

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JULY, 1941

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

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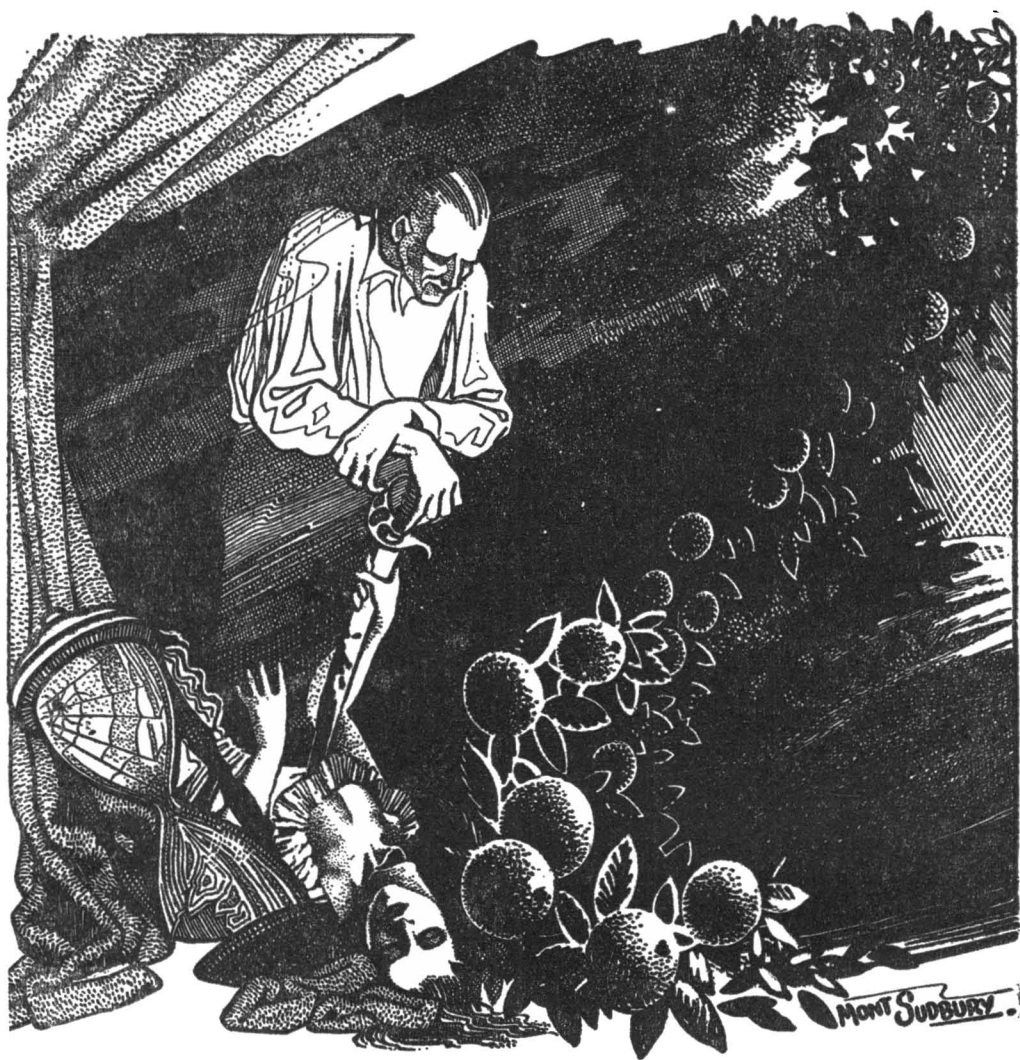
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Song Without Words

By SEABURY QUINN

*What could they signify—those three little bitter oranges
piled in a pyramid on dead girl's breast?*

ST. MARY'S CITY, Md., March 3.— Maryland state police and authorities of St. Mary's county report they have as yet been unable to find any trace of Chester Gunnarson, wealthy Brooklynite

who vanished from his house near Porto Bello last Friday night. Gunnarson, who bought the old manor house and what remained of the once large plantation of Elderwood last month, made a trip down



Her fingers tightened as she smiled at him. "My dear," she whispered in a throaty, husky voice, "I knew you would come back to me. . . ."

here to inspect the property two weeks ago, and lived in the old mansion several days, returning to his home in Brooklyn for a few days, then coming back here last Friday.

He was last seen by a filling station attendant at St. Mary's City about eight o'clock that night. Next morning his car, an open sport roadster, was found parked in the driveway before the house. A cigarette stump of the brand Gunnarson was known to smoke was found in an ashtray in the hall, in the soft earth between flower

boxes in the orangery were found footprints positively identified as his, but extended search has thus far failed to reveal any trace of his whereabouts.

Mr. Gunnarson was a cripple and had been since early infancy, having been stricken by infantile paralysis before his second birthday, and it would have been physically impossible for him to have walked any distance from the house. That he had not left by a vehicle other than the car in which he drove down from New York is believed proven by the fact that his

car's are the only tracks to have been found around the house.

Elderwood, the house which Mr. Gunnarson purchased, is one of the oldest, as well as best preserved, of the pre-Civil War mansions in this locality. During the War Between the States it was the property of Judge Amos Pinchin, by whom it was inherited from his grandfather, Gen. Jabez Pinchin, of Revolutionary War fame. Miss Elaine Pinchin, Judge Pinchin's only child, died there in tragic circumstances shortly before Gen. Lee's surrender, and after the war the place was occupied by a succession of tenants, none of whom remained long in possession. Portions of the plantation were sold off successively until only thirty acres of the original tract remained. These, together with the house, fully furnished with authentic antiques, were offered for sale as a unit by George Hoffmann, wealthy Philadelphian, who bought and completely renovated the house a little more than a year ago. Mr. Hoffmann never assigned any reason for quitting the premises on which he had expended so much money; it is known only that he moved away after living there less than three months, and that he thereafter advertised the place for sale at less than its assessed value.

Until Mr. Gunnarson appeared there were no bidders for the property. The place has a bad reputation, and the colored people and superstitious whites in the neighborhood declare that it is haunted by a malignant spectre. Mr. Gunnarson's strange disappearance adds a note of eerie mystery to the history of a house about which mysterious stories have been whispered for more than half a century.

—New York *Daily Sphere*.

To the Editor of The Sphere. Sir: It was with something like a feeling of blood-guiltiness that I read your article on the strange disappearance of Chester Gunnar-

son of Brooklyn, N. Y., from my former house at Elderwood, near Porto Bello, Md. Mr. Gunnarson's purchase of the property was transacted through my attorney's and his brokers, and we principals never came in touch with each other, but in the light of subsequent developments I have a feeling of remorse for not having made a point of meeting him and warning him of possible dangers attendant on occupancy of those premises.

Almost exactly one year ago I bought Elderwood from a collateral descendant of the late Judge Amos Pinchin, and though the place was offered me at what seemed an absurdly low price, I assumed this was because of the shocking state of disrepair into which it had been allowed to settle.

My first care was to modernize the house completely, installing automatic oil heat, electric lights and fixtures, and modern plumbing. I then went down to look at it, and found everything that could be desired, to all outward appearances. My wife and daughters were also delighted with the place, and we spent several weeks there, entertaining friends from the North. It was a source of surprise and some little disappointment to us that none of the local gentry accepted invitations to evening parties, though they were all most cordial in bidding us to their houses, and frequently called on us during the day. We also found great difficulty in securing and retaining domestic help. None of the colored people in the locality could be induced to remain in the house, or even in the reconditioned slave quarters, after night fall, and we found that the white help brought from the North were restless in the place, and soon found some excuse for leaving.

IT WAS late last April, the 28th, as I recall, that I found the reason for this. My family had gone North on a shopping expedition, and in the absence of servants I was left alone in the house. I distinctly

remember hearing a hall clock strike 11:30, but do not think it had struck 12:00 when I noticed a peculiar light in the orangery, or conservatory, which was connected with the second drawing room by a short glassed-in passage. As I recalled having shut off the lights in the conservatory earlier in the evening, I rose to investigate.

You may imagine my surprise when I found, upon going into the orangery, that the illumination I had observed was not from the electric bulbs, but was a sort of cold glow, like a phosphorescent gleam, appearing to emanate from a far corner of the greenhouse. That it was this sort of weird, uncanny light, and not moonlight or other natural illumination, I am positive, for the sky was overcast and a storm was blowing up from Chesapeake Bay.

As I walked further into the conservatory to investigate the phenomenon I suddenly perceived the figure of what appeared to be a young woman standing with her face toward me. The odd greenish light in which she stood was at her back, and I could get no clear impression of either her face or costume, though at the time it struck me she was wearing a dress of antique vintage, something like the styles we see depicted in old prints from *Gody's Ladies' Book*. Whether she were fair or dark I could not make out, but there was something about her dimly-seen face that was positively terrifying. She raised a hand and plucked an orange from one of the trees that have been cultivated by the Pinchin family since early in the eighteenth century, and offered it to me. At the same time I noticed that her mouth was open and her lips moving, as if she were singing, but I could hear no sound. Dimly, I recalled having heard that a young woman had been murdered in that greenhouse by a lover to whom she had been unfaithful, and that her unquiet spirit was supposed to walk there some-

times, "singing a song without words." Of course, I had never taken any stock in that sort of absurdity, but as I looked at that spectral figure I recalled the legend, and was more utterly afraid than I have ever been before. I felt an almost overmastering impulse to speak to the apparition and demand what it wanted, but as I opened my lips to do so something within me seemed to sound a warning, and I experienced such a feeling of revulsion as can only be compared to one's feeling when he comes suddenly upon a copperhead or rattlesnake coiled in his path. The feeling was so strong that it amounted to a physical sickness, and I staggered, rather than ran, from the conservatory, and though it was late at night and threatening rain, jumped into my car and drove as fast as I could to Leonardtown, where I spent the night. Next morning I returned to Elderwood, bundled up all the family's personal belongings and left the house, never to return.

Not for anything would I have passed another night in that place, or permitted any member of my family to do so. When I offered the property for sale I had scarcely any hope of acquiring a purchaser even though my asking-price was much less than the assessed value of the place. The fact that no one offered to buy the property till Mr. Gunnarson's brokers bid for it, and that he was a northern gentleman with no knowledge of the evil reputation of the place, confirms my belief that the residents of that section of Maryland know whereof they speak when they declare Elderwood is haunted.

I may add that I subsequently made attempts to learn the legend of the house, but found that those to whom I talked either could not, or would not enlighten me. About all I was able to find out is that the spectre of a young woman appears in the conservatory, and that she is always apparently singing. No one has ever heard her

utter a sound, however, and it seems to be generally believed that if she is addressed the person speaking to her will thereupon immediately hear "the song without words" which she is singing, and as an immediate consequence, will perish.

Who—or what—the mysterious woman in the conservatory was I have no accurate idea, but from the feeling of abysmal and instinctive terror with which the mere sight of her inspired me, I have no moral doubt that she was a manifestation of at least one phase of the dreadful Thing that haunts Elderwood Manor.

I fear this Thing is responsible for the unfortunate and crippled Mr. Gunnarson's disappearance, and am certain that no trace of him will ever be found by anyone in — or of — this world.

I deeply regret not having carried out my original intention of canceling the insurance on the house and then setting it afire, so that both house and haunting Thing might have been destroyed for all time.

Respectfully,

GEORGE HOFFMAN,

Late owner of Elderwood Manor.
Philadelphia, Pa., March 6.

THE sky was dappled like the breast of a gray goose, and like tiny tufts of goose-feathers little flakes of soft white snow were wavering slowly through the twilight as Gunnarson drew up before the tall stone gateposts of his new house. It was lovely in the winter dusk, that house, standing far back from the macadamed highway, with its long avenue of cedars stretched before it straight as a plumb-line and the lofty columns of its white piazza glimmering faintly in the half light. He felt a sudden warmth, almost like a glow of homecoming, as he looked at it. "Home," the words struck echoes in his heart, "this is to be our home, mine and Geraldine's, please Fate."

Odd how he'd come to buy it. They'd been looking over *Rural Life* one evening when Geraldine had exclaimed, "Oh, lovely!" as she saw the advertisement: In Southern Maryland, a fine pre-Civil War house, modernized in all particulars, surrounded by a farm of thirty acres, running water through the meadow, river frontage with wharf-rights—

"You'd like it?" he asked in that almost reverent tone he always used with her.

"Oh, Chet, I'd simply love it!" she returned with bubbling enthusiasm. "Think of it, that lovely, mellow old house, with rolling country all around it, and one's own river-landing. Just like the colonial gentry. And then, to have your own cows and horses there and—"

"And me?" he broke in gently, almost pleadingly.

Her narrow, high-arched brows drew down a moment in a mild frown, more of annoyance than of anger. "Yes," she conceded, "even you, Chet." But the smile she flashed him as she spoke took all the edge off of her words.

He said no more about it, but next day he had his brokers get in touch with the attorneys who had advertised the place. Now, with the deed in his pocket, he had come to look at the property. He'd have another deed made out, and hand it to her when she stepped across the threshold as his bride. Too bad he couldn't carry her in the traditional manner, but—

CHET GUNNARSON could not remember when he had not been in love with Geraldine Peters. She was three years his junior, and it seemed to him that he had loved her since that morning thirty years before when his nurse had lifted him to look at the new baby in her frilled and ruffled carriage. "It's little Geraldine," the maid had told him. "She came to Mrs. Peters' house last month. Isn't she pretty?"

Even as a three year old he had been

serious, with a quaintly adult manner of expression. "She's beautiful," he answered fervently as he looked into the little dimpled pink and white face showing like a flower between the knitted pink and white bonnet and the pink and white eider-down crib blanket. "She's beautiful, an' when we grow up I'm goin' to marry her."

The nurse had turned her head away quickly. "Poor lamb," she muttered, half a sob in her voice.

He hadn't caught the words distinctly, but he understood their intonation, realized she negated his expressed ambition. "Yes, I am, too," he defended hotly. "You just see if I don't. Nobody's goin' to stop me marryin' her, even if I am differink!"

His "differinks" from other children was a thing he hardly understood, but it was there, he knew that, even in those days. Older people, 'specially ladies, made little deprecating clucking noises with their tongues against their teeth when they passed him in the park or on the street. He couldn't run and play tag, roller-skate or roll a hoop like the other little boys and girls. While other lads were clothed in shorts and sweaters, or snow suits, he was always dressed in trim blue sailor suits with long, wide trousers that helped to hide the braces that were buckled to his shrunken, puny little legs. When he walked he hobbled with a lurching, staggering roll. He often fell, he tired quickly.

At thirty-three he still was "different." Massage, electrotherapy and carefully supervised exercise had made it possible for him to move with less awkwardness, he could even drive a motor car equipped with special treadles and a special driver's seat, but dancing, tennis, golf or any form of sport except swimming was utterly beyond him. He was well-favored facially, with smooth dark hair, a wide forehead and sober dark eyes beneath delicately arched brows. Above the waist he was well made, deep chested, square shouldered. From the

hips down he was the hopeless parody of a man with trousers that hung limply about legs shriveled to mere skeletal remains. His shoes would have been small for a ten year old lad.

And constant as his cruel deformity was his love for Geraldine. As a little girl she'd mocked his lameness, as an adolescent belle she tolerated his companionship when better company was not available, as a woman she regarded him much as a Mediaeval princess might have looked upon her fool. Occasionally she was kind and gentle, more often she would whet the sharp edge of her wit upon him; sometimes she was actually cruel. But she took his lavish presents with an air of condescension, let him call, or take her to the opera or theatre, and when he laid his heart, his crippled, twisted body and his more than merely satisfactory fortune at her childish small feet, as he did periodically, she was careful to make her refusals gentle, diplomatic, and not too final.

For Geraldine was poor. All her life she'd known the taste of genteel poverty, and it was quinine-bitter on her tongue. She had no illusions. She was a merchantable article, definitely so, and she meant to drive the shrewdest bargain possible. She knew her beauty and allure, realized the value of her pale-gold hair, her matte-white skin, her straight, slim, softly, contoured figure on which bargain basement dresses looked like Paris importations, her gray eyes with their childish look of utter innocence—and which were so adeptly able to put price tags on everything. Chet Gunnarson was her backlog, her reserve, what her poker-playing friends referred to as an ace in the hole. So she rejected his proposals with a gentle melancholy, as if refusal pained her more than it did him, and always held out the faint, hopeful glimmer of "perhaps—some day."

The house was very dark, and cold with what seemed more than merely mortal

chill. He played his pocket flashlight on the wall, found the electric switch and pressed it, then as gentle, moonlike light spread from the shaded globes he found the switch controlling the oil furnace and flicked it. In a moment came a subdued whirring from the basement. Everything was in order, it would be warm in a few moments, and he could spend the night quite comfortably there.

The advertisement had not overstated matters. "Completely furnished with authentic antiques," it had announced, and Chester took in the perfection of the furnishings with a thrill of admiration. Marble vases, porcelain figurines, ormolu clocks set off the solid lines of carved furniture. Here was a bit of beautifully shaped mahogany, there a piece of walnut almost worth its weight in gold at any dealer's—and all of it was his. His and Geraldine's.

The little room behind the formal parlor was especially attractive. Old-fashioned chintz patterned with quaint bouquets hung at the low windows, there were deep chairs and sofas covered with a warm rose-tone that complemented the gray wood-work. A coffee table of pear wood was placed between a divan and the fireplace where the split logs had been laid in readiness. Against the wall was a tall chest of drawers waxed to a satin finish, above it was an antique mirror framed in gilt; an oil portrait framed in a narrow strip of gold hung on the wall above the marble mantel.

"This is delightful!" he exclaimed. "So restful—homelike"—his voice softened to a tremulous whisper—"our home; Geraldine's and mine."

Almost gaily he limped to the fireplace, bent and set a flaring match to the piled kindling underneath the logs, then, as a little corkscrew-flame of orange fire curled up: "Welcome home, dear," he breathed softly, "welcome to this house of yours—"

The sentence died half uttered, for as he straightened he looked full into the pic-

tured face above the mantel, and as his living gaze locked with the picture's painted glance, he felt an odd, inexplicable thrill run through him. There was nothing wanton or voluptuous in the painted face. The girl was dark, with pale, smooth skin and sweetly curving lips. There was a tiny mole, perhaps a beauty-patch, beneath her left eye, a full-blown yellow rose was tucked into her smoothly lustrous hair. Her gown, cut low to show the shoulder-tips after the style of the eighteen-sixties, was dark green silk, and round its waist was bound a sash or scarf of yellow that exactly matched the flower in her tresses. But most of all the eyes were fascinating. Deep blue they were, almost purple, and framed by long, thick, curling lashes. As he looked into them they seemed deepening in shade until they verged on black. Somehow, they seemed appealing to his chivalry, begging piteously for something, but what they pleaded for he could not tell.

For a long, pulse-pounding moment he stood staring at the portrait, and it seemed almost as if he'd stepped into a different world. Even—he resented this, but it was so—as if he'd forgotten Geraldine and his deep, almost hopeless love for her, and had somehow come to a goal he'd been seeking since—was this remembering? he wondered. He could have sworn that he remembered this pale, fragile girl, that he recalled her soft, low laugh, the touch of her soft hand, the sweetness of her voice as she sang softly in the twilight—when did she sing—where—how—?

He shook his shoulders, closed his eyes and opened them again, and he was standing once more in the charming little room with firelight brightening its walls, the thrumming tune of a low winter breeze was sounding at the window, and a picture—just an ordinary picture—hung upon the wall before him.

He woke suddenly to a vague sense of apprehension. An intangible tocsin

seemed beating an alarm in his inner consciousness, a current of cold air seemed blowing over him. Like a dream-affrighted child he roused to a sitting posture and looked round him. Now he remembered. He had lain down on the sofa, comfortably aware of the log fire's glow and the mounting heat in the radiators after his cold drive. The chanting of the light wind hurrying past the window and the softly hissing murmur of the fire had been a lullaby to him. How long had he been sleeping?

FROM the hall there came the measured booming of the tall clock, a deep, deliberate, echo-making stroke. One o'clock, or half-past something? he wondered.

The flowered chintz that draped the long French window opposite the entrance fluttered forward with a wavering motion, as if blown upon by a light draft, and once again he felt the breath of bitter, freezing chill. He rose unsteadily on crippled legs, caught his balance and limped across the room.

It was not a window, he discovered. It was a door concealed by the hanging, and it let onto a short passage, glassed in on either side, like the entrance to a greenhouse. Beyond, he saw the glimmer of the small panes of a pair of glass doors; through them gleamed a faintly greenish luminance, something like moonlight, rather like the pale dawn-radiance before the sun comes up, yet neither. He felt a sudden reasonless tenseness; not fear exactly, but something not far from it. The old dark house seemed tense, too; breathless, waiting, listening. Why should he be afraid? Of burglars? He dropped his hand into his jacket pocket where a little automatic rested. He might not be a match for a prowler if they came to grips, but he was an expert pistol shot. If he'd been followed here by someone who thought a cripple couldn't resist—

The door swung open to his touch, and the cold, terrifying chill that froze the air gave way to the rush of warm perfumed air from the conservatory. The place was almost literally alive with flowers: roses, gardenias, carnations, and the subtly-perfumed, star-bright blossoms of a pair of ancient orange trees. The greenery of wax-bright leaves and slender, trailing tendrils seemed to move with a slow, gentle rhythm, as if they had been under water, swaying with the flow and ebbing of small waves. Against the diamond-shaped panes of the roof the snow drove with a faintly hissing sound. It was a stormy night; no moon or stars could break through those massed clouds that sifted down their weight of snow-crystals; yet the whole conservatory glowed with a faint lemon-colored light.

He limped between the stands that held the nodding flowers, wondering whence that odd glow came. He could see everything distinctly: the oranges that hung like globes of gold upon the wax-leaved branches, the climbing rosebush that shook down its golden hoard of yellow blossoms, the—

Involuntarily, he flinched from her. So close he could have touched her, she stood by the orange tree, the girl of the portrait. She had not been there when he entered, he could swear to that; indeed, he could have taken oath she had not been there two breaths earlier. The odd green glow that seemed to come from nowhere, yet be everywhere, illuminated her. He could see the yellow rose that nestled in her smooth dark hair, the yellow scarf that bound her slim, slight waist; see her pale face and great lustrous eyes, the bright, smooth tresses of her hair, her full white throat and gleaming ivory shoulders. She stood so close to him that he could see the faint blue vein that traced itself across her temple; her breath should have been on his face, but he could feel no breath. Her

lips were lightly parted and moved as if she sang, but he heard nothing.

She was reaching for an orange from the nearer tree, and he could see the tightening of her bodice on her slender bosom as she raised her white, bare arm.

With a slow motion, like a wave, or like a tree branch swaying in the lightest breath of breeze, she turned toward him, her great eyes luminous, her face so pale, so sad, so utterly entreating. One slender hand came forward, timorously. Like a little child who fears rebuff she held the freshly plucked orange toward him.

A WAVE of coldness almost nauseating in intensity seemed to spread through him, beginning at his stomach-pit and creeping slowly through his veins until it touched and paralyzed his hands and feet and throat. Yet, precisely as a person may be frightened and attracted by a snake at the same time, he felt a sort of wondering fascination. An impulsion to address this strange pale girl whom he had never seen before, yet for whom he felt an inexplicable affinity, swept over him.

It was not in this man whom fate had hurt so cruelly to hurt anybody. He glanced down at the orange she held out, then up again to her sad, pleading eyes. "You"—with a sobbing gasp he gathered his voice by supreme effort—"you want me to take it?"

And suddenly he was no longer afraid. The chilling dread that had encased him like a glaze of ice fell from him, and she was just an ordinary girl—though more than ordinarily attractive—holding out a bitter orange to him.

Now he caught the snatch of song she sang, a haunting, lilting little melody that seemed to flutter like a black moth prisoned in the web of its own tremulous cadences. But the words—if words they were—he could not understand. They were in some foreign tongue, or else the little meaning-

less syllables that people fit to tunes that have no words.

Abruptly she stopped singing and smiled at him. He could see the laughter forming in her eyes, see the heavy lashes flickering, see the dimples showing in her cheeks each side her mouth. Her teeth were very white against the redness of her lips as she spoke: "Thank you. It's good to have someone speak to you."

His puzzled face showed he was fumbling for an answer to this wholly unexpected statement, and she laughed, a tinkling, gurgling laugh that sounded like the purling of clear water over stones. "Yes, I've been so lonely here—"

"You came in earlier?" he broke in, wondering at her presence in his house. "Wasn't it cold—"

The laughter faded from her lips and eyes, leaving her face grave and sorrowful. "Very," she responded earnestly. "And dark."

Here was a poser. He did not want to ask her why she trespassed on his property—probably she was a neighbor used to wandering through the old house, he reflected. She couldn't have known he was coming, but—To cover his embarrassment he began to peel the orange she had given him. Its skin was tough and leathery, and the pulp was hard and rather dry, and its flavor had a bitter tinge to it that he disliked. She watched him intently, almost with elation, as he ate. Another?" she asked as he finished.

"No, thank you, but if you'd care to join me in some more substantial food I'd be delighted. I had a pantryful of things sent yesterday. That is," he added ruefully, "I hope they sent 'em in. I forwarded a set of keys to Blickenstein & Canby at Baltimore, and asked that they put the supplies in. Shall we look?"

As naturally as if she'd known him all her life she fell in step beside him, and he felt a sudden glow of appreciation when

with perfect naturalness she stepped ahead of him, unlatched the passage door and waited for him to pass through. Few young women showed such courtesy and consideration for his lameness.

"Coming?" he called back as she hesitated.

"You want me to—you are inviting me into the house?" she asked, and he was puzzled by the odd smile of elation that lighted up her rather somber features.

"Of course, I invite you. Come in." He held his hand out and she dropped her fingers into it. They were soft as rose leaves, but so cold their touch chilled him.

As she crossed the threshold, her hand still in his, she bowed her head a moment, as in acknowledgment of a favor. "Thank you, again," she told him softly.

THE firm of fancy grocers had not disappointed him. In the *Frigidaire* were eggs and butter and *hors-d'oeuvres*, the pantry shelves were lined with tinned and potted meats and fowl, the wine was neatly cased and waiting on the pantry floor.

They made a merry meal of chicken sandwiches and dry champagne, with little *éclair*s from a glassine package for dessert. Afterwards they sat before the fire and talked, though what they spoke of he had little recollection later. He knew only that she talked charmingly, and that she followed any conversational lead he took as aptly as a skillful dancer matches her step with her partner's, and that when at last she rose to leave he had a feeling of regret.

"But I must go," she told him with a deprecating smile. "Think what the neighbors might say." For some reason this seemed to amuse her, and she laughed until it seemed to him that little bells were ringing in all corners of the room.

"No," she shook her head as he made toward the front door, "I came in that way"—with a nod toward the conservatory—"and I'll leave by it. Haven't you heard

it's bad luck to come in one door and leave by another?"

He smiled tolerantly. These Southerners! So superstitious—and so charming. "I—I hope," he stammered diffidently, "that I may have the pleasure of seeing you again—"

"You will," she broke in with a nod, and though the words were lightly spoken there seemed an underlying emphasis in them.

He watched her thread the path between the flower-boxes, saw her turn the angle of the aisle that led to the old orange trees—then, with the swift finality of a tropic sunset, she was gone.

"Odd," he mused, "I didn't realize there was a door there, but—" His rumination took another turn. The light. He could not remember having turned it on, yet there had been light here when he met her, the same odd greenish glow had lighted the conservatory as she left. Now it was gone. The place was dark and lightless as a mausoleum. He shook his head again and gave the puzzle up. It had been a night of mysteries, but very pleasant ones.

From his bedroom window he looked out across the landscape. The snow had stopped some time before, and the whole countryside was like a giant frosted cake with points of reflected starlight for candles. There was no wind, the soft white flakes lay undisturbed as if—how was it? Almost beneath his window lay the orangery. If anyone had left it tracks must have shown in the snow, but it was virgin-smooth and unmarked, not even a wind-riffle showed on its chaste surface.

HIS sleep was troubled. Several times he roused to fitful wakefulness, prodded by the barb of a dream. Elaine—she'd told him that was her name—seemed haunting him. Once he woke to semi-consciousness and lay with half-closed eyes to fancy that she bent above him in the

cold white moonlight, that she looked into his face with gloating eagerness, and that her lips were drawn away from teeth whose whiteness was more frightening than beautiful. Something seemed wrong with her face, too. It was not exactly changed, but in the moonlight it appeared less attractive, gaunt and hollow-cheeked, as if it were the face of one who had been starved a long, long time, or—he shrank from the comparison—dead, and brought back to a semblance of life by the embalmer's art.

Again he roused to fancy that she crouched upon the floor beside his bed, and that she put her hands up to her face and wept between her fingers. She was sobbing piteously, and he could make out something of the words she moaned between her broken-hearted gasps. "I must not hurt him—he is good and kind and gentle—but the long, long waiting in the dark and cold, the loneliness of it—oh, I will treat him kindly, make him happy; I'll give him love for love and trust for trust!"

Then he was fully awake and the lights were on, and he was lying in the great four-poster bed with no one in the room with him, and no sound in his ears except the muted crowing of a cock in some far-distant farmyard.

THE day passed like an age. He was lonesome, nervous, distrait. He wondered where she lived, who she was, how she came to visit him—how, indeed, she had found entrance to the house, for he had made a slow tour of inspection in the orangery and found that save for the door leading from the little drawing room there was no entrance to the place.

The dark fell early, long green shadows creeping swiftly across the snow, stars bursting out of the sky like a thousand lamps all lighted at the same moment. And with the dusk she came.

He heard the rattle of the greenhouse door, a little tinkling laugh, then, "May

I come in?" And she was there. Her green silk gown had been changed for a dress of brown wool stuff high necked, long sleeved, and tight about the waist and hips. It looked archaic, like the dresses one saw in the pictures of the belles of Civil War days. Still, this was Southern Maryland, perhaps there was a difference between their styles and the modes of New York.

"I'd been hoping you'd come," he told her. "Waited dinner for you, as a matter of—"

"You did?" Delight showed in the long blue eyes that always seemed to hold a hint of secrecy in their depths. "Oh, that was sweet of you. See"—she brought her hand from behind her—"here's another orange. I plucked it for you as I came through—"

"How'd you manage it?" he interrupted, not rudely, but curiously. "I've been all round that orangery, and the only door I found was this one."

Her long eyes seemed to slide away obliquely and lose themselves beneath their silky lashes. "Perhaps I know a way nobody else does," she responded archly. "Some day—maybe—I'll show it to you. Then you and I can come and go at will—" Her words grew softer, trailed away before the sentence was completed. She seemed breathing faster, and a little patch of almost hectic color showed in either cheek. Silently she held the orange out to him.

"No, thank you," he declined. "It seems ungracious to refuse when the family who built this house took such pride in their orangery, but somehow I don't care for the fruit. Ready for dinner?"

If she were disappointed she concealed it admirably, and the candle-lighted dining room was soon achime with her gay laughter.

After dinner she played for him. She had a lovely harpsichord touch, and her voice, though small, was sweet and true.

The songs she sang were old, "Maid of Athens, Ere We Part," "Believe Me of All These Endearing Young Charms," finally "Darby and Joan."

"Always the same, Darby, my own,
Always the same to your old wife Joan,"

she sang softly, then, tears on her lashes, turned to him.

"Tell me," she demanded, "do you believe there's comfort for the miserable in having company?"

He pondered the odd question. "I don't know, if the company were sympathetic and understanding—"

"Like the missionaries who go out to serve the lepers?" she pursued.

"Yes, like them. They go voluntarily; but they must be comforted in serving, just as the knowledge of their sacrifice must help the poor souls whom they serve."

"Could *you* make such a sacrifice?" She was leaning forward, eyes alight, and he could see the movement of her bosom as her breath came faster. "If you felt sorry for a person who had suffered dreadfully, and you knew that you could help him by your sacrifice, could you give up your home and friends to buy peace for that person, even though it might mean dying, as most people understand the term?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid not. You see, there's someone I love very dearly. I couldn't give her up—"

"But if she didn't love you; if she were married to somebody else—"

"Why, that would change matters. If that were so, I don't think I'd mind 'dying, as most people understand the term'."

THE message came next day at sunset, curt with the brevity of a commercial telegram:

Chet dear the answer is yes stop poking round that dismal hole and come back and marry me

Geraldine

His heart almost stopped beating as he read. After all these years Geraldine was going to marry him. They'd live together in this lovely old house; they'd be so happy, for he loved her so—

The scream that broke his blissful thoughts came from the orangery. It was a woman's, but it had the sexlessness, the utter impersonality of a thing of true horror.

It spouted up, a dreadful jet of terrifying sound, then, with an awful gurgling, sank again, as if it had been sucked back down into a drain.

He hobbled to the entrance of the greenhouse. There was no light there, nothing but grim shadows lurking with a sort of vengeful watchfulness to pounce on him. He snapped the light-switch, called softly, "Elaine!"

There was no answer, but the echo of that dreadful scream seemed trembling on the closed-in air the way a bell-tone lingers long after the gong is struck. "Elaine?" he called again, and limped between the flower-boxes toward the orange trees.

She lay full length upon the moist black earth, her little feet crossed one above another, her arms stretched out from the shoulders, palms upward, as though she had been crucified against the ground, and from her throat a stream of bright blood slowly trickled. The blow that felled her must have been a dreadful one, for her neck was nearly severed by it. Her eyes were nearly closed, but not quite, and from her mouth, which hung a little open with a terrible, lax slackness, a little rill of blood had dribbled till it ran across her cheek and down her chin.

How long he bent above her he had no idea. Time cannot be computed when the breathing stops, and it seemed to him he had not breathed for hours as he looked down at the ghastly, mangled form.

Elaine, poor little sweet Elaine! Who had done this foul thing, who could have

—he brought up suddenly, aghast. It was a little thing, but somehow it seemed terrible as the murder. On the dead girl's breast, arranged to form a little pyramid, were three of the small, bitter oranges. A token of some sort, of course. But what? What could they signify, those little bitter oranges piled on a dead girl's bosom?

His mind began to work with cold logic. There was some secret entrance to the place, of course, but there'd been scarcely time for an escape. If the murderer were hiding— He drew the pistol from his pocket, snapped its safety catch off and began a circuit of the greenhouse.

Slowly, limping painfully, he walked up one aisle, down another. Now he was back where he had started. The body—good heavens, there was none!

Where he had seen Elaine lie murdered with the little oranges upon her breast there was nothing. No trace of blood, either.

He knelt and pressed his hands against the earth where she had bled. The ground was moist, but when he brought his fingers up they were unstained. Was this the way that madness started? Had he seen a vision, been the victim of hallucination?

Once more he made the circuit of the orangery, once more he failed to find a trace or clue of murderer or victim. "Take it easy, boy," he told himself. "Don't let it get you down." He had to get a firmer grip upon his nerves. "Let's think this business over." Either the body was there, or it wasn't. If it were there, and he could not see it, he was the victim of delusion. If there had never been a corpse there, he'd been "seeing things." In either case he was in need of medical assistance and advice, and would be better far away.

Stumbling in his haste he hobbled to the garage, set his motor going, circled down the long driveway and turned into the highway heading northward.

In Washington the fan-belt of his engine broke, and as he waited in the service station he picked up a morning paper. "Are You Troubled?" ran the headline of a small advertisement. "Madame Clearwater, Clairvoyant and Noted Spiritualist, can help you. All sittings absolutely private."

Laughing at his gullibility, but with the latent hope the medium might have some explanation for his vision of the night before, he called a taxi and drove to the address given in the notice.

"GOOD MORNING!" The medium came in bustling, her pink and white face wreathed in a smile of professional cheeriness. She was the last person he would have taken to belong to her profession. Plump, florid, in her middle fifties, she was attractively attired in a black crêpe dress with cut-steel accessories and blue trimming. She might have been a matron with grown children about to sally forth to address a women's club, or a church-committee-woman, devoted to guilds and good works. "Don't rise!" she ordered hastily as he lurched upward in his chair. "Just sit there and relax."

"Now"—she fairly beamed on him as she dropped into an easy chair by a small table and drew a crystal ball out of a drawer—"what can I do for you? Is it business, romance, or—" With a little, birdlike nod of her well marcelled head she waited his disclosures.

The change that spread across her broad and rather homely features as he talked was almost frightening. Before he'd finished she was fairly squirming in her chair, the bloom upon her full lips had receded, her rather large, protuberant blue eyes were filled with such a look of dismay that he would not have been surprised if she had suddenly retreated from the room and slammed the door behind her. At last:

"You really saw all this?" she asked him

in a husky whisper. "You swear it on your honor as a gentleman?"

"Of course. But why—"

"Young man"—she had her agitation in control somewhat, but spoke through trembling lips—"you've stood as close to the Beyond as anybody could, yet not go through the door. Do you know the history of Elderwood?"

He shook his head and she drew a deep breath. "You are the first man to address that specter, though many have seen it. You remember how it frightened you at first? That was nature's warning; the instinctive fear of the living for the dead. You should have heeded it."

"But the moment I spoke the fear all seemed to slip away," he returned. "I was frightened at first—"

"Listen to me carefully," she interrupted, "and thank your lucky stars that you're alive to hear me. Judge Amos Pinchin lived at Elderwood in 1864. His daughter Elaine was the belle of all the countryside, all the young Confederate officers were wild about her, but she would give her hand to none of them.

"At last a young Lieutenant Beauchamp came to stay with them. He was a member of a fine old Creole family from New Orleans, and it was said his nurse had taken him as an infant to the voodoo rites the slaves practiced in Congo Square. There were strange stories about him. It was said he could take a rattlesnake in his bare hands and stroke it till it fell asleep. A sergeant of his company swore that he'd seen a Yankee rifleman fire pointblank at his heart, yet Beauchamp was not only not killed, he kept right on and cut the Yankee's head off with his sword. Negroes on plantations where his troop was quartered were terribly afraid of him; he'd speak to them in some outlandish gibberish and they'd come crawling to him like whipped dogs, with a sort of sickly grayness underlying the dark pigment of their faces. He

never went to services held by the chaplains, and he'd been heard to boast that he could put a curse which would endure through all eternity on anyone he hated.

"This dreadful man was quartered at Elderwood during September, '64. He fell in love with Elaine, and though she swore she hated him, they became engaged. You can understand that, can't you? She hated him and feared him, but her fear was greater than her hatred. So—

"When General Early fell back after his defeat at Cedar Creek Union soldiers pressed down to attack Richmond, and Elderwood was requisitioned as a regimental headquarters.

"One night Beauchamp left his command, and in civilian clothes wriggled through the Union lines till he reached Elderwood. Elaine was in the greenhouse picking an orange when he rapped on the glass. She saw him looking through at her—and he must have been a fearful sight with his clothes all rain-soaked, his hair matted on his forehead and that fierce light people found so frightened glaring in his eyes. She screamed, and a Yankee sentry heard her. Beauchamp was captured, and since he was out of uniform, a court-martial sentenced him to be hanged for a spy.

"Perhaps Elaine could have saved him. He had pleaded that his only reason for coming through the lines was to see her, but when the president of the court-martial asked her if she loved him she took one look at him and screamed out that she hated him.

"He asked as a special favor to be allowed to say good-by to her in the orangery. They put a sentinel at the door, and somehow Beauchamp overpowered him and snatched his saber from its sheath. A squad came running at the guard's alarm. That's how we have the tragedy so well authenticated, for these men saw and heard all that transpired. Beauchamp

had cut the girl's head nearly off with a single blow of the saber, and as the men arrived he was arranging her so that she lay cross-formed on the ground, with three oranges piled on her breast. He was cursing her as she lay dying.

"He cursed her with unquiet rest in the grave; forbid her to find rest or peace till she could find someone who would speak to her, notwithstanding a living man's fear of the dead, and would eat three bitter oranges from her hand. She must come singing when she appears, yet no one may hear her voice until he's spoken to her, and no one may hear the words of her song until he asks them. Until she's been invited by a living person to leave it, she must remain forever in the greenhouse where she died—"

"But why was I in peril?" Gunnarson demanded. "She didn't seem—"

The medium interrupted with a bleak smile. "You didn't let me finish. She can find rest in the grave if someone eats the oranges she gives him—but only if a person asks to hear the words of her song can she find entry into Paradise. And"—she shook her finger at him, as a teacher might admonish a dull pupil—"whoever hears the words of her song goes with her, whether it be to Paradise or torment."

"But how was it I heard her scream and saw her lying dead?" he pursued.

"Last night was the anniversary of her murder. She has to re-enact it every year just after sunset. Had you waited an hour or two she would have come to you, just as she always had."

As he rose she admonished: "Don't ever go into that dreadful house again, young man. She might inveigle you into asking her to sing that wordless song, then"—she threw her hands up in a gesture of complete finality—"please be advised by me. I know about these things."

Gunnarson paused in mid-step almost in mid-breath, upon the threshold of the

library. Geraldine was in there, he knew, but until he heard the man's voice he had not known anyone was with her. She was sitting on a hassock by the fire, and her wine-red dinner dress splashed out around her on the dark-blue carpet, blending with the ever-shifting highlights from the blazing logs. Its brilliance emphasized the ivory of her arms and shoulders and the bright, metallic luster of her gleaming hair. Clive Van Ness was sitting by her. One of her hands was in his, the other rested on his arm possessively. As Chester halted at the door he heard the last words of a sentence:

"—but you don't love him, do you, Gerry?"

"Love him?" Her slow words were heavy with contempt. "I *loathe* the filthy cripple, Clive, but what are we to do? You're poor as any mouse that ever went to church; so'm I. I've been that way all my life, but I'm through with all that now. The wealthy Mrs. Gunnarson is going places, my dear. Be a good lad, and she might let you tag along. Divorce is easy these days, and I'll get a cash settlement in lieu of alimony—" Her laugh was brittle, hard as the tinkle of a shattered glass.

Gunnarson drew back a half step, flinching as from a blow. It was a little thing, that light, cruel laugh, but it had broken his heart in a thousand pieces, and torn the quivering fragments out by the roots. Everything he'd ever known or prized or hoped for lay shattered into dust about his malformed feet, and like a dreadful soundless cry five words re-echoed through the aching hollow where his heart had been: "I loathe the filthy cripple." His footsteps deadened by the thick carpet he turned and crept out of the house, like a wounded animal that seeks a place to die in solitude.

All night he limped and hobbled back and forth across his room, contending with the dreadful emptiness that had engulfed

his life. "Geraldine—Geraldine!" his pulses seemed to sound the rhythm of her name in his ears, then, like a peal of ghostly laughter roaring from the vastness of the winter sky, an answer beat upon him bludgeoned him, crushed him—"Filthy cripple—filthy cripple—I loathe the filthy cripple!"

He would put her out of his life, forget her, never think of her or see her again. "Never see her?" He chuckled with a rasping bitterness at the absurdity. Dear God, he'd see her everywhere, in shop windows, in subways, crossing streets, in passing cars! Reminders of her would come to him every time he heard the quick tap-tap of a girl's high heels, each time he caught the powder-sweet smell of an evening wrap. He'd hear her voice in every note of music, every bird's song; he'd hear the mellow ripple of her laughter—ha, her laughter—that was it! She'd laughed when she told Clive Van Ness, "I loathe the filthy cripple!"

The lavender light of early morning was just showing in the east above Jamaica Bay when he unlatched the door, crept falteringly to the garage, and set his car in motion. He had not stopped for coat or hat. No matter. What were cold or heat to him? Men shivered with the cold, or scorched with heat, and so did beasts, but he was neither beast nor man. What was it she had called him? Oh, yes, "filthy cripple."

His tires drummed against the frost-bound paving of Manhattan Bridge, lisped and swished against the icy cobbles of Canal Street, whirled and thrummed against the smooth floor of the Holland Tunnel.

He was out of Jersey City now, heading toward the elevated highway. As the lode-stone draws the iron Elderwood was drawing him. He was heading southward; southward into Maryland, to Elaine.

Elderwood was silhouetted against the

half-light of gathering dusk as he wheeled through the tall stone gateway. The after-glow of the sunset showed angrily behind long streaks of black clouds, as though a giant hand had been dipped in an ink-pot and drawn across the reddened sky with outspread fingers. The columns of the porch were tall pale bars that shut the prisoned dark behind them.

He was feverish with the onset of the cold he'd caught from the exposure of his headlong coatless flight, but the fever of his haste was fiercer than the febrile racing of his blood as he flung himself out of the car and clambered up the white steps of the portico.

The house was very still and quiet as he threw the front door open, it echoed small sounds hollowly, like an empty auditorium. Somehow, it seemed to wait in breathless silence, as an audience may wait the climax of a play in tense expectancy.

"Elaine!" he called as he drew back the glass doors of the orangery. "Elaine!"

Only dusk-light, hardly more transparent than a whorl of fog, was in the place. Gloom blurred the outlines of the flower-boxes, the orange trees were scarcely visible.

"Elaine!" he called again softly. "I'm here—I've come back!"

A little glow of pale, cool light, no larger than a firefly's lantern, brightened at the far end of the orangery. It spread slowly, stealing through the shadows, seeming to absorb them rather than dispell their gloom. It brightened steadily, until he saw the nodding flowers in the boxes plainly, even to the tiny veins that laced their leaves.

Then she was there. Her face seemed forming from the drooping white buds of the orange blossoms. The slim pale fingers of her hands seemed paler than the flowers on the branches, the dark green of her sleeveless low-cut silken dress seemed almost a continuation of the waxen leaves.

She came toward him slowly, with a sort of rippling, flowing motion, both her hands outstretched. And both his hands reached out to her.

Her fingers tightened on his as she smiled at him. It was as if a candle had been lit behind the sombre velvet of her eyes. Her lips became a soft, alluring curve. "My dear," she whispered in a throaty, husky voice, "I knew you would come back to me!" Then she bent and kissed him, slowly, with her hands against his cheeks, as though she drank a long-delayed draught and was savoring each drop of it.

He reeled back from the aching sweetness of her kiss. Her hands were still upon his cheeks, her face was very close to his, her eyes were luminous and dewy with the

tears of pent-up yearning, shining with a rich, ripe look of promise.

"Sing to me," he besought. "I want to hear the words of your song!"

She threw her head back and sang smiling.

Her voice was soft as water gently rippling in a moonlit stream, its cadences were gently seductive, with secret rhythms astir beneath them. He heard the words and caught his breath in a quick gasp, then let it slowly out.

Nor did he ever draw it in again. Hand in hand, with her song ringing down the timeless corridors of immortality, they stepped into that strange land which is neither heaven, earth nor hell, where breathing is unnecessary, and words are fitted to all wordless songs.