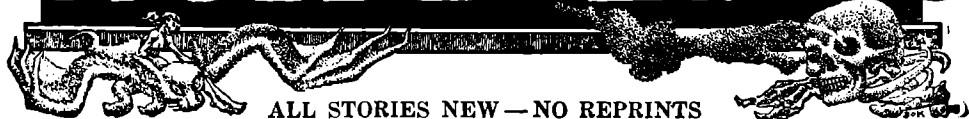


# Weird Tales



JULY, 1946

Cover by Matt Fox

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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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# The Ginnabar Redhead

By **HAROLD LAWLOR**

**S**HE was standing at the side of the Canyon Road when Byron Kane first saw her. Her hand flashed up in an urgent signal for him to stop, and he turned his spotlight upon her as he slowed, for the hour was late and anything could happen on the Canyon Road.

But her appearance looked innocent enough, judging from what he could see. No fear of a hold-up, certainly. It was one of those deceptively mild November nights common in that part of the country, but even so she had a blonde mink coat slung carelessly over her shoulders, cape-fashion, the arms dangling emptily. Her throat and her ear-lobes were ablaze with jewels, her dark red hair piled high, and the hem of her emerald-green evening dress, slit to the knee in front, was lost in the wisps of trailing fog that drifted like tattered gray chiffon close to the ground.

Byron braked to a stop, stepped out. It was only then that he saw the great black coupé beyond her, like a monstrous stream-lined beetle, overturned in the ditch where it had crashed through the white-painted guard rail. Its wheels were still spinning impotently in the air, heightening its resemblance to an insect trying vainly to get back on its feet.

Good God! How had the girl ever survived such a crash? There wasn't a mark on her. Nevertheless, "Are you hurt?" Byron asked. "Can I—"

"Yes. No. My injuries do not matter. It's you. Listen!" she said urgently, coming closer. "I feel that I must warn you—"

"Warn?" Byron said. And he actually said, "Who, me?" Why should she be warning him when she was so obviously the one in need of help? And then he thought he understood. It was a common enough phe-

Heading by **LEE BROWN COYE**

*Anything can happen on Canyon  
Road—and does!*



omenon. The girl was suffering from shock. Perhaps she'd even incurred a slight brain concussion, which was why she was talking so disconnectedly. He slipped an arm around her, tried to lead her to his car.

But she pulled away, and her hazel eyes blazed at him. "I'm all *right*, I tell you! It's you. I want you to promise me that you'll never again travel the Canyon Road. It's dangerous for you!"

"But—but—" Byron faltered, bewildered. This was preposterous! He was beginning to feel absurdly like a young man in an Oppenheim novel. He'd never seen this girl before in his life. And as for the Canyon Road, he traveled it almost nightly, returning to his home, and while it was lonely and sparsely enough traveled, it was hardly sinister. Certainly it could carry no menace for him. But now—

The girl was clutching his lapel, impotently trying to shake him in her exigency. "Promise me!" she almost hissed it. "Then go."

"But I can't leave you here alone. You're wearing a fortune in jewels. Your coat, your car—" He heard himself growing incoherent. This wouldn't do. He said more calmly, "Come, we'll get help."

"I tell you I'm *beyond* help!" She gestured helplessly. "Oh, if I could only make you understand! If you'll just—" She broke off, bent her head in a listening attitude. "There's someone coming."

BYRON heard it too. Loose pebbles in the road, kicked heedlessly by careless feet approaching. Together he and the girl stood there and watched the road. Presently the figure of an elderly gentleman was revealed in the headlights of Byron's car. A quiet old gentleman, dressed in decent black—ordinary enough, you would say. And yet, there was something about him—

He didn't speak. He made no offer to help. He just stood there, looking at the girl. And he shook his head, slowly back and forth, and clucked pityingly. Then, still without a word, he turned and continued to trudge down the road.

It was—peculiar.

Byron looked at the girl. "Who was that? He seemed to know you."

She shook her head. Almost she seemed

to cower within the shelter of her coat. "I—don't know. He—frightened me."

Byron took a few steps forward. "Say!" he called after the retreating figure of the old man. "There's been an accident here. Aren't you going to help? Hey, *you!*"

The old man paid him no heed, and presently his figure disappeared entirely into the fog. Byron felt a strange sense of chill in the small of his back. He turned to the girl.

It was then that the oddest thing of all happened.

She appeared to blur before his eyes. Her outlines seemed to be dissolving. Byron shut his eyes, perforce, as one does to ward off dizziness. And when he opened them again, there was nothing there.

No girl. No car. Nothing but his own car remained, just where he'd parked it at the side of the road.

He stood there, blinking his eyes stupidly. He wasn't dreaming, he hadn't been drinking. Even if the girl could have hidden in the fog, how could some two tons of automobile vanish? They *couldn't* be gone—the girl and the overturned coupé. Yet they were.

It was very strange. It was—eerie. The foggy night. The hush. The mystery.

Some of the fog seemed to rise then and drift icily up his spine. He shivered apprehensively—the sort of shiver, he remembered, that makes you laugh nervously and say, "Someone must be walking over my grave."

Why was he thinking of graves? Gruesome. He groped for the door handle of his car, reassuringly damp and cold under his shaking hand. Somehow—he never could remember very clearly just how—he managed to drive to his home.

HE SLEPT not at all that night. And he knew next day he never would forget that scene of the night before. It was one of those things that stick in your memory persuasively, no matter how you try to dismiss it from your mind. It repeated itself in his thoughts maddeningly, like a phrase from an imperfectly remembered song.

The old man. The girl. Especially the girl. Between himself and the girl, he'd sensed, there'd flowed a strong attraction. Unspoken messages leaping across a void.

They were meant to be together. Ridiculous. He'd seen her only once. But that was the way it was. That was the way he felt.

Meanwhile, he couldn't work. There was that painting he was doing for Denta Toothpaste; there was the March cover for *Metro-politan*, still unfinished. Well, and the hell with them. He had something else on his mind.

#### *Ghosts.*

After all, wasn't it the only logical explanation? If you could speak of logic in connection with such a thing? Surely the old man and the girl were people without substance?

Byron mentally made allowance for the strong strain of superstition he had inherited from an Irish grandmother who'd sent him gibbering to bed as a child on many a night, filled with deliciously terrifying tales of ghosts and goblins and the walking dead. But maybe there'd been some truth in many of those yarns.

For the first time he was sorry he lived alone, sorry he had no one with whom to talk it over. His friends had thought him mad for electing to bury himself out here in the country. A bachelor, young, moneyed, popular, handsome enough. "Why," they'd said aghast, "you could be surrounded with hordes of people."

And so he could. And so he had. And that was the trouble. He'd had a studio in town for a time, and it had been filled to overflowing with genial souls, dropping in endlessly. And the work he'd been able to do you could stick in your left eye, and have room for a horse besides.

Well. And he'd moved to the country. And now it was ghosts interfering with his work.

Good God, life was full of problems!

By three o'clock he'd kidded himself out of believing in ghosts. By four o'clock he was sure he'd dreamed it all last night. By five o'clock he was quite cheerful, singing in the shower, preparing to leave for town.

And, he thought, shrugging into his dinner jacket, he was going and returning by way of the Canyon Road.

"See, fella!" he scowled at his image in the mirror. The scowl grew terrific as he made a pass at his mirrored self. "Yeah, you!"

Ghosts, my eye.

But he knew his skepticism for the hollow pretense it was. He knew why he'd be returning by the Canyon Road. Not from disbelief. Not from bravado. No. But because he'd be hoping to see again—a ghost, a red-headed ghost with hazel eyes.

You could always dream, couldn't you?

MARCATTI and Ebsen, the duo-pianists, were playing at Orchestra Hall, and he'd promised to take Isobel. Not that it was romance with Isobel. He usually thought of her as "good old Isobel." But it was pleasant enough companionship.

At dinner beforehand he was tempted to tell her of the mink-coated redhead. But Isobel, he knew, would only feel of her pale-blond back hair, fix him with her pale-blue eyes. "Where did she go to school?" Isobel would probably ask, speaking in her slightly nasal, well-bred voice. And when from ignorance he couldn't answer, she'd say with just the right touch of indifferent rue, "I'm afraid I really do not know her."

Limbo for the mink-coated redhead.

So he said nothing. But he saw that though the imagined dialogue never took place, perversely enough it annoyed him with Isobel. Annoyed him intensely. Almost at once he saw the reason for his absurd irritation. The realization enlightened him mightily, startled him.

He was deeply in love with a red-headed ghost!

Marcatti and Ebsen, later, were not at their best, but they were good enough. You could sit there, your eyes closed, letting the music beat against your ears. You could toy with the idea of the trip home along the Canyon Road. You didn't have to go that way, you knew. You could take Route 56, and cut across through Denham. It was only a little longer. You could have quite a little argument with yourself, sitting there in Orchestra Hall, knowing full well all the while, you were going home by the Canyon Road, come hell or high water.

Because, though she'd warned you away, there was a girl with red hair whom you might see again. A girl whose painted mouth lured you on, whose eyes stirred you strangely.

As Isobel's never had.

HE DROPPED Isobel at her house, accepted her cool kiss. Then he set out for home, with the feeling that the evening was just beginning.

Where the Canyon Road branched off from Route 56, he stopped the car. Which way should he go, he debated, tantalizing himself. He sat there about five minutes pondering the question, prolonging the suspense knowingly, laughing at himself inwardly the while. He'd done this sort of thing ever since he'd been a child—made the most of every anticipated moment. Quite unconsciously he'd learned to be an artist in living.

When the five minutes had elapsed, he pulled the gearshift into low and started down the Canyon Road, just as he'd known in his heart he would do.

He prepared himself for disappointment. She wouldn't be there, of course. That would be too much to hope. But paradoxically if she weren't there, it would be all right, too. At least, he'd know he wasn't going out of his mind. Either way, how could he lose? He laughed shortly at this whimsy.

And then he stopped laughing.

She was there. Her hand flashed up in an urgent signal for him to stop, and he turned his spotlight upon her as he slowed, for the hour was late and anything could happen on the Canyon Road.

The blonde mink coat clung over her shoulders. The emerald-green dress. Beyond her the overturned car, like a beetle in its death throes.

The scene was the same.

Again he felt himself sliding out of his own car, heard himself asking, "Are you hurt? Can I—"

Again she said, "Yes. No. My injuries do not matter. It's you. Listen! I feel that I must warn you—"

It was like a broken record, repeating the same phrase endlessly. You had to stop this. You had to hold onto your sanity with both hands. You had to say something different, to change the scene, however slightly. Or you'd go mad.

He said, "What does this mean? This is the same scene as last night. You're saying the same thing."

Her eyes widened. Her right hand caught

her coat at the throat. She seemed to shiver. "I don't know what you mean. I've never seen you before in my life."

He *wasn't* asleep. He *wasn't* imagining things. The door handle was cold under his touch. The fog was getting into his lungs, making him cough slightly. She *was* standing there, her hazel eyes watching him intently.

He mustn't grow excited, he mustn't lose control. He said carefully, "You stopped me just like this last night. You warned me not to travel the Canyon Road."

She backed a step in alarm. "How—how did you know that was what I was going to say? Warn you not to come this way again?"

He said patiently, "But I've just told you! You said the same thing last night."

"I don't know why you're lying to me. I wasn't here before." Again she caught his lapel. "But you must believe me. It's dangerous for you to come this way again."

This sort of thing could go on forever, while the moon shone down brightly. He swallowed. He tried to sort out the crazy words, phrases, sentences running through his mind, to reshape them so that this time they would make convincing sense and this girl would stop—

"Sh!" She broke in on his thoughts.

He knew what was coming without even listening. Loose gravel rattled in the road, and again the old man was there in the glare of the headlights. As before, he ignored Byron and looked sadly at the girl.

And Byron thought with a part of his mind, "I must focus my attention on something concrete, so that I can be sure later on this isn't a dream."

There wasn't much. The moonlit road. The old man, the girl. The black car, like many another, overturned in the ditch. But —*yes!* The license number. 223-223, this state. It was almost his own telephone number repeated. He could easily remember.

He looked up at the old man then, and said woodenly, "There's been an accident."

The old man stared straight past him at the girl. This time he spoke. He shook his head regretfully. "It's no use, my dear. I've told you that before. It really isn't any use at all."

The girl cowered, perhaps more in perplexity than fear. The old man started

trudging away. Byron broke from this weird lethargy that had him in its grasp. He followed a few steps after the old man. "Say, what is—"

But, wait! This was the same mistake he'd made last night! He wheeled to face the girl. And then it happened again. The whole scene blurred. He struggled valiantly to fight back the haze before his eyes, but when he could see clearly again, the girl and the car were gone.

He stood there blinking dazedly. Then with shaking hands, he opened the door of his car, and got in. He sat there a long, long time, his elbows on the steering wheel, his head in his hands, staring blindly ahead down the deserted Canyon Road.

It is not a pleasant thing to reflect that one is going insane.

**S**TRANGELY enough, he slept that night. The nervous sleep of exhaustion. But in the morning he felt as if he'd had no rest at all.

It was raining, a steady drizzle, depressing enough to the spirits under even the best conditions. But as Byron watched his shaking hands as he poured out his coffee, he knew this could not go on. His nerves were shot. The unknown, the inexplicable, he'd never faced them before. They added nothing to one's mental tranquillity.

Perhaps he could allay this mental torment if only he had someone with whom to talk, a logical earthly someone who could point out a plausible reason for these things he'd been seeing. Mentally he reviewed the list of his acquaintances, rejecting them one by one. Good lads, all of them, but not what he wanted.

It was some time before he remembered John Francis Murry, whom he knew only slightly. Murry, the criminal lawyer. Cerebral, unimaginative, astringent, no harbinger of superstitions.

To think of Murry was to dive for the shower, the closet, the car. It was to see at last some faint ray of hope for help.

**M**URRY leaned back in his swivel chair, let cigar ash drift sloppily onto his paunch.

"Huh," he wheezed. He half-shut his eyes sleepily, a habit of his when his brain

was at its sharpest. "Thing I don't see," he grunted, "is why you came to me. A psychiatrist is your best bet, I'd say."

Byron had paced to the window nervously, fiddled with the string of the shade after telling his story. Now angrily he let the shade roll up to the top with a noisy zip.

"A psychiatrist!" he scoffed. "He'd tell me I was seeing the girl because I hated my parents because I was frightened by a caterpillar at the age of three!"

Murry chuckled briefly. "Well, maybe." "You don't think I'm crazy?" Byron challenged.

"They call me the guy with the open mind," Murry said blandly. "Have you any theory about this scene you've been seeing?"

There was an armless chair facing Murry's desk. Byron turned it around, straddled it, leaned his arms along its back. "I read a story once—" He broke off, grinned sheepishly. "You'll surely think I'm crazy now. But I believe there was a wreck there. The girl was killed. She's a ghost. For some reason she's coming back, trying to warn me of some imminent danger. God knows why."

"You're sure you didn't dream the whole thing, both times?"

"Sure, I'm sure!" Byron said indignantly. "I saw everything as plain as your face. Why, I even noted the license number of her car! 223-223, this state, '46."

"Huh." Murry reached for the telephone and dialed a number. "Gimme the Accident Bureau—no, I *don't* know what extension, *get it!*" he barked irritably. He waited seconds then for someone named Callahan. "Mike? Any record of a fatal accident this year on Canyon Road where it crosses Cobanga Canyon, redhead girl killed, driving black Lincoln coupé, this year's license number 223-223?"

He listened a minute. "Well, call me back, will you, when you know?"

Byron and Murry made desultory conversation then for fifteen minutes, but at the end of that time, Byron couldn't have repeated a word of what they'd said. He sat there nervously on his chair, listening with only a part of his mind, and he jumped when the telephone finally rang.

Murry said thickly through the cigar, "An old couple injured there two years ago, and

no accidents since? Thanks, Mike. What? Oh, you did? It *does*? Huh! Thanks again, Mike."

Murry hung up, placed the phone very carefully at the side of his desk. "All right," he said then, leaning back comfortably. "What's the gag?"

"Gag?"

"The angle." Murry wiggled his thick fingers. "So you want to meet her, too, huh? Well, I can't blame you. Every guy in town does. Though this is a screwy way you're going about it."

Byron said tensely, "I don't know what you're talking about. If you've found out anything about that dead girl, tell me, and cut out the clowning."

Murry blinked. "Dead girl, my foot. The black Lincoln, license 223-223, belongs to Miss Fleury Lennon, torch-singer, who's knocking 'em dead nightly at the Cinnabar Café. If she's dead, she's the liveliest corpse I ever saw. I heard her there last night, and the night before, myself. At just about the times you say she stopped you on the Canyon Road. So now what?"

Byron rubbed his forehead. "So now I've got to find out what it's all about before I go completely crazy."

IT WAS a night club like a thousand others, the Cinnabar Café. The smoke-laden atmosphere hit your lungs with the impact of a blow. Fireflies would have been brighter than the lights on the walls discreetly biting the gloom at intervals. You sat in almost Stygian darkness until ten o'clock, when a baby "spot" made a bright golden circle to frame Miss Fleury Lennon.

You weren't surprised to learn that she was good. She had to be, at five dollars *couvert*. She'd never sing at La Scala, perhaps, but she was fine in the Cinnabar Café. She sang huskily, throatily, of love good and bad. Of lovers gone, missed or forgotten. The usual thing. But she made you care intensely about her chanted troubles. When she was finished, and you applauded, she stood there looking at you coolly.

She sauntered off the floor to the dressing rooms, the baby "spot" following her insolent swivel-hipped step till she disappeared, as if it too were loath to see her go.

Byron stopped beating his palms

together and signaled the head-waiter.

"I want to meet Miss Lennon." He showed a folded wad of bills discreetly. "It's really important."

The waiter hesitated, but not for long. "I think it can be managed." He palmed the bills suavely. "Follow me, sir."

Away from the smoke, away from the dimness. A brightly lighted hall that hurt your eyes by contrast. A white-painted door flaunting a golden star.

"A gentleman to see you, Miss Lennon," said the waiter through the panels. "He says it's important."

"Just a minute." Then, "Show him in."

They entered, then the waiter withdrew. She was sitting on a tufted velvet *pouf*, eyeing him in the mirror the while she applied fresh lipstick with a little brush. Byron waited for some sign of recognition. None came.

This was the first time he'd really had a good look at her in a bright light. She was a little older than he'd thought. Her left eyelid, through some muscular fault, drooped very slightly in what should have been sinister fashion. Perversely enough, it only added to her attractiveness. And of her personal magnetism he hadn't been mistaken. You felt it like a challenge.

But he couldn't stand here staring like this all night. He said deliberately. "I want to know why you've been warning me away from the Canyon Road."

She put the lipstick brush down. Her eyes widened, met his in the mirror. "Warning you away from—? My dear Mr.—"

"Kane. Byron Kane. The last two nights you've stopped me on the Canyon Road, and told me never to travel that way again." Quickly he explained the two scenes of the nights before.

She turned around, and her eyes never left his face till he finished. Then she smiled very slightly, a little wearily. "Well. I thought I'd heard them all. But this is certainly a new approach."

Byron smiled too, but grimly. "At any other time I'd knock myself out to meet you. I admit it. But tonight I'm telling you the truth. Look, I've met you, I've gained my purpose if that was what I'd come for. Why should I persist in the lie now—if it were a lie?"

Evidently she saw the logic of this. Her smile faded. "The strangest thing of all is that you should mention the Canyon Road. I haven't traveled it in over a year. But I have to take it tonight."

Now he was warning her, half-laughing at himself in his mind at the absurdity of the reversal. "Don't take it tonight. Go some other way."

He was surprised to find himself shivering. Damn it, he meant the warning. He felt a queer sense of foreboding.

But Fleury only shook her head. "My sister is very ill. I have to go to Antioch, and there is no other road."

It was ridiculous, insane, that they should both be taking this so seriously. It was utterly meaningless. And yet—

"Why are you afraid of the old man in the road?" Byron asked.

"I've told you. I wasn't there. I've never seen him." She stood up. "I really don't know what you're talking about. I've never seen you before in my life, believe me, but still—" She looked at him. "I'm afraid."

Maybe she was lying to him. She didn't seem to be, but how could he tell for certain? After all, he scarcely knew her.

"You really must excuse me now." She looked at the clock. "I ought to be leaving."

There seemed nothing for him to gain by remaining. Byron took his leave—a curious, stilted sort of leave-taking, as if they were both embarrassed by their intensity over such nonsense as they'd just been exchanging. But their eyes clung, strangely loath to part.

At the door he said, "I think we'll meet again."

And she said softly, "Yes. I have a feeling—"

Of that much, at least, he was sure.

HE RETRIEVED his car from the parking lot, drove around to the entrance of the café, and parked some ten yards from the canopied entrance.

Rain was falling again, and it was colder.

The doorman sauntered over, his slicker shining wetly. "You can't park here, sir. It's a cab-stand."

Byron handed him a bill. "It will be for only a very few minutes."

The doorman said, "Okay, sir. I think I can fix it."

He'd just regained his post when a black coupé swept up silently and stopped before the canopy. A uniformed attendant stepped out just as Fleury Lennon came slowly from the café. She was wearing the costume Byron remembered from the last two nights, even to the mink coat slung carelessly over her shoulders.

Byron pulled his snap-brim low, slumped down in the seat, his heart pounding. His eyes never left the license number under the taillight of the car before him. 223-223. It was the black Lincoln coupé.

Fleury said something to the doorman, then got into the car, sliding over behind the wheel. Byron started his motor, and followed the coupé as it pulled away from the curb.

Once on Highway 56, the Lincoln pulled slowly, inexorably away. Byron pushed his little car to the utmost, but he lost the coupé long before the junction of 56 and the Canyon Road. The last he saw of it through the rain, its taillights winked at him sardonically like widespread ruby eyes.

HE STOPPED where the roads forked, surveying the emptiness of the Canyon Road before him. He told himself he was a fool. He ought to turn right on 56. Call it instinct, superstition, sixth sense, what you would. Everything told him to turn to the right.

But he knew he wouldn't. He could not.

Whatever it all meant, he and the girl belonged together. He'd known it that first night. He thought she'd recognized the same thing herself tonight. It was in her eyes. It was in her calm acceptance of what was, after all, his preposterous story.

He wasn't smiling tonight as he shifted into first, pointed the hood of his car down the Canyon Road. The scene of the past two nights would be repeated, he felt. But with a difference. This time he meant to see that she didn't vanish. He meant to understand the mystery.

He slowed as he approached Cobanga Canyon, and his hand switched on the spotlight.

She wasn't in the road.

For a minute he felt a sick wave of disappointment. And then his heart leaped. He saw the skid marks on the wet pavement.



His hand jerked the spotlight, swept it over the ditch beyond.

His breath caught hurtlingly.

There it was. The car. Overturned. But where was she?

Again something, like a warning bell in his mind, told him not to stop, to sweep on. But he stopped. He got out, gingerly approached the overturned coupé.

And that was where he found Fleury. Inside the car. Crumpled in the twisted wreckage. Dead.

Somehow, he eased the body out, laid it gently on the ground. But all the while his soul was raging impotently that such senseless destruction of a lovely thing could be. It was like seeing an irreplaceable object of art broken in a futile, pointless fit of temper. Was this the way it had to end? Tenderly he pulled the mink coat about her, she who'd never feel the cold again. And he covered her face with his handkerchief.

Through his grief, he knew dully he'd have to go for someone. Fleury was beyond help, but— Wait! He listened. Far off, approaching on the little-traveled Canyon Road, he could hear the high whine of a speeding car. He could stop them, send them for help.

He caught up a flashlight from the glove compartment of his own car, ran to the center of the road. Headlights swept around a curve in the road, rushed down upon him. He waved the flashlight madly. The car hurtled toward him. Didn't the fools see him? Weren't they going to stop?

It was too late to leap aside, to cry out. You threw up your hands, but you couldn't hold back tons of onrushing metal and death. The right front fender of the car struck you sickeningly. You buckled. You were hurled aside like a bag of grain. You lay there at the road's edge, your limbs bent at crazy angles, jagged red streaks of pain etching themselves against the black of your waning consciousness.

Then—nothing.

The hit-run driver slowed momentarily, then sped on to his own private hell.

**W**HEN Byron came to, Fleury was standing before him.

He blinked, then sprang to his feet with a glad cry. His hand went out to her eagerly.

"Fleury! I thought you'd been kil—"

Something was wrong! His breath caught sharply. His hand had gone *through* her shoulder!

She smiled faintly at the expression of horror on his face. "I know. I've already discovered for myself. Look." She placed her hand on his arm. It passed right through.

He stood there staring stupidly from his arm to her face. Then he looked around. They were on a road, a long, long road that stretched to the horizon and beyond, that stretched to infinity. A road that was not the Canyon Road.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said. "But I remember everything else now. So much is clear. I know now why I warned you away from the Canyon Road. Some part of me—apart from my conscious self—knew this was going to happen, and tried to prevent it. I was powerless to save myself, for some reason, but I tried to save you."

"You mean we're—we're—?" He couldn't say the word.

"Dead." She said it for him.

For a minute terror held him. It took a bit of getting used to—this idea that he was no more. And then he looked at Fleury. Fleury was with him. At least he was not alone. Fleury. He smiled. He said slowly, gratefully, "It—why, it isn't going to be so bad!"

She slipped her hand in his. Her eyes were soft and shining. "Not so very bad," she agreed.

And then they both heard it. The sound of shuffling footsteps coming nearer on the road.

"It's the old man," Fleury whispered. Her hand tightened on Byron's. "Strange, I don't fear even him any more."

The old man stopped when he saw them. He smiled gently. Seen up closer, he was not at all alarming. "You see, my dear?" he said. "I told you it wasn't any use. It wasn't any use at all. Would you change things now, if you could? Of course not. Come."

Byron said, "But you. Who are *you*?"

As they fell into step beside him, the old man told them, "Sometimes they call me Kismet. And sometimes they call me Fate."

And then in silence the three of them went happily down the road to nowhere.