the older man's expression.

"But I—I couldn't have! How could I?" He strode over to the doctor, and seized his shoulders as though they were the only solid things in the hotel room. "Doctor! I . . . was thrown from a pony once, as a child. I struck my head. Could that have. . . ?"

"It's possible," the physician nodded gently, then noted the raising agitation in the young man's face. "Now, now. We'll straighten this out later—you've had a terrible shock. Suppose you take the room next to mine for tonight, eh? In the morning we'll—Odd-looking ring you have there, he changed the subject smoothly in an effort to wipe some of the horror from the bridegroom's eyes. "Very ancient, isn't it? I collect ancient objects," he went on talking pleasantly. "Have a genuine scarab, from the tomb of Rameses. And a Mayan idol—hideous little thing. Mind if I look at that?"

Bob Hanson glanced down at his hand dully, which was still clutching the Babylonian ring his uncle had given his bride. The doctor took it from his nerveless grasp and turned it over and over, examining the tiny fragment of cloth-like stuff set in the secret compartment.

"By George!" he murmured. "Interesting! A hair ring! Early Babylonian, from the looks of that cuneiform inscription." He talked on in a low soothing tone, edging Rob Hanson from the room where his

young bride lay, half-conscious and battered.

Skillfully he steered the stunned young man to a room opened by the porter. Bob sank down on the bed, gulping gratefully at the brandy flask that Markham held to his lips.

Then, once more, he buried his face in his hands.

"Celia!" he groaned. "Just a sweet innocent. Why, she's barely eighteen! I don't suppose she's even kissed more than a couple of boys in her life, at church picnics or the like! We grew up together. I—I wouldn't hurt her for anything in the world!"

THE doctor sighed. In contrast to the clean-cut young man on the bed, he looked tired and wrinkled, with sober dark eyes that had seen a great deal of human suffering. Also, he had seen a deal of criminal insanity, having been resident at a state asylum for several years. He eyed Bob warily, watching the way his fingers twisted together like writhing snakes.

"Don't worry," he soothed. "The house detective has been posted outside your wife's door. Nothing else can . . . harm her tonight. But I think it best that you sleep here, until some investigation of this . . . this business has been made. I'm sure," he added keenly, "that you would not want a recurrence, if it turns out that you *are* subject to attacks of schizophrenia. Split-personality, you understand. A Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality."

The young man groaned again, and shook his head violently. "But I'm *not*! I remember *everything*! Somebody must have forced entrance—"

"No. No, that's impossible, Mr. Hanson. I've already checked."

Bob looked up, startled by the cold gravity of the doctor's voice.

"No." The older man destroyed his last hope, as mercifully as he could. "A maid was mopping the hall outside your room, during the entire time you say you were in the lobby and your wife was alone. No one—*no intruder*—could have entered the room in your absence, without being seen by the maid. And it's obvious that no one could

gain entrance by way of that balcony. It's a drop of fifty feet—to the treetops!"

As his quiet words sank in, Bob's eyes widened in shock and incredulity. His neatly brushed head moved weakly from side to side in denial. Then, at the doctor's heavy shrug, he threw himself face down on the bed, his broad shoulders wracked by silent sobs.

"All right," he said brokenly. "Notify my uncle, please. He'll . . . take whatever steps you think necessary. Have me—committed, and send somebody to come and take Celia home."

About midnight, after young Hanson had drifted into a troubled sleep induced by strong sedatives, the doctor tiptoed from his room, carrying with him the heavy ring Bob had slipped from his bride's bruised hand.

DR. MARKHAM shook his head. It was a strange case, and a tragic one for everyone concerned. Ironically, he read the romantic inscription on the bride's betrothal ring, picking out the queer wedged-shaped symbols in a heavy tome on his desk. "*Mine through eternity. . .*" The physician grunted. There seemed nothing he could do tomorrow except commit that nice young boy to a mental hospital, after first notifying their families of his brutal attack on his young bride.

Sighing, Markham sat down at his desk, idly examining the massive ring as he mulled over the problem. The metal was very dark, a weird *pulsing* black that seemed to expand and billow like smoke. Curiously he brushed a drop of acid across one of the six flat outer sides, and discovered it to contain some gold and iron, also another metal that defied his knowledge. Slipping open the secret compartment, the doctor stared for a moment at the tiny bit of fabric framed inside, with its fine silken woof and dark coarse warp.

On impulse, opening his penknife, he gouged out a strand of each, and placed them under his microscope. They were, as he suspected, hair—but a strange combination. The yellow silky strand was human hair, he found. But the dark coarse filament

was that of some animal, perhaps a dog or an ape! Markham, who had expected the interwoven locks of some ancient lovers, was nonplussed at this discovery. He resolved to tell young Hanson about that in the morning—then reminded himself wryly that, in view of the events, that combination of human-and-beast hair in the betrothal ring was all too appropriate!

Then, abruptly, his eyes narrowed. A crazy idea had popped into his head, so fantastic that he dared not mention it to anyone.

Leaping up from his chair, the doctor mounted the stairs to the floor above and entered the room of the young bride, after nodding casually to the house detective who dozed outside the door, on guard. Markham sat down quietly by the bed, checking the girl's pulse and frowning over the bruises and welts on her neck and shoulders.

Then, carefully, he slipped the massive ring on her finger, and waited. He did not have to wait long.

Almost instantly, the girl's calm expression changed to one of feverish excitement, ecstasy mingled with fear, horror, and revulsion. She began to toss and mutter in her sleep, and Markham had to bend close to catch her words—an odd combination of English and what he recognized finally as Sumerian, the ancient language of Babylonia!

"Ai! Phogor!" the girl whimpered. "Come! *E-Im-Kbur-sag* . . . the high places in the wind! The winding stair shall lift me up to . . . charmanim . . . Ai! *Bel-peor! Thy handmaiden . . . awaits thy . . . pleasure. . .*!"

Celia cried out suddenly—and before Markham's startled eyes, a great red welt began to rise up on the flesh of her slim neck. Another appeared on her bare shoulder as she whimpered and cried out once more.

The doctor mopped his forehead, on which cold sweat had broken out. Dimly, though the night outside was still and clear, he thought he heard a rushing sound, as of a strong wind blowing. Through and beneath it, also, he heard a deep guttural voice, with the suggestion of words—

hideous, lecherous words that blasphemed the very air of the room. Markham gulped, and bending quickly, withdrew the ring from Celia's finger—the ring which already had contracted and made a deep imprint on her flesh.

"Good God!" the doctor breathed shakily. "I . . . I never thought I'd have the privilege of seeing a genuine case. Stigmata! Hysterical stigmata! No question of it. But what brought it on?"

HE RAN his fingers over the welts and bruises on Celia's body, and pursed his lips in a soundless whistle of amazement. Some of the wounds were actually bleeding! And her fingernails, which had a moment before clawed frantically at the open air above her, were broken as though in struggle against some solid object. Looking closer at them, Markham opened his penknife and pried something out from beneath one nail. A hair! A dark coarse hair, exactly like that he had found in the ring! But perhaps Celia Hanson, too, had examined that secret compartment before her strange attack occurred.

Returning to his quarters, Dr. Markham sat for some time, poring over the big tomes in his library; reference works that pertained to his hobby of collecting ancient relics. Toward dawn he dozed off, his mind awl with strange conjectures—only to waken sharply with the feeling that someone was in his room.

Markham turned his head slightly where it rested on his desk. A hand was groping stealthily in the drawer near him, rummaging among his medicines. It selected a vial on the label of which a grinning skull warned of the dangerous contents.

The doctor leaped up, seizing the hand and knocking the bottle to the floor. With an expert twist, he forced young Bob Hanson into a chair and kicked the vial of poison out of reach under his bed. The boy glared at him hopelessly, slumped in his chair.

"Why did you stop me," he muttered, "after what I did? And it must have been I, if nobody else could get in that room! Oh, don't you see? I've got to release Celia!

She'd wait for me. She'd try to forgive me, to understand. Don't you see it's the only way for us now?"

"Except," Markham interrupted crisply, "to look at the facts, and use a little common sense and imagination! Relax, boy," he said softly. "It wasn't you. I didn't see how it could be—you've no symptoms of mental disorder. But—"

Bob's eyes widened. He jumped up from his chair. "They've caught him? The—the man who—?"

"There was no man," Markham said, patting his shoulder. "My young friend, I have every reason to believe that your bride's wounds and bruises are—stigmatic. That is, induced by hysteria and self-hypnosis. It's a medical phenomenon you don't see once in a lifetime. Though there was a case in the papers recently, a Theresa Neumann, who repeats the wounds of Christ on the cross every Good Friday. There was another case in the village of Vilar Chao, Portugal, a girl named Amelia. A cross appeared on her forehead in a great red welt when she said her Rosary.

"There are other kinds of stigmata, though, besides those caused by religious fervor. There was a Polish girl, Eleanor Zugun, who would break out in welts and scratches when she believed a spirit-creature, a poltergeist, was attacking her. Her hands were tied and she was watched by a group of physicians, but the welts would appear just the same—dreadful raw red wounds on her cheek or neck."

Young Hanson blinked at him, utterly bewildered. "But," he blurted, "you don't mean that Celia—? Why, she's not the hysterical type! Are you saying now that she, not I, is the mental case?"

The gray-haired physician stared back at him, his own eyes dark with bewilderment.

"Perhaps," he said quietly, "my medical report will say that your young bride subconsciously feared marriage, though consciously she trusted and loved her new husband. Psychiatry! We scientists," he smiled wryly, "are willing to accept its strange ins and outs as medical fact. But—I personally believe," he added slowly, "that this is a *psychical* phenomenon. Mr. Hanson, I be-

lieve that, for the short period you left your wife alone in that room in her highly emotional state, she became hypersensitive to . . . what the American Society for Psychic Research calls *psychometry*!"

"Psy . . . ?" Bob Hanson repeated, amazed. "Say! I've heard of that! There were some recent tests made at Harvard in extra-sensory perception. It's the opposite of clairvoyance, isn't it? A psychometry medium can take some object in his hand and sense its past—or events that happened closely connected with the object?"

Markham nodded. "Precisely! I've observed one such medium in her—call it 'trance', if you like. A lady, a chubby palmist who plied her trade in a tent outside Miami. She was actually able to take a piece of ordinary brickbat in her hand—and describe the details of a murder committed with it! She even drew a clear picture of the murderer. He was later convicted of the crime—though not on such flimsy legal evidence as a psychometric reading! Our authorities are not inclined to credit these matters. But 'thoughts are things', as the saying goes. They impregnate metal and wood and stone, much as radio-active heat does in a certain area. Everyone can sense such waves at times, especially in moments of intense emotion. But some of us are more receptive than others, more intense.

"Mr. Hanson," the doctor finished flatly, "I believe your wife is such a person—and that she relived an experience strongly attached to this ancient Babylonian ring you gave her. You call it a betrothal ring, and it is just that—but in a rather ghastly way."

The doctor shuddered visibly, then went on:

"I examined the cuneiform inscription very carefully. A sinister one, rather than romantic! Coupled with what your wife muttered in her sleep when I slipped the ring on her finger, I believe the thing to be the betrothal ring of a young bride of ancient Babylonia. A virgin bride of the city of Peor, on the Tigris.

"There was, as you may know, a religious custom among those who worshipped the god Baal—or Bel is the Babylonian

word, meaning *lord* or *possessor*. An evil, vicious custom. Directly after a wedding the young bride was required to sit in the temple and give herself to the first stranger who tossed a handful of silver into her lap. She could not refuse to submit herself to the first comer—even if he happened to be a leprous beggar; Then, and only then, could the bride go to her lawful husband. A practice so unthinkable that the Canaanites came to speak of the god as 'shame-lord,' or '*Baal-ze-bub*', the 'god of flies'.

"The stranger, of course, represented Bel. A shaggy filthy monster with a beast's body and the old lewd face of a man. But sometimes, if the young bride was very fair and innocent, the god himself came to claim first fruits, as the practice was called."

Bob Hanson, listening intently, tugged at his collar as the import of Markham's words reached him all at once.

"And—Celia?" he forced out the name. "She—she—?"

" . . . relived the experience of that young bride of Peor," the doctor nodded grimly. "By the medium of psychometry. A truly horrible experience! No wonder her physical body was affected, to the extent of stigmatic wounds! Of all the impious deities of antiquity, Bel, or Baal, was known and despised for his obscene brutality! Most of our Christian prophets preached against him, and burned down his temples—Daniel, Isaiah, Jeremiah. They weren't exaggerating when they called the rites of Bel an 'abomination!'"

Young Hanson shivered uncontrollably. "Oh, my poor Celia!" he moaned. "Of course, she'll have to be hospitalized. But I'll wait for her! I'll—I'll help her forget this terrible experience if it takes the rest of my life!"

Dr. Markham smiled, slapping him on the back gently.

"But it won't take that long," he said cheerfully. "Unless I'm much mistaken—" He glanced out the window to where the sun was rising, clear and warm, over the mountain ridge." In fact, I rather think your pretty bride is waking up right now, hungry for breakfast—and worried about

where you are. Shall we go up to see her?"

The young man nodded eagerly, and in a moment the two men were standing beside Celia's bed. She stared at Markham, pulling up the covers modestly over the torn negligee. Then, as he took her wrist with a faint smile, she relaxed, making a little face at Bob.

"Oh—you're a doctor? Good heavens! Did I faint or something last night? Poor Bob! He must have been frantic, to call in a . . ." She moaned faintly, sinking back on her pillow. "But I do feel awful! And those horrible nightmares—" The bride's face convulsed with horror, then flushed to the roots of her hair. "It—it was that dog-thing I thought I saw at the wedding! Ugh! It—came to me, and—I was terrified, and yet—" She rolled her head from side to side as though in an effort to dispel the confused memory. "Oh, it's all mixed up!"

Bob moved quickly to the bedside, and she took his hand in both of hers, smiling shakily.

"Oh, darling," Celia apologized, "I didn't mean to frighten you. But I . . . I felt as though I'd been drugged! I couldn't wake up. Just kept on and on dreaming about this . . . this strange ancient-looking city! There was a crowd in the streets, around a great tall building. Some robed men were dancing in a sort of queer *limp*. Then . . ." She shuddered. "Then one of them snatched a poor little baby from its mother and . . . and dashed its brains out on a big six-sided stone! Oh, it was horrible! But I couldn't wake up . . ."

"Then a . . . a young girl, with a wreath of flowers on her head. I . . . It seemed to be *me*! There was a long flight of stone steps winding around the outside of that tall tower. I climbed and climbed, with those people howling below me. Then—there was a door opening. And a big room, lighted with a weird green glow; a room with simply dreadful pictures on the tiled walls! They . . . they made me blush! Then there was a huge couch, all gold and blue jewels, piled high with pillows. And the wind—it blew and howled all the time! Then I . . . I . . ."

Celia stopped, then plunged on, her breath coming in short gasps of horror.

"I . . . looked up, and that *Thing* was coming toward me, talking in a horrible guttural voice and . . . and reaching for *me*!"

SHE gave a little moan and buried her face in the pillow. Over her head, Bob Hanson looked despairingly at Dr. Markham. But the doctor shook his head. Lightly, he flipped back the cover to reveal the girl's bare shoulders and neck, which had been covered with such dreadful bruises.

Young Hanson stared, unbelieving. The wounds had disappeared! He raised his eyes once more to Markham's, lips parted. But again the wise old physician shook his head, moving unostentatiously toward the door.

"We are all troubled by nightmares and nervousness," he said soothingly. "I wouldn't be upset by it, young lady. Just take it easy for a few days—and enjoy your honeymoon! You'll be fine as soon as you and this anxious young man of yours have had breakfast together! I'll drop in later. Much later!"

He closed the door after him, smiling, and strode down the hall to return to his own quarters. The ring, the evil ring of Bel-peor, was still in his pocket—to be mailed back to Walter Ferris with the full story, at young Hanson's request. Bob could pretend to have lost it. Anything, so that it would never again close, vise-like, about his bride's slim finger—as it had closed about the finger of that other young bride of Peor, many centuries before Christ.

Markham frowned. There was much about this case that he did not understand—and much that he did not care to understand! That dark coarse hair in the secret compartment of the ring, for instance—with its counterpart under Celia's fingernail. That could be explained, perhaps, in a natural way—

But he could not explain the fact that the silky blond strands interwoven with it were, under his microscope, identical to the hair on Celia Hanson's head—though it had been set into that ancient Babylonian ring over three thousand years ago!