

THE CELLAR

By PAUL L. ANDERSON

TOM HARKNESS and I were chums in prep school and college, but as so often happens in such cases we drifted rather apart after graduation; he remaining in New York to study medicine, while I went abroad to take up art. For some time we kept up a more or less desultory correspondence, which, however, gradually languished—"faded out," as they say in the movies—for we had no real, no fundamental interests in common, and I was not even deeply stirred when he wrote me of his approaching marriage; I merely set down his enthusiasm as the characteristic raptures of "a young man married," wrote him a suitably congratulatory letter, and dismissed the whole affair.

At length, after four years in Paris and one in Rome, I returned to New

York, to find that Harkness, who had specialized in psychology, was already beginning to make a name for himself as an alienist, and had, for so young a man, an excellent consulting practice. He was especially interested in various investigations into the power of suggestion, had done a good deal of experimenting along these lines, and was always ready to talk about his work, so, having looked him up and got into the way of dropping in to see him at odd times, I listened to a number of very interesting monologues on the subject. One effect of these talks, though, was that I found myself losing my sentimental affection for my old friend, for Harkness had developed into a type which is particularly distasteful to me personally—cold-blooded, unemotional scientific investigator, to whom people

dividuals—which enables a man to impose his will on another, to control another's actions by a dominating personality. Not that Harkness was aggressive; for one so unemotional he was astonishingly gentle and considerate, but it was simply that when with him I felt a sense of helplessness—quite unallied, however, to fear—similar to that which one feels in the presence of any overwhelming power, a thunderstorm, for



are merely cases, specimens on which to work or to experiment. Further than this, I was always a little uncomfortable in his presence, for he possessed to a remarkable degree that curious psychic power—common to all leaders of men and found in the most unexpected in-

example, I repeat, there was no element of fear connected with this sensation; I knew he would not harm me, and my discomfort had its genesis solely in the conviction that did he choose to tell me to do anything I would be dominated by his unusual psychic strength and would be unable to refuse.

ALICE HARKNESS, though, was totally different from her husband. Meeting her for the first time, I realized that Tom had not exaggerated her attractiveness—he had rather under-stated the case. I shall not attempt any description of the girl; as well try to describe the west wind, or a June rose. It would mean nothing if I should say that she was under medium height and slim, but well proportioned, and that she had

wavy brown hair and gray eyes; there are thousands of girls whom such a description would fit, and the thing which made Alice Harkness stand out from all others was the very thing it is impossible to put into words—personal charm. I have never met anyone else, either man or woman, who possessed to so great an extent the power of making others fond of her, nor was she attractive only to men; women liked her as well, and she took as much pleasure in their company as in that of her masculine admirers, of whom there were apt to be several about the house of an evening. There was nothing of the coquette about her; she was fond of outdoor sports, brimful of vitality, and she liked people not because they were men or women, but because they were, precisely, people. Also, she owned that greatest of all Heaven-sent gifts, the temperament that is always happy—delighted with any sort of occupation, and always having a good time.

I had, of course, met many women, but never one who had interested me particularly—actually, I had reached the age of twenty-six without the faintest suggestion of a love-affair—but it was not many months before I found myself genuinely and deeply in love with the wife of my old-time friend, and it seemed to me that I could observe signs that she liked me better than any other of the men she knew. It must be admitted that Dr. Harkness was not a thoroughly satisfactory husband for a vivacious young girl; he was a very able man and a brilliant conversationist, but he was utterly absorbed in his work and gave his wife only casual attention, so during the four years of their married life the two had to some extent grown away from each other, especially since there were no children to act as a bond.

Still, one cannot honorably make love to a married woman, even though she and her husband do not get along well. Artists have a bad reputation in such matters, but it is not really deserved; there is as large a proportion of straightforward individuals among us as in any other profession, and it is the few scamps who have given us a bad name. Like anyone, I was reluctant to say good-bye to the woman I loved, and debated the matter with myself for some time in the effort to find another solution, finally coming to the only possible conclusion—that I must go away. I made my preparations to return to Paris, and went up to the Harkness house the day before sailing, to take leave. Tom was out at a consultation, so I saw only Alice, but she knew very well the reason for my

going, though nothing was said of that and the conversation was most matter-of-fact—regrets, promises to write, hopes for good fortune, and so on. Longer silences than usual, perhaps; we both found it a little difficult to talk.

At last I moved toward the door and Alice rose to shake hands. As her hand touched mine a shiver ran through me, my head swam, a power stronger than my will took command of me, and I stepped close and laid my arm about her shoulders. She trembled, drew back, whispered:

"No, no, Peter! We mustn't! We mustn't!" and as I gathered strength to drop my arm and go she trembled again, drew her breath sharply, looked away from me, shivered, stepped nearer, caught my hand to her bosom, and with a sob laid her head on my shoulder. A faint perfume rose in my nostrils and I pressed her to me, laying my cheek against the soft waves of her hair. I patted her shoulder, murmuring pet names and clasping her tighter—and the door opened and Tom walked in.

HE STOPPED short on seeing us and eyed us a moment before passing on to the fireplace, where a log fire was blazing. Of course Alice and I moved apart when he entered, but we said nothing—there was nothing to say. Tom Harkness had been known in college for his sardonic speech, nor had this tendency lessened in the years he had practiced medicine, and I looked for some bitter and scathing comment, but none came. For perhaps half a minute we three stood silent, when Tom said gently:

"Sit down a minute, Peter; you too, Alice." We found chairs, but Tom stood leaning against the mantel. He lit a cigarette and turned to us again.

"I hardly expected this," he began, evenly. "Of course I've known for some time that you two were in love with each other. Having specialized in psychology I see indications that others would miss, but I confess this is a bit of a surprise to me; I didn't think it had gone quite so far."

"Tom," I answered, "you weren't mistaken; it hadn't gone this far. This is as much of a surprise to me as to you, and I think it is to Alice, also. I came up today to say good-bye; I'm sailing for Paris tomorrow, and—and—well, things rather got away from us."

Tom looked from me to Alice and back to me again, then nodded reflectively.

"I guess you're right, Peter," he said. "That explains matters. I hated to think I was that far off in my estimate of you two—I should have foreseen what

would happen, though. Might happen to anyone."

"Well then, Tom, I reckon I'll trot along. It's all right, is it?"

"Of course it's all right, old man—I'm fairly well acquainted with you both! But don't be in a hurry; I have several things to say yet." He threw his cigarette into the fire, thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and settled himself squarely in front of us, then went on:

"I take it you two are really in love with each other? This isn't merely a fancy? You really feel you can't be happy apart? Life a dreary waste, and all that?"

"That's about the size of it, Tom. Damn it all, man, I'm not in the habit of kissing ladies promiscuously!"

"Nor is Alice in the habit of being promiscuously kissed. Quite so! Well, now, I've spent considerable time these past few months thinking this over, and I reckon the best scheme is for you to take her."

"Make 'im take 'er an' keep 'er; that's 'Ell for 'em both?" Thank you, no!"

"Don't be a fool, Peter! I mean honorably, of course. Do you suppose for a minute I'd let you have her on any other terms? But there's no sense in making two people thoroughly miserable in order to afford one a doubtful pleasure that's more than half misery at best—"

"Thank you, Tom!" Alice interrupted.

"Don't be silly, Alice. You know what I mean well enough, and you know how I feel toward you. However—well, it's largely my fault, you know, so the best thing is for you to get a divorce and marry Peter; I shan't interfere—will you let me come see you once in a while?"

"Oh, Tom!" cried Alice, and I burst out:

"Tom, you certainly are a sure-enough man-sized man!"

"There, there!" he answered. "Spare me your thanks! This isn't heroism at all—merely plain, ordinary common-sense. 'Greatest good for the greatest number,' and all that. It looks big to you, having it sprung on you all of a sudden, this way, but you forget I've had time to think it over. Get along with you, Peter, and cancel your steamer reservation. Come around tomorrow and we'll talk over arrangements. Clear out now; I'm going to take an evening off and take Alice to hear *Die Meistersinger*; sorry we haven't a seat for you—still, you'll have plenty of chance to take her to concerts and operas and such."

I don't expect she'll hear much of the music tonight though—something else to think about, you know! Get along now; we've got to dress and eat dinner. 'Bye!'

BRIEFLY, then, Alice got her divorce, and she and I, after waiting a decent interval, were married, very quietly, the May after the decree was granted. I was working on a portrait commission at the time, and could not leave the city at once, so our wedding-trip was postponed until the following October, when we planned to motor through the Berkshires, up through Great Barrington, Pittsfield, North Adams, and so over the Mohawk Trail, for that country is wonderfully beautiful in autumn, and Alice had never seen it. Tom came to call several times at our studio apartment in West Twelfth street, and we talked over the route of our trip with him, he suggesting one or two slight changes, by way of improvement. He was not a frequent visitor, though there was no definite break; still we all three felt it hardly the thing for a divorced husband to be on too good terms with his former wife, and besides, his practice kept him busy most of the time. We were always glad to see him—quite apart from a more or less natural feeling of gratitude—for he was, when he chose, an excellent companion, but—well, there was just that little sense of constraint; a feeling that it wasn't just the thing.

So the summer passed, and on the second day of October Alice and I started on the deferred honeymoon, motoring up through Brewster, Pawling and Millerton, and stopping the first night at Lakeville. The next day was a gorgeous Indian Summer day, and we decided to turn off from our chosen route to run over and see some friends in Norfolk, so instead of swinging north at Canaan we went straight on through East Canaan, stopping at times for me to make sketches and color notes, with the result that we reached Norfolk only about noon. We had lunch at the Norfolk Inn, spent some hours with our friends, and started back, allowing time enough to reach Great Barrington for dinner. However, we were overtaken by a terrific thunderstorm—one of the sudden mountain storms so common in that region, though a bit unusual so late in the year—which delayed us so that I realized, soon after leaving Canaan the second time, that we would not reach Great Barrington until late and debated with myself whether it would not be better to turn back for the night rather than push on. I had the chains on and

was driving carefully, for the road was very slippery, but I had about decided to turn around when a figure appeared in the glare of the headlights, standing in the middle of the road and waving its arms frantically—"like a drunken windmill," Alice remarked—and I slowed down. As the car slipped and slithered to a stop I saw the stranger to be a tall, bearded man of middle age, dressed in blue overalls and jumper, wearing a big straw hat, and having the bowed shoulders and knotted hands of a farmer. He was evidently in a state of great excitement—not altogether explained by the obvious fact that he was drenched to the skin with rain—and rushing up he spoke in the nasal tones of the rural New Englander.

"Say, Mister!" he said. "Won't you please come help me? My wife's gone an' fell down the cellar steps an' broke her leg, an' I ain't got nobody to help me git her up. There ain't no neighbors nearer n' half a mile, an' she's layin' there sufferin' awful! If you'll jist help me git her up-stairs, an' then stop in Sheffiel' as you go by an' send a docker back, I'll be right obliged. You kin drive right up the lane here, an' I'll ride on the step o' your machine."

I WAS somewhat disgusted at being held up this way, so late, but there was no refusing such an appeal, and, turning in at the gate indicated, I drove perhaps a quarter of a mile along a muddy, deeply-rutted lane, at length reaching the house. As we approached the building I saw by the light of the lamps that it was a dilapidated, ramshackle affair, badly in need of paint, the door-yard grown up with weeds, and a general air of slackness about the place. At one side of the house a sand-screen with a pile of pebbles at the foot seemed to indicate that some cement work had recently been done on the premises, but no sign of the result was visible. Still, such run-down houses are too frequent in that region to call for any special attention, and we climbed out of the car and went in, Alice remarking:

"I'll go along; perhaps I can help the poor woman while you go for the doctor."

"Thank ye, Ma'am; I take that right kindly of you," said the farmer, and taking a lamp from the table he added: "Step this way."

He led us out through the kitchen, where I noted, in a swift glance—it is my business to observe quickly—a cook-stove, an iron sink and pump, several battered chairs, and a table, the latter piled with a confusion of unwashed dishes. The floor was covered with a

frayed oil-cloth, the plastered walls needed paint, and in one place a patch of plaster had fallen away, leaving the bare lath exposed. This scene photographed itself automatically on my mind, even as our guide opened the cellar door and stepped aside for us to descend. Alice gathered her skirts close about her and started down, I following, but hardly had I reached the second step before I felt—I did not know, I *felt*—that something was wrong. I started to turn, but in that instant the light disappeared, the door was slammed with a thunderous crash, and even as I threw myself against it the bolt shot home. Again and again I hurled my full weight against the door, but to no effect, and I heard a faint laugh from the other side. Below me, in the dark, Alice spoke:

"What's the matter, Peter?"

"Matter? Why, this infernal scoundrel has locked us down cellar, that's what's the matter!"

"But his wife?"

"Wife! There's no wife! It's all a fake! He's tricked us into the cellar and locked us here! By thunder, I'll make it hot for him when I get out! What I'll do to him'll make him think Hell's a refrigerator!"

"But what would he do a thing like that for?"

"Most likely to rob us—hold us for ransom, maybe. But I swear I never heard of a hold-up man in this part of the country before."

"But isn't there any way we can get out? Can't you shoot the lock off the door with your pistol?"

"I left it in the car! What a fool I am! But I never suspected anything like this!" Again I surged against the door, and grasping the knob shook it violently. Raising my voice I shouted:

"Open this door at once! Do you hear?" But no answer came save once more the faint, far-off laugh. I realized that here was something different from the usual farm-house door and called to Alice:

"Lend me your spirit-lamp a minute, Honey," and she handed it up. I turned it on and looked the door over, and my heart sank, for door and cellar-way were lined with steel, and I knew this for no chance hold-up, but a carefully planned trap.

"Let's look the place over and see if there isn't some other way out," I said, and going carefully down to the foot of the steps we examined our prison thoroughly by the light of the little flash-lamp. The cellar proved to be about thirty feet square, with floor and walls of new concrete, and was empty

of any furniture—nothing but the bare floor and walls save that in the center there rose a stone chimney some eight feet square, the rough field stones being laid in Portland cement. There were no windows, nor was there any door other than the one by which we had entered, and the ceiling, which was about eight feet high, was apparently of oak beams, laid side by side. That was all; no way of escape, no way of communicating with the outside world, no food, no water, no light—nothing. It was a perfect trap; once in, we were at the mercy of our jailer; there we would stay until he saw fit to release us. Alice looked at me and I at her, and she whimpered a little, then caught herself and, smiling bravely, said:

"Peter, I'm frightened. Just a little, I will admit."

"Don't worry, Honey; it's just a scheme to rob us, and maybe I can rush him or trick him when he brings us food. Anyway, he won't do any worse than take our money; he wouldn't dare."

"Don't think it, my friend!" said a voice behind us, and we both jumped. The voice laughed, then said:

"Right behind you," and as we swept the light of the flash-lamp around it spoke again:

"No, I'm not a ghost! Quite the contrary! I'm talking to you through a speaking-tube. Look between the stones of the chimney and you'll see a little hole there. I had the tube put in when I built this little man-trap, so I could converse with my prisoners."

"Damn you!" I cried. "You let us out, or it'll be the worse for you!"

The voice laughed again.

"My dear chap, I fear you haven't recognized me yet! My disguise must have been pretty good! Still, allowance must be made for the fact that it was dark and that you weren't expecting me; that helped, of course. But think! Whose voice does mine remind you of? Think hard—whose? 'Journeys end in lovers' meetings'! Whose?"

A moment's silence—it flashed upon us—Alice bent toward me and seized my arm.

"It's Tom!" she whispered. "Tom Harkness!"

"Yes, my dear," said the voice, mockingly. "You're quite right—it's Tom. Strange, how we meet again, isn't it? Really, Peter, I took you in nicely, didn't I? No, I don't mean just now; I mean the whole thing. Did you honestly think I'd let you get away with my wife so easily? How little you understand the sterling integrity of my character!"

"But, Tom, what do you want me to do? How long are you going to keep us here? And what's it all for, anyway?" I was puzzled.

"Why, my dear fellow, I don't want you to do anything! There's nothing you *can* do! What for? Well, you'll find out, presently. And how long? Why, how can I tell how long you'll stay there? I'm not going to *keep* you there—I'm just going away and *leave* you there!"

I FELT Alice shudder and she leaned against me—she swayed and I put my arm around her.

"But look here, Tom," she said. "You don't mean—leave us to—to die here!"

"Yes, my dear," answered the mocking voice. "I do mean just exactly that!"

"But you can't do that!"

"No? Why not?"

"Why, we'll be traced—you'll be caught!"

"Caught? Listen, my dear—you too, Peter. I've been planning this little affair for months—ever since I found you two turtle-doves loving each other so charmingly, that memorable afternoon. There's no house within a mile of this, and this is five hundred yards from the road. Shout all you want to—no one can hear you. Dig all you want to—there's three feet of concrete under and around you and two feet of solid seasoned oak over your heads. Anyway, even if anyone should by any possibility hear you, you're in a highly superstitious neighborhood, and this is known as a haunted house! I bought it partly for that reason; I gave out that I was going to remodel it—and sure enough I did! Oh, no, I wasn't absurd enough to give my own name! And who'll trace you? And suppose they should trace you, what chance is there of finding you? And how long do you think you'll last, without food—or water? No, you're done! This is the end of your road—the end of your pretty dreams!"

"You infernal murderer!" I burst out. Again Harkness laughed. I went on:

"You must be mad, to plan any such devilish performance as that—leave us here—in the dark!"

"Why, Peter, do you hesitate to eliminate a mosquito that bothers you? Mad? Oh, no, I'm not mad! Not mad at all!" His voice rose to a scream. "Not mad, I tell you! No, I'm not mad!" Again he laughed, and I felt Alice shudder. When he spoke again he was quieter.

"Well, Peter—and Alice—I must leave you now. I trust you may enjoy

each other's society for the next few days—not longer. No, I promise you, not longer—without water! Still, you won't be alone. You'll have company—oh, yes, company!"

Alice broke in, her voice soft and gentle.

"Tom!"

"Yes, my dear? What is it? Something I can do for you? Some last words to take down—some message to send?"

"Tom—for God's sake!"

Harkness laughed again, sardonically.

"For God's sake? Why, Alice, you astonish me! I thought you knew my views in the matter of these superstitions, these absurd notions of superhuman powers! No, my dear, 'For God's sake' means nothing—nothing at all—to me! If that's all, I'll be leaving you. So kind of you to let me take your car!"

"Tom!" I broke in. "If God means nothing to you, is honor no more than a word? Can you do this thing—torture a helpless woman?"

"Honor?" mocked Harkness. "'Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday'! Good-bye—forever!"

ENRAGED, infuriated at his callousness, his devilish cruelty, I rushed up the stairs and shook the door furiously, hurled myself frantically against it again and again—useless! And I returned to the girl who sat on the cold floor, her face in her hands, sobbing. Presently Harkness spoke once more.

"Quite convinced, Peter? I assure you the door will withstand your most furious assaults! I have tested it thoroughly—a much stronger man than yourself, my dear fellow! Tremendous endurance he had, too—quite remarkable vitality! However, you're welcome to try all you like—but I would advise against it; violent exercise makes one perspire, and one grows thirsty. Good-bye. Good-bye, Alice. Too bad you couldn't have been faithful to me!"

Faintly we heard his footsteps as he moved about the house, the front door slammed—silence!

Alice flung herself into my arms and clung to me.

"Peter!" she said. "It's incredible! It can't be true! We must be dreaming it!"

"I'm afraid it's true, Honey! Maybe, though, he's just trying to frighten us. One of his blasted psychological experiments, perhaps."

"Oh, Peter, that must be it! He'll come back and let us out! He's just playing a joke on us!"

"That's probably it, Honey. He'll most likely just keep us here over night,

and come in the morning and let us out. Let's just sit down here and take it easy." But in my heart I knew I was not telling the truth—I knew there was no hope—but it would not do to let Alice know!

We talked for a time, then lay down on the cold, hard floor, Alice's head pillow'd on my shoulder, and presently I knew by her breathing that she was asleep, exhausted by her emotions. Long I lay peering into the utter, impenetrable dark, cursing to myself the fiend who could so torture a woman—the woman who had lain in his arms, the woman he had once loved—till at length I, too, lost consciousness.

How long I may have slept, I cannot say, but after a time I woke, chilled and aching. I tried to lie still, but my shoulder pained from the weight of Alice's head, and I must have stirred, for the girl woke with a start and flung her arms around me.

"Oh, Peter! Peter!" she cried. "Oh, I had such a terrible dream! I dreamt we were—oh, Peter, make me wake up! Oh, Peter—oh, God, it wasn't a dream!" and she burst into terrified sobs, trembling, shuddering, from head to foot.

I soothed her as best I could, and presently she grew quiet, and lay still in my arms for a long time—perhaps an hour. Then she spoke again.

"Peter, does it hurt very much to starve?"

"No, Honey," I answered. "Why?"

"I have a large ache in my stomach, and I thought—"

"Yes, Dear, it's hunger; I have it, too. But it won't get any worse, and it won't last long; it just lasts a little while, and then there isn't any more pain—just progressive weakening; you just get weaker until—the end. It's really the most comfortable way; not bad at all."

"Peter, I'm thirsty, too."

"Yes, Honey; that's the worst part of it. We may be rather uncomfortable, if Tom doesn't let us out pretty soon."

"Do you honestly think he will?"

"Yes, I honestly do." But she caught a false note in my voice, for she cried instantly:

"Peter! You're not telling me the truth! Why, Sweetheart, you don't think I'm afraid to go, do you? Not when I know what's coming!" And I could not answer.

By and by she spoke again:

"Listen, Peter! The ceiling of this place is wood, and you have a knife in your pocket. Don't you believe you could cut a hole and let us out?"

Two feet of seasoned oak, and a pocket-knife! However, it would encourage her to have me try, and I said:

"Well, I'll have a shot at it, anyway; maybe we can make a go of it."

SO I searched and found a place where I could climb the rough stones of the chimney and reach the ceiling, and, holding by one hand, attacked the beams. Luckily the knife was sharp and of good steel, but it went slowly, oh, so slowly! A chip at a time—my hands were blistered, my arms ached from the strained position, and I knew well that long before I had got through we would have succumbed to thirst, the thirst that was already beginning to torment me. Still, to be doing something was a help, to be making an effort, not to be giving up—snap! The blade broke under my hand. I dropped to the floor to rest, and by and by took up the work again with the other blade of the knife, Alice holding the flash-lamp for me to see. At length, utterly exhausted, I gave over and examined what I had done—a scratch! A foot long, half an inch wide, quarter of an inch deep! The task was hopeless. I lay down on the floor and Alice sat beside me.

And now for the first I began to feel the terror of the dark. It seemed an actual, a material thing, a Presence, weighing me down, pressing on me, holding me helpless in its grip. And Alice felt it too, for she turned on the light. Its little ray seemed instantly to lift a weight off my chest—I could bear anything did it only come in the light! But in a few moments she turned it off, saying:

"We must save it to work by." And again the weight settled on me—and on her as well; I could hear her panting, gasping, as if for breath in a stifling air. So we lay in the dark and the silence—not a ray of light, not a sound but our labored breathing, and slowly, gradually, but inevitably—relentless, overwhelming—the horror grew—heavier, closer, more terrible—something touched my foot, and my nerves gave way—I jumped—it ran across our feet, and Alice screamed aloud. Again and again she screamed and the walls gave back the sound, multiplied, horrible, heartrending. I groped for the light and our hands met—she tore her hand away, screaming louder and louder—I flashed on the light and she flung her arms around my neck, her screams died to a moan, and at length she asked:

"Oh, Peter, what was it?" I swept the light about the cellar, we saw a great gray rat, and Alice shuddered, then grew quieter, and said:

"Heaven knows a rat is bad enough, but when I didn't know what it was—Peter, forgive me for being such a fool!"

"It's all right, Honey; your nerves are a little upset, that's all. The beastly thing made me jump, too."

"Look here, Peter," she cried, excitedly, "do you suppose it came in from outside? Maybe we can find where, and have that much start on getting out! Let's look!" So, taking the flash-lamp, we went carefully over the cellar again, but found no least crevice or cranny that led to the outer air, save only the small hole of the speaking-tube—and Harkness had carefully stuffed the upper end of the tube before he left—to take away our smallest chance of being heard!

So we gave over the futile search and sat down, shoulder to shoulder, Alice's hand in mine. By and by she said, in a half-whisper:

"Peter!"

"Yes, Dear?"

"Peter, if that rat didn't come in from outside, Tom must have put him here—to make it worse for us!"

"I guess you're right," I answered. "That's what he meant by company."

"Ugh!" she whispered. "Horrible—Torquemada! Peter, the poor thing is as badly off as we are!"

"Just about." Silence for a few minutes, and then:

"Peter?"

"Yes, Honey."

"Do you suppose—after we're gone—the rat will—he will—?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Oh, horrible! Horrible! Peter, I don't so much mind dying—everyone has to die some time, and it's not so bad, with you—only I wish you didn't have to—but to be eaten—by a rat! don't you suppose we could catch him?"

"We can try, at all events."

THEN began a mad hunt, the maddest scene ever enacted since the world began, for round and round the cellar we two, doomed man and woman, hunted the loathsome beast, by the feeble light of the little lamp. Round and round, back and forth, tiptoeing, racing madly, heading him off, chasing furiously, till at length we gave over, exhausted—he was too agile—we could not catch him—and we sank on the floor to rest. Alice burst into hysterical laughter, more horrible than her screams. She laughed and sobbed and rocked back and forth, laughed again and sobbed and choked on her laughter. It was long before I could quiet her, but at length she fell asleep in my arms—and I, too, slept.

Again we woke to utter dark and silence. We may have slept for minutes
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or for hours—in the dark there is no time! Alice was the first to speak.

“Peter,” she said. “I’m terribly thirsty; my lips are dry and parched and my tongue feels swollen.”

Silently I kissed her, and she whispered:

“You too, Peter? Oh, my dear, forgive me for complaining. Forgive me! Are you going to work any more today?”

“Yes, if you like,” and I started to rise, but she held me.

“No, it’s no use. You couldn’t make it. Darling, will you forgive me for getting you into this?”

“Getting me into it? What do you mean? You didn’t get us into it, any more than I did—Tom was too clever for us, that’s all.”

“No, Peter, I mean in the first place. For making you love me—I shouldn’t have let you—when I was married.”

I clasped her tight.

“Sweetheart, no man could help loving you! You’re not to blame—no one’s to blame. The fault is mine—I should have gone away.”

She crept closer, put her head on my shoulder, and sobbed.

So utter black despair took us, so we gave over all hope, and lay quiet. Hour after eternal hour dragged its slow length along—unmarked—uncounted—day or night, we could not know. We lay there, the leaden dark and the silence weighing on us, pressing us down, loading our souls—from time to time Alice or I stirred slightly, shifting to an easier position, but that was all. Time passed, cramped and cold we lay, speaking at times, but for the most part suffering, each striving to spare the other,

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Silently I bent and kissed her, and she clung to me, her arms about my neck, and I kissed her again and again, and stroked her hair.

"Sweetheart," she whispered, "do something for me? Don't turn the light on again. People who die—of thirst—aren't pleasant—to look at—they say. And I'd—like—you—to remember me—as—I used—to be. Promise—Honey?"

For answer I lifted the lamp and broke the glass against the floor. She heard the crackle and understood. I felt her arms tighten about my neck—such a weak little clasp!—and she whispered:

"Thank—you—Dear!"

And once more the dark and the silence settled over us, and once more the Horror closed down.

PRESENTLY she grew delirious, and I was sick to the very depths of my soul—her raving, struggles, shrieks, blasphemies—worse than all, her mad croaking laughter—at last she was too weak to struggle, and lay quiet.

Side by side we lay, and the endless round of the dragging hours rolled over us as we waited the inevitable end. Alice was helpless, and I in little better case. Weak with hunger, tortured by the agonies of thirst, I felt my dry tongue, rough and harsh, swelling in my mouth, pressing against my teeth, forcing my mouth open. Alice began to moan softly. I clasped her hand, and the answering pressure told me that she was still conscious—could still suffer. Once more I cursed the fiend who so tortured her—I was growing light-headed—I saw visions of brooks, of lakes, of green and grassy meadows—water, water! And ever that low moaning at my side!

I thought of rain—I heard it pattering on the roof—no; delirium!—of the storm through which we had driven—my mind reeled to the pump I had seen in the kitchen above us—water, water! And ever that horrible moan brought me back to our prison—our tomb!

I laid my hand on Alice's head, and felt it rocking from side to side—I passed my hand gently, caressingly, over her face—and shuddered—the cracked lips were drawn back from the teeth and I touched the harsh, swollen tongue protruding from her mouth! I clasped her hand, but no answering pressure came. Her moaning had died to a faint whimper, heartrending in its utter helplessness. Whimper—whimper—whimper! It beat on my brain like the roar of the surf on rocky shores—it grew and swelled and reverberated in my ears—I tried to scream,

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till after long hours—days, perhaps—of torture, Alice spoke, her voice thick and blurred, no more than a whisper.

"Peter?"

"Yes?" and my own voice sounded strange and far-off in my ears.

"Dear, I don't believe I'll be conscious much longer—will you kiss me once more before I go—my love?"

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but no sound came save only a faint
moan—like that I had heard before!

Then there came to my mind something an old plainsman had once told me; that dying of thirst was not like dying of hunger; that when one passed from starvation there came a point beyond which recall was impossible, but when water lacked one could be brought back from the very edge of the grave, given but a trifle of moisture. Water! Could I but reach it, could I but find some—a few drops—Alice might yet live. Madness seized me at the thought, and again—for the hundredth time—I cursed Harkness in my soul. Once more I thought of the pump I had seen above us—two inches of wood and steel—a million miles away! Raging, furious, mad with anger and desperation, I staggered to my feet and in one last surge of strength crawled up the stairs. Delirium held me—I would beat again on the door—I threw myself against it—I beat on it with my fists—heedless of the pain—and even as I beat I knew the mad futility of the act—insane! Had I not tried it before, when stronger than now? Had not Harkness told us we were to die in the cellar? Could I now break down that deadly barrier? I beat once more, and strove to scream—the door held firm. I seized the handle and shook it—I turned the knob—the door swung back on well-oiled hinges—I staggered into a blaze of sunlight!

Have I said that Harkness was a sardonic fiend? Before leaving the house he had carefully, silently, drawn back the bolts and unbarred the door!

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