

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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The Cloth of Madness*

By SEABURY QUINN

JAMISON ALVARDE, the noted interior decorator, was dying. His family physician knew it; the neat, white-starched nurse—almost waspish in her impersonal devotion to her professional duties—knew it; the eminent graduate of Hopkins and Vienna, called into consultation, whose fee would be more than the annual maintenance of a poor ward in the City Hospital, knew it; Alvarde's next of kin, a niece and nephew, hastily summoned from half-way across the continent, knew it; and—which was most important of all—Jamison Alvarde knew it.

The last rays of the December sun slanted through the casement of the sick man's room, falling directly upon the bed and illuminating his face as though with a rosy spotlight. This was fitting and proper, since he was the principal character in the short tragedy about to be enacted.

It was not an ill-looking face the afternoon sun bent its brief valedictory on. Jamison Alvarde's plentiful hair was iron-gray in color and swept up from his high, placid forehead in an even-crested pompadour. His eyebrows were heavy and intensely black,

and the deep-set eyes beneath them were as gray as frosted glass. While his long illness had etched fine lines about the corners of his eyes and at the ends of his narrow lips, it had not robbed his cheeks of their rich, olive coloring, and even in the antechamber of death his mouth retained its firm, almost cruel, set.

In a far corner of the room, the family physician whispered fussily to the next of kin. Waiting for a patient to die is tiresome business, especially when one is hungry and when one expects to have roast lamb with caper sauce for dinner.

"Yes, yes!" he was saying. "Mr. Alvarde has had a great deal of trouble the last year, a very great deal of trouble. He has never been the same since that terrible affliction fell upon his wife and his friend at his country place in the Highlands. A tragedy, my dear young friends, a very great tragedy; quite enough to break anyone's health. I've no doubt that Mr. Alvarde's present illness is directly traceable to that—er—unfortunate occurrence; no doubt whatever."

Alvarde's wasted, nervous hands paused a minute in their restless fumbling at the bedclothes. His thin, straight lips twisted a moment in an

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inscrutable smile, and his pale lids slowly lowered till they nearly hid his roving gray eyes. With that unwonted sharpening of the senses which often comes to those weakened in body, he had heard the doctor's whispered conversation.

The mention of that June morning when his wife and friend had been discovered in their rooms, hopelessly imbecile, brought no grimace of horror to the sick man's face. Rather, he smiled whimsically to himself, as if there were something not altogether unpleasing to him in the memory.

THE afternoon sun sank behind the line of hills across the river. The great specialist got into his fur-lined overcoat and his imported motor car and drove home. The family physician left instructions to be called immediately there was any change in Mr. Alvarde's condition and went home to his lamb and capers. The next of kin tiptoed downstairs to dinner, and Jamison Alvarde was left alone with his thoughts and the white-clad nurse.

"Nurse," Alvarde raised himself slightly on one elbow, "open the lower left-hand drawer of the desk and bring me the little black book you'll find there. . . ."

"Now give me my fountain pen, please," he directed, when the sharp-featured girl had brought the book and adjusted the pillows behind his back.

The nurse withdrew to the window, watching the last spots of sunlight on the river, and Alvarde commenced to scribble on the flyleaf of the book before him. As he wrote—difficultly, for he was very weak—the same faintly reminiscent smile he had worn in the afternoon settled again on his tight-pressed lips.

Half, three-quarters, of an hour his pen traveled laboriously over the book's blank leaf; then, with a faint sigh of satisfaction, as at a task well

done, Jamison Alvarde lay back upon his pillows.

The nurse crossed the room to remove the book and pen, paused a second, looking into her patient's face, then hurried to the telephone to call the family physician.

She might have saved herself the trouble and allowed the good doctor to finish his dinner in peace. Jamison Alvarde had no need of his services, or of any other physician's. Jamison Alvarde was dead.

THE customary three days elapsed, and in the morning of the fourth they took Jamison Alvarde from his residence on the Drive to a new home in Shadow Lawns. It was a very stylish and dignified funeral, for Alvarde had left a respectable estate, and the high-priced funeral director who conducted the obsequies understood his business thoroughly.

On the fifth evening Alvarde's attorney—a dapper little man, much addicted to wing collars and neat, double-breasted jackets—called and read his deceased client's last will and testament to the next of kin, who, as was expected, proved also to be his residuary legatees, one-third of the estate having been left the dead man's wife. Then the lawyer took up the business of straightening out Alvarde's affairs.

"It will be necessary," he informed them, stuffing the will back into his saddle-leather brief-bag, "to let me have all your uncle's papers which are in the house."

"The only papers of Uncle Jamison's we found in the house are bound in a little black book," the niece remarked. "He'd been writing in it just before he died."

When the little book was forthcoming and he had tucked it in his overcoat pocket, the lawyer seated himself in his automobile and started on his homeward trip. Before the motor had traversed two blocks he took out the slender volume and opened it. He

was no waster of time; his capacity for making every minute count had won him his enviable standing at the bar.

The first words which struck his eye were written in a weak, straggling hand—the words Jamison Alvarde had penned on the night of his death.

“What the devil!” the lawyer exclaimed as he slowly spelt out the sprawling characters of the inscription. “Did the old fool try to make another will on his death-bed?”

“The old fool” was his late lamented client, the commencement of whose *ante-mortem* writing was such as to warrant his assumption that a last will and testament had been attempted.

He read:

I, Jamison Alvarde, being of sound mind and memory (which is more than some I know are), but being weakened in body, and about to die, do declare the following statement to be the true explanation of the mental derangement which occurred to my wife, Edith, and my friend, Hector Fuller, at my country place last summer.

“Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord; but I anticipated Providence in demanding reparation. As a piece of revenge my work is not devoid of good points.

My one regret in publishing this memoir is that I shall not be present to hear the comments of the fools who have sympathized with me in my “affliction.”

JAMISON ALVARDE.

“Humph,” the lawyer turned the scribbled fly-leaf over; “so Alvarde’s mind was wandering at the last, eh? Wonder how much more of this stuff he wrote in bed that night?”

The next page answered his question. Following the leaf upon which the scrawling introduction was scratched, the book was written in a firm, clear hand, the hand Alvarde had penned in health. The pages were filled with detached paragraphs, like diary entries, but undated. The first sheet was torn diagonally across, so that the first sentence was incomplete.

* * * * *

—somewhat cool for this time of year. Excepting the tower, the house

is fully completed, and we shall live here while the carpenters are finishing up.

I have asked Hector Fuller up for the week-end. Edith protested against his coming; for, with every woman’s loathing of the unattainable, she has taken his impregnable bachelorhood as a deliberate affront. But Fuller is my friend, and whether Edith is pleased with his visit or not is of no moment to me. This is my house and Edith is my wife; and I mean to be master of both.

FULLER came this afternoon. I watched Edith narrowly when she greeted him, for I had determined to cut her allowance in two if she were discourteous to him. She blushed to the roots of her hair when she gave him her hand, and his face colored, too. Fuller looked uncomfortably at me out of the corner of his eye, and I caught a sidelong glance from Edith which reminded me of the look Regina, my Irish setter, gives me when she knows I am about to beat her for worrying the poultry. I was sorry for Fuller; having to be polite to a hostess who dislikes you must be uncomfortable business.

FULLER is a sly old dog! Pretending misogynist that he is, always preaching the joys of an Eveless Eden, I’ve caught him red-handed in a flirtation with some silly woman—and, I believe, a married one, at that.

This afternoon I came in late from inspecting the decorations of the Grayson mansion drawing-room, and as I was about to mount the stairs I noticed a bit of folded paper lying on the floor. The sight of this trash on my hall carpet angered me; I hate such clutter and disorder.

I was about to pitch the scrap of paper in the fireplace when I noticed that it was house stationery and was written on. I opened it and recognized Fuller’s writing.

My darling:

The ordeal was terrible. How I hate to have to pretend; how you hate it; how I hate to see you obliged to do it! If only you-know-who would go away, so that we could cast aside this hideous mask, how happy we could be!

My dear, there are not words enough in all the languages combined to tell you how I love you. I'd rather kiss the print of your little foot in the dust than the lips of any other woman on earth. Oh, if only that brute could be got rid of!

Only a few more days, dear one, and the ghastly comedy we're playing will be finished. Then I will be at liberty to meet you once more at the old accustomed place.

My darling, my darling, I love you!

Искренно.

"H'm!" I muttered, as I shoved the slushy thing into my jacket pocket. "'That brute' they're so anxious to be rid of is undoubtedly the lady's husband. Abuse the husband to flatter the wife, every time!"

We husbands are always brutes once we're pledged, with bell, book and candle, to provide a living for some worthless female. We're precious enough before they've put their halter on us, though, I've noticed! I dare say Edith thinks me a brute, though the devil knows it keeps my nose to the grindstone, paying for her fripperies.

I found Fuller in his room, dressing for dinner, and gave him his note.

"Next time, don't be so careless with your *billets d'amour*," I cautioned. "Someone might find it and pass it along to her husband, you know."

The shot went home. Fuller turned as pale as if a ghost had entered the room with me, and faced about with a spring, as though expecting me to attack him.

"I suppose you'll demand that I leave the house immediately?" he asked, when he saw that I had no immediate intention of assaulting him.

I laughed. "My dear boy," I told him, "it's a matter of perfect indifference to me how much you protest your hatred of the sex in public

and flirt with them in private. Only you're so ungodly absent-minded with your mash notes! I found that gummy thing of yours lying in plain sight on the hall floor. Is your brain so addled with love of the fair one that you forget to post your letters to her?"

He regarded me a moment as a condemned criminal might the messenger who brings his reprieve, and jammed the note into his waistcoat pocket.

"Thanks, old man," he gulped. "Awfully good of you to bring it to me!"

"Oh, that's all right!" I assured him as I started to my own room to dress. "Don't bother about thanking me."

Funny, what a doddering fool love can make of a sensible man like Fuller.

I WISH Fuller would use more discretion in his choice of a light o' love. She uses lily of the valley.

Lily of the valley is the one thing about which Edith has defied me. Time and again I've ordered her never to bring the pestilent stuff into my house, and every time I've found a phial of it on her dressing-table I've flung it out the window; yet her hair, her finger tips and her lingerie fairly reek with it, despite my commands.

I came out late from town this evening, and Grigsby, the butler, informed me that Fuller had dropped out during the afternoon and had put up in his usual room. I stopped in his quarters for a little chat before going to bed. He had already turned in, but was still awake. His clothes were sprawled all over the room in the careless way he always throws them when he crawls into bed, and I had no choice but to share the same chair with his dinner jacket.

I'd scarcely gotten seated and lighted a cigar when I began to notice the unpleasant proximity of lily of the valley scent. At first I couldn't make out where the annoying odor

came from, but a few sniffs localized its source. Fuller's dinner jacket was redolent with the perfume.

"No doubt you find it very comforting to have your lady love rest her head on your shoulder," I grumbled, "but, for heaven's sake, why don't you get her to use some other scent? I loathe this stuff as the devil does holy water."

He gaped at me like a goldfish viewing the sunlight through the walls of an aquarium.

"What d'ye mean, 'some other scent'?" he asked. "I don't follow you."

"Why, this infernal lily of the valley." I tapped the scented shoulder of his jacket in explanation. "I hate it more than any other smell this side of H.S. Edith uses it until I think, sometimes, I'll have to commit suicide—or murder—to get rid of it."

Fuller's eyes widened like a cat's in the twilight.

"D-does Edith—Mrs. Alvarde—use that perfume?" he stammered.

"You're devilish well right, she does, *ad nauseam!*" I growled as I got up. "And for the Lord's sake, get your woman to use something else. It's bad enough to have Edith scenting up the place, without your lugging a lot of the stuff in on your clothes."

I HAVE thought the whole matter over very carefully. I shall kill them both.

The scales fell from my eyes to-night (perhaps I would better say they were snatched from my eyes) and I see what a blind, fatuous, dotting cuckold I have been for the fiend only knows how long. The shame of it is maddening.

Spring has broken early this year and summer is upon us; the roses in the lower garden are budding out, and the double row of dogwood trees which flanks the drive is festival-clad in a white surplice of blossoms.

The decorations of the Grayson

house were all completed today, but I had to stay late catching up a few loose ends, so that it was well after dark when I reached home.

Fuller was out on one of the visits which have become rather frequent of late, and he and Edith had dined when I arrived. She was in the music room, strumming idly on the piano and singing softly to herself when I passed through the hall. Fuller had gone to his room for some reason or other. I could hear the sickly sentimental refrain of the popular ballad she was thrumming as I went up the stairs:

There's a kiss that you get from baby,
 There's a kiss that you get from Dad,
 There's a kiss that you get from Mother,
 That's the first real kiss you've had.
 There's a kiss with a tender meaning,
 Other kisses you recall;
 But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart,
 Are the sweetest kisses of all.

Something in the spring air, the shower of pearl moonbeams I'd just driven through, or the appealing lilt of the song downstairs—perhaps all three—set my pulses throbbing at an unwonted tempo; I climbed the last ten steps humming the silly words under my breath:

There's a kiss with a tender meaning,
 Other kisses you recall. . . .

In his room across the hall from mine Fuller was moving about, alternately whistling and humming the same banal refrain. The words came softly through the closed door of his room:

Other kisses you recall,
 But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart,
 Are the sweetest kisses of all.

Strange how a snatch of song on a spring evening will carry a man's mind back to scenes he has never thought to see reflected on his memory's screen again. As I knotted my tie I remembered my first sweetheart, pretty and blue-eyed and blond. I used to have a trick of pulling off her glove when I brought her home from

some party, and kissing all five of her pink little fingers.

Poor Elsie; when her husband died he left no insurance and God knows how many children. She came to me for help, but she had no business qualifications, couldn't even type; so there was nothing I could do for her.

Then there was another girl—a slender thing with a painted face, a robemaker's manikin: Her masculine acquaintances had been the sort who wear colored derby hats and converse in terms of the race-track and pool-room. I was the first man of breeding she had known, and she was as grateful for the common or garden variety of courtesy as a stray dog for a scrap of meat.

She knew only one medium of exchange, and her timid little offers of passion were pitiful to see.

I gave her three hundred dollars; rather a handsome settlement, considering our respective positions. A child more or less doesn't matter to her kind. . . . I've often wondered what became of her. . . .

Fuller was still singing to himself when I finished dressing and went down to the dining-room. Edith had left the house and was sitting on a stone bench at the lower end of the terrace, watching the boats go by on the river below. In her white dinner frock, with the moonlight on her arms and shoulders, she was almost as pale as the marble Psyche at the other end of the walk.

A chilly breath of wind swept up from the river, rustling the dogwood blossoms and shaking the scrim curtains at the dining-room windows. Edith felt it as it passed and shivered a little.

"She'll be cold without her wrap," I speculated as I poured myself a stiff appetizer of Irish whisky and rang for Grigsby to serve dinner.

A bar from the song recurred to me:

There's a kiss with a tender meaning . . .
But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart . . ."

I went into the music-room, picked up Edith's China-silk scarf, and stepped through the French window to the lawn.

Walking quietly across the short-cut grass, I approached her from the rear, softly humming the refrain.

"But the kisses I get from you, sweetheart, are the sweetest kisses of all," I finished aloud, dropping the shawl over her narrow shoulders, putting my hands over her eyes, and bending forward to kiss her full upon the lips.

Her white, thin hands flew up from her lap and clasped about my neck, drawing my cheek close to hers.

"Oh!" she cried, and the exclamation was about a sob, "my dear, my dear, I've been thinking you'd never come! I've been so lonesome."

Then she struck me playfully on the cheek and gave a sniff of disapproval.

"Hector," she scolded, "you've been drinking that horrid Irish whisky, and you know how I hate it. *He uses it!*"

I released her eyes and sprang back, livid with fury. So this was the explanation of that lovesick note I'd found in my hall when Fuller was here before! This accounted for the scent on his dinner jacket; this was the clue to his sudden craze for coming unannounced to my house—always when I was from home.

But my mind worked with the agility of a leaping cat. Before Edith had time to recover from the horror the discovery of her error had given her, I had landed fairly on my mental feet.

I threw back my head and laughed; laughed naturally, laughed uproariously.

"By the Lord Harry, old girl," I cried, pounding my thigh in a perfect paroxysm of counterfeit mirth, "that's the best joke I've heard you spring in years! Everyone knows you hate Hector Fuller worse than a hen hates a rainstorm, and now you

call me by his name and pretend you thought you were kissing him!" Again I rocked forward in a spasm of laughter. "And I can just about imagine how you'd have written the ten commandments on his face with your nails if it really had been Fuller!"

All the while I was watching her as a snake does a bird, noting the look of blank amazement which slowly replaced the terrified gaze she had first turned to me when she discovered her mistake.

"Let's go in the house and have some music; it's too cold for you out here, dear," I concluded, as soon as I had calmed down my mock amusement.

She rose as obediently as a well-trained dog and accompanied me across the lawn in silence. But she shuddered slightly as I put my arm about her. Women have no control of their emotions.

While I smoked three or four cigarettes, she played and sang for me, and then, pleading a headache—the old, threadbare excuse of all her sex since Eve first left the garden—begged leave to go up to bed.

I let her go and went out to the stable. I harnessed the cob to the village cart and drove furiously along the country lanes for three hours, lashing the horse fiercely whenever he dropped out of a gallop. The poor brute was nearly foundered when I turned him home; but I was as raging wild as ever.

I have thought the whole matter over very carefully. I shall kill them both.

LAST night I said I should kill them both. Today I know I must kill them, or they will surely kill me. A sentence from Fuller's treacherous note to Edith has been pounding in my head all day with the monody of a funeral dirge:

"... if that brute could only be got rid of!"

When faithless wives and false friends conspire to be rid of an inconvenient husband the number of his days is appointed. The dockets of our criminal courts bear eloquent testimony of that.

A weakling would seek divorce as the easy solution of my difficulty; but I am no maudlin fool, ready to efface myself, leaving the way clear for them to flaunt their triumph and my dishonor before the world. I appeal from the fool-made and fool-administered law that offers divorce, to the higher law which ruled when the winds first souged through the primeval forests; the law which the wise old Hebrew summed up with his terse, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

I must be very careful in my execution of these two, this man who has ravished away my honor before my eyes and the woman who has sold my good name for a kiss. Except for them, no one must suspect my vengeance; for it is no part of my plan to die like a felon for having exacted the justice which the law denies me.

I must kill them, but I must be careful—very careful.

IF I were a superstitious man I should say that the Fates have decided to aid me in the furtherance of my plans. While I was lunching at the Republique today, Howard Enright dropped into the chair opposite me. I greeted him sourly enough, for I was in no mood for conversation, but he refused to be rebuffed.

He is just back from an extended tour of the East, where he has picked up enough expensive junk for his house to fill three museums and impoverish half a dozen millionaires. Despite my curt answers, he rambled on about the thousand and one *objets de vertu* he'd lugged half-way around the world, until I was ready to believe that he'd brought the whole *Arabian*

Nights home with him. Othello's tales of

. . . anthropophagi,
And men whose heads do grow below
their shoulders,

were hackneyed beside the wonders Enright would display at his galleries.

He had a jade Buddha that caught and held the sunlight until the beholder was ready to swear that the image was filled with living fire. He had lachrymatories from Persia—tall, spindle-necked bottles, coming in pairs, into which the Persian widows wept, that the fullness of the bottles might be an outward and visible sign of the fullness of their grief at their husbands' taking-off. He had a great fan from Korea, where there was an ancient custom that no widow might remarry till her husband's grave was dry. The fan, he explained, was to be used by the lady in hastening the aridness of her lord's burial mound. He had bits of porcelain from the dynasties of Han and Ming—things so fragile that the Chinese called them "frozen air," and so precious that they were worth their weight in rubies.

I was thoroughly bored by his graphic cataloguing of the stock of his junkshop, and had given up the attempt to stifle a yawn, when he wound up with:

"And I've something else, Alvarde, that will appeal to you as an interior decorator."

"Indeed?" I masked the yawn with my hand.

"Yes, sir. Weirdest thing you ever saw; regular old marrow-freezer! They call it 'the cloth of madness,' and there's a legend to the effect that whoever looks at it loses his reason. Some vengeful old raja had it woven for the special benefit of some friends he suspected of forgetting that the harem is sacred, inviolate."

"Well, did it work?" I queried, more for the sake of politeness than anything else.

"They say it did. According to tradition he had an asylumful of crazy friends and acquaintances in less than no time. Anyhow, I couldn't get one of the natives to look at the thing. Rummy lot, those Indians."

I smiled my appreciation of the wily old maharaja's finesse.

"What does it look like, this 'cloth of madness' of yours?" I asked.

"Oh," Enright spread his hands wide in preparation for an eloquent description, "it's—it's—it's— Oh, hang it all, man, I can't describe the beastly thing to you! All red and full of funny, twisty black lines, like snakes and lizards and—why, Alvarde, it's like an X-ray of a guilty conscience! Come around to the shop and see for yourself; I'd never be able to make you imagine the thing's damnable fascination."

"There might be an idea for some bizarre pattern in wall-hanging," I reflected. "New designs are hard to find nowadays." So I went with him to the shop.

He undid several yards of cocomattng wrappings and unfurled a small oblong of crimson cloth for my inspection.

At first sight of the thing I was ready to laugh in his face; for, save for a rather unusual combination of involuted and convoluted black lines and stripes on the cloth's red ground, it seemed to differ in no particular from hundreds of other Oriental tapestries.

Enright must have seen the unspoken skepticism in my face, for the corners of his small hazel eyes wrinkled in amusement.

"Go ahead and laugh," he invited, "but I'll bet you ten dollars that you'll be ready to cry 'nough' by the time you've looked at it steadily for five minutes."

For answer I drew a bill from my pocket and placed it on a tabouret, without taking my eyes from the bit of weaving.

Enright matched my note with one of his, and drew back, smiling whimsically at me through the smoke of his cigar.

"Hand me your ten when the five minutes are up," I ordered, keeping my gaze fixed on the cloth.

"Easy now," he counseled, glancing at his watch; "you've only been looking forty seconds, so far."

One who has never tried it has no conception of how time drags while the eyes are focused on an immovable object. In the quiet of the storeroom I could hear the ticking of Enright's watch distinctly, and the ticks seemed a minute apart. An almost uncontrollable desire to rub my eyes, to shut them, to direct them anywhere but at the cloth, came over me. The writhing broad and narrow black bands on the ruby surface seemed to be slowly coming to life. They wound and twisted, one upon another, like the shadows of scores of snakes suspended in the sunlight. They seemed alternately to advance and retreat upon their glaring resting-place, and my eyes ached with the effort to follow their serpentine movements.

I began to be obsessed with the thought that there really were reptiles—dozens of them, scores of them, hundreds of them—behind me; that they would drop upon me any moment, smearing my body with their loathsome slime, tearing my flesh with their fangs, filling my blood with their deadly venom.

"Time up?" I called, my voice sounding hoarse and croaking in my own ears.

"Only two minutes more to go," Enright answered pleasantly.

"I'll—stick—it—out—if—it—kills—me!" I muttered between my teeth, and, covering my eyes with my hands, fell choking and gasping to my knees.

The infernal cloth had won. Scornful and determined as I had been, it had worn my nerves to shreds and

made a whimpering, fear-crazed thing of me in three minutes.

"How much will you take for that thing, Enright?" I asked, when I had recovered my composure to some extent.

"More than you're able to give, son," he replied. "I'll get a half-grown fortune from some museum for that bit of fancy work or my name isn't Howard Enright."

"Well," I temporized, "will you rent it to me, then? I'd like to have a modified copy of it made by my paper manufacturer. Some client with a diseased mind might want a chamber of horrors done, and a denatured copy of this cloth would be just the thing."

"Promise me on your honor as a gentleman not to have a duplicate made, and I'll lend it to you for forty-eight hours for nothing," Enright offered.

"Done!" I agreed.

I took the tapestry to my paper-maker this afternoon. I have ordered two rolls of paper made in exact imitation of it. I shall paper the unfinished tower room with it.

THE trap is set. Working at night, and without help, I have hung the walls and ceiling of the tower attic room with the paper. This room is small, hardly more than a large closet, and, being originally intended for a lumber room, is without windows or other communication with the outside except a small fresh-air vent in the roof.

With an idea of obtaining the maximum amount of room for storage purposes, I had dispensed with all wood trim and had the door made flush with the wall. This renders the place ideal for my purpose, for I am able to cover every fractional inch of wall space with the paper; so that, when the door is closed, the maddening design is presented to the gaze from every direction except the floor. This I have painted white, the better

to reflect the glare from the cluster of high-power nitrogen-filled electric lights I have placed in the ceiling.

Early this morning, when I had finally completed my work, I switched on the full force of light and looked about me.

From above, the glare of the electric bulbs beat down like the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah; from the white floor the reflection smote my eyes like splinters of incandescent metal, and from the walls and ceiling the writhing, tortuous design of the demoniacal paper glared like (to use Enright's description) "an X-ray of a guilty conscience."

I had been careful to leave the door open when I tried my experiment. Lucky for me I did; for I had scarcely glanced once round the hideous apartment when I began to feel the same panic fear I had experienced when I first looked at the cloth in Enright's store. My eyes seemed bulging from their sockets; my breath came hot and quick, like the breath of a sleeper bound fast in a nightmare, and I all but lost my sense of direction. It was with great effort that I found the open door and staggered through it, with the sweat of mortal terror standing on my forehead.

I have been very good to Edith these last few days. I have endeavored to anticipate her every wish; have come back from the city loaded with bonbons and flowers like a country bumpkin wooing his sweetheart; I have doubled her allowance of spending money.

Last evening, after dinner, she kissed me, of her own volition. I felt my plan for vengeance weaken a little as her arms went round my neck. . . . Fool! Her lips are soiled with another man's kisses; her arms are tainted with the embraces of her paramour.

I looked into her eyes, warm and brown and bright, and wondered how often they had shone with love of Fuller. How long, I wondered, had

it been since the same arm which rested on my shoulder had clasped the neck of the man who called himself my friend—and stole my honor like a common thief?

I shall invite Fuller to the house to spend the week-end. My trap is set; now to snare the quarry.

IT IS DONE.

Last week I mentioned casually to Edith that I had asked Fuller up for the week-end. I saw her eyes brighten at the suggestion, but chose to misinterpret the sign.

"It's no use making a fuss about it," I told her. "I know you don't like him; but I want him here, so you might just as well make the best of it."

She made no reply, simply rose and left the room. As a play-actor Edith is a sad failure. I suppose she feared her joy would be too apparent, even to a doting fool husband, if she remained.

When Fuller came I made a great show of urging her to be courteous to him, and greeted him cordially myself.

Fuller's was a charming personality. Quick-witted, loquacious, well read and much traveled, he was an ideal guest, providing his own and his host's entertainment. We passed a pleasant afternoon together.

I never saw Edith more charming than at dinner that night. There was a faint flush in her face, her eyes were very bright. She was wearing a gown of silver over sapphire, and had a jasmine blossom pinned in the smooth coils of her chocolate-colored hair.

The corners of my mouth flexed grimly at sight of the flower. Once, when I was in South America, I had seen a vicious knife duel between two men, and when I asked the cause of the brawl, I was told that one had offered the other's sister a jasmine bloom. Jasmine, they explained, was the symbol of inconstancy. Strange,

that of all the flowers in my grounds and conservatory Edith should have chosen the badge of infidelity to wear that night!

From my seat at the head of the table I could see Fuller worshipping Edith with his eyes. There was that in his adoring gaze which gave one to think of a mediæval knight kneeling humbly at his fair lady's feet, while her husband was off to the erusades.

We had coffee in the music room. Edith seemed ill at ease, fumbling with her cup, twirling the stem of her liqueur glass between her fingers, toying nervously with her cigarette. Before Fuller and I had finished, she rose abruptly and went to the piano.

There was no light burning in the room, and the moon laid a path of mother-of-pearl across the polished floor. With the silver radiance of the moonlight on the silver meshes of her gown, Edith was white as a wraith of the night. A snatch from Oscar Wilde's *Salome* flashed through my mind:

She is like a dead woman; a dead woman who covers herself with a veil and goes seeking for lovers.

I smiled to myself in the darkness. "She will seek no more after to-night," I reflected.

"Ah, moon of my delight, that know'st no wane,
The moon of heav'n is rising once again;
How oft hereafter rising shall she look
Through this same garden after one—in vain?"

she sang. I rose and began to pace the room.

Gradually, taking great pains to be impersonal about it, I swung the conversation to stories of vengeance wreaked by outraged husbands on faithless wives and their paramours. Incidentally, I recounted the legend of the cloth of madness; how the Indian prince had demanded his treacherous friends' sanity as the price of their perfidy.

Edith's hands fluttered among the sheets of music on the piano; a leaf of

it fell to the floor. Fuller leaped gallantly to his feet to retrieve it for her, and their hands came together in the moonlight. I saw his fingers close round hers and give them a reassuring pressure.

"What would you do, Alvarde, if you caught another man trespassing on your wife's affections?" Fuller suddenly shot at me. "Kill him?"

Edith gave a short little choking gasp and put her hand to her throat very suddenly. She had always been afraid of me.

"My dear man," I drawled, "do I look like such a fool?"

"Fool?" he echoed wonderingly.

"Precisely; 'fool' is what I said. Why should I hang for another man's sin? I rather think the old raja's method of revenge would appeal to me."

"But, you know," he objected, "the cloth of madness is only a myth."

"So is my wife's incontinence," I answered shortly. "One is quite as possible as the other."

And so we let the talk of betrayed friendship and its price drop, and passed to a discussion of interior decorations.

I told them of my more unusual bits of work for a while, then suggested:

"Let's go to the tower rooms. I've evolved a new scheme in wall-hangings for them. One of the rooms especially will interest you two."

We went through the larger rooms, I pointing out the novelties in color scheme, pattern and wood trim, they taking only a perfunctory interest in my designs.

At the door of the storeroom I stood aside to let them pass. Edith paused at the threshold, looking questioningly, fearfully, into the velvety darkness of the little chamber. Fuller stepped before her.

"Let me go first," he said; "it's dark in there."

"Yes," I echoed, all the smoldering resentment I had felt for months

flaming up in my voice, "it is dark in there, but"—my words rose nearly to a shriek—"we'll lighten it."

I put out my hand, pushing Edith roughly through the doorway after Fuller, slammed the door, locked it, and pressed the switch which controlled the electric lights. Then I bent listening at the keyhole.

For the space of a long breath all was silent in the little room; then there was a deep-drawn sigh, whether from Edith or Fuller I could not say.

"Well, what's next?" I heard him ask. "If this is Jamison's idea of a joke, I think he's showing mighty poor taste."

An insane desire to chuckle came over me. They'd see, very soon, whether I was joking. I wanted to pound on the door; to shout aloud and bid them look about them; to tell them what lay in store.

"Hector," it was Edith speaking in a still, frightened whisper, "he *knew!*"

Fuller's steps sounded harshly on the bare, polished floor of the empty room as he strode about it, seeking an exit; his fists pounded the walls in search of the hidden door. I had to stifle the laughter in my throat; for I knew how the rounded walls, the unbroken monotony of the crimson and black paper, and the glaring reflection from the white floor would confound his sense of direction. He was pacing the room like a blind, caged beast, striking the walls again and again in the same place, and meeting with no more success than an imprisoned bumble-bee flying at the transparent walls of a poison-jar.

For several minutes he continued his futile efforts; then I heard him withdraw to the center of the room.

There was a faint rustle of skirts. She was shrinking up against him.

"She's in his arms, now," I muttered. "Let her cling to him; let him hold her. I wish them joy of each other."

Several minutes more. Then:

"Hector, I'm afraid; I'm terrified. Hold me close, dear."

I bit my lips. Would that devil's design on the walls never begin to work?

"Hector," this time the words came quaveringly, as though she were fighting back a chill, "that paper on the wall—does it seem to you as if the figures on it were moving?"

"Yes, dear."

"They are like snakes—like horrible twisting snakes. I feel as though they were going to spring at me from the walls."

"A-a-h!" I murmured to myself, rubbing my hands together softly, like one who has won a wager. "They're beginning to notice now."

Fuller took several quick, decided steps from the room's center, walking directly toward the door. I drew back and seized a chair, ready to strike him down if he succeeded in breaking through the light wooden frame. I had not counted on his retaining his faculties so long, and had taken no precautions to reinforce the lock, trusting the paper with which it was covered to mask the door effectively.

Within a foot or so of the door he paused irresolutely, waited a moment, and retreated.

"I can't do it!" he almost wailed. "I can't bear to put my hands against that wall!"

"Hector!" This time there was no mistaking the panic in Edith's voice; every word came with a gasp. "The paper—the paper on the wall; it—it's—the—cloth—of—madness! It's that awful tapestry he told us about to-night."

"My God, girl," his reply came thickly, as though his tongue were swollen in his mouth, "you're right!"

I could hear them breathing heavily, like spent runners after a race, or those in the presence of mortal danger.

Softly, there came the sound of Edith's sobbing. Very low it was,

and very pitiful, like the disconsolate heart-broken sobbing of a little child who has lost its mother, and is afraid.

"Oh!" she whimpered, "let me hide my face against you, dear. Don't let me look at those ghastly things on the walls. You must shut your eyes, too, dear; you must not look either."

I waited patiently outside the door. Even closed eyes, I knew, could not withstand the intense glare of those lights and the fascination of those flame-colored walls.

Her resolution broke even sooner than I had expected.

"I can't bear the darkness," she wailed. "I must look, I must see them—the horrible snakes, the hideous snakes that are beckoning to me from the walls. Hold me, Hector darling; don't let me move—don't let me go to them! Hold me fast in your arms."

Another pause. Dimly I caught another noise—one that I had not heard before. Sharp and syncopated it was, like the clicking of castanets heard from a distance. It puzzled me at first; then recognition burst upon me, and I had to thrust my tongue against my teeth to keep from laughing aloud. It was a sound I'd heard on very cold nights when I'd passed shivering newsboys fleching a little heat from above some engine-room grating. It was the sound of chattering teeth.

It was warm that night; the temperature in that little, poorly ventilated room, with those great lights burning in it, must have been like the entrance to Avernus; yet their teeth were chattering like a monk's clap-dish. Stark, freezing terror had them by the throats.

I was striding softly across the floor, digging my nails into my palms in an effort to keep from giving audible vent to my feeling of triumph, when my steps were arrested by a titter from the room beyond. Edith was laughing, not mirthfully, but with the shrill cachinnation of

hysteria. In a moment her quavering treble was seconded by a deep, masculine baritone. The pair of them were laughing in concert, and from the cracking strain in their voices I knew that they were trying with all their strength to keep silence, yet laughed the harder as they strove.

I turned on my heel and descended to the dining-room. No need to listen further, I knew. A few hours more, at most, and my revenge would be complete. I was shivering a little, myself.

Downstairs, I poured out a stiff peg of Scotch. Raising my glass I looked out into the moonlight, apostrophizing the old raja who invented the cloth of madness.

"Here's to you, brother!" I said as I turned my glass bottom up.

Shortly after midnight I climbed the stairs to the tower and stopped before the door of the little room where I left them. I listened intently for a minute. There was no more sound from beyond the door than if it had barred the entrance to a tomb.

I pressed the electric switch, reducing the force of the lights within by half, then unlocked the door and opened it a crack, peering through the narrow opening.

Inside, everything was still, still as a nursery at midnight.

Fuller was sitting upright in the middle of the floor, an inane smirk overspreading his face. His collar and tie were undone, his waistcoat was unbuttoned, his shirt-front was partly loosened from its studs, and much wrinkled. His tongue protruded from his mouth, hanging flaccidly over his lower lip, as though he had lost control of it. Altogether, he was a figure of comic tragedy, like that character of Victor Hugo's whose face had been so horribly deformed in childhood that, no matter what his emotion was, he could do nothing but grin.

Nearer the door, just as she had fallen, lay Edith. One arm was ex-

tended, the hand resting palm up on the floor, the fingers slightly curled, like a sleeping child's. Her cheek lay pillowed on her arms. Her hair was a little disarranged and the jasmine flower had fallen from it. One of her satin pumps had dropped off and lay gaping emptily beside her, exposing her narrow, silk-cased foot. I could see the veins of her instep showing blue against the white flesh under her silver-tissue stocking. Her lips were parted very slightly.

The air of the place was heavy with the perfume of lily of the valley.

I gathered her in my arms, and she whimpered a little, like a child that is disturbed in its sleep, as I carried her down to her room.

It was difficult business disrobing her and getting her into bed, for she seemed to have lost all control of her muscles, even being unable to take the pins from her hair.

Fuller was a heavy man, but somehow I managed to drag him downstairs and tumble him into bed, being careful to scatter his clothes about the room as was his custom when turning in late.

Last of all I returned to the tower and worked like a fiend, obliterating every trace of the wall-paper's design with the gray paint I had hidden away for that purpose. Two hours' heart-breaking work, and the little room was as demure in its fresh coating of Quaker drab as a nun's cell. A neat, well-lighted storeroom it was, nothing more. Every lingering sign of the cloth of madness was hidden away forever.

I slept well into the morning next day, rousing only when Grigsby came rushing into my room and shook me roughly by the shoulder.

"Mr. Alvarde, sir," he panted, his eyes bulging from his face like a terrified frog's, "something terrible has happened, sir!"

"What's the matter?" I growled at him sleepily. "Cook gone on a strike?"

"Oh, no, sir, no!" He wrung his hands together in anguish. "It's really terrible, sir! Mr. Fuller's a-sittin' on the edge of his bed, a-tryin' to put both feet into one leg of his trousers, sir, and he's smilin' something awful." And Grigsby attempted to twist his heavy features into an imitation of Fuller's demented grin.

I got into my slippers and robe and started across the hall for Fuller's room, running full tilt into Agnes, the waitress. When Edith had failed to come down long after her usual breakfast hour, Agnes had gone upstairs to see what was detaining her, and had come running to me, fear written in every line of her face.

"Oh, sir, something's wrong with Mrs. Alvarde! I went in to call her, and she wouldn't answer me, nor look at me, nor nothing; just lies there and laughs and mumbles at herself, like she was a baby!"

"You're a pair of fools," I told her and Grigsby. "You stay here; I'll go and see for myself."

It was true. Fuller was as perfect an imbecile as was ever confined in an asylum, and Edith's mental timepiece had been turned back thirty-five years. No babe in arms was ever more helpless in body and mind than she.

THE papers and the doctors and the neighbors made a great fuss about it. Everyone sympathized with my unfortunate wife and friend and wondered how I could stand my terrible misfortune with such fortitude. I closed the house and sold it at a loss several months later.

Edith is still at a sanatorium, and the physicians look sorrowfully at me when I go out to visit her, and tell me that she will never be anything but a grown-up infant, though she will probably live to a ripe old age.

Fuller's malady has taken a turn for the worse. Last month they had

to restrain him with a strait-jacket. He was raving about some strange kind of cloth—what it was they couldn't make out—and threatening to kill me: me, his best and oldest friend!

"Let me go first, it's dark in there!" Fuller said when he and Edith stood at the entrance of the storeroom. I've often wondered which one of them went into the darkness of insanity first. Edith, I imagine; women have no control of their emotions.

I AM a sick man. The physician tells me that there's nothing to worry about, but I read my death sentence in his eyes. If there's such a place as

the hell the preachers tell of, I suppose I'll go there. At least, I'll have to die to do it; Edith and Fuller got theirs here, and it will last through all the long years they live like brute beasts in their madhouse cells.

* * * * *

JAMISON ALVARDE'S attorney closed the little black book with a snap and pursed his lips. Anyone looking at him would have said that he was about to whistle.

"Yes," he said meditatively, fapping his knee with the little book, "if there's a hell he's undoubtedly there now! It's a pity if he isn't. This scheme of things certainly seems to require a hell—a good hot one, too!"