

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

NOVEMBER, 1942

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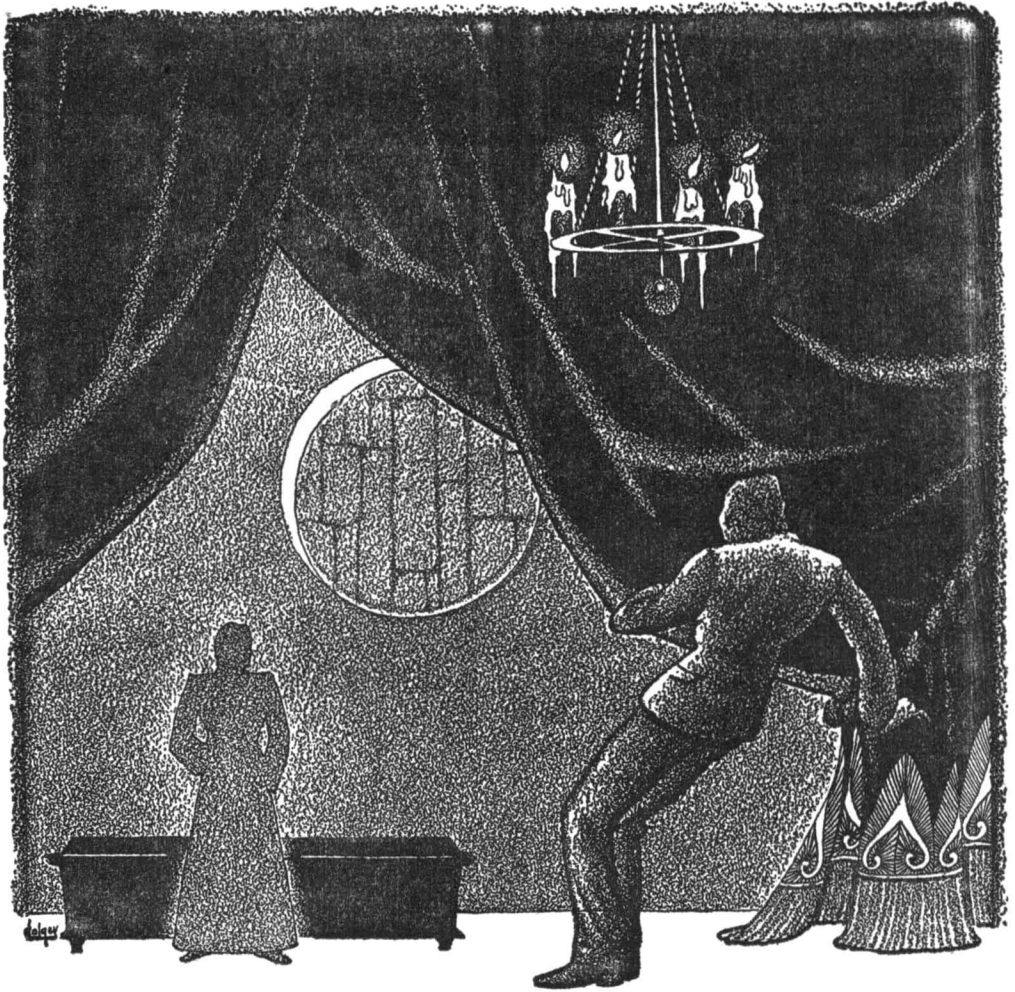
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The

*A house that's capable of murder . . . and it was
willed to me!*



Crooked House

By *THORNE LEE*

IT TAKES all kinds of houses to make a world, I suppose—even houses that are capable of murder.

Heaven knows, I didn't want to inherit

Rydell Oaks. It was a misshapen creature of a house that should never have been built. My brother, Garson, was the designer, and like Frankenstein's monster his

house turned upon him and killed him.

Dr. Rascob saw my brother die. Garson Rydell grew old in a single week, right before the doctor's eyes. His flesh withered, his hair greyed, and life dried up in his veins—the process of years condensed into a few hours. He had just passed his thirtieth year, but Dr. Rascob would have staked his reputation that Garson Rydell died of old age!

The doctor could not understand it. I can understand it now. Garson lived a year at Rydell Oaks before he died. It was the house that made him old before his time.

And Garson willed the house to me!

RANDALL BAUDER was the second man to live at Rydell Oaks. There were no secrets about the place. I told him how my brother died. I told him that I was afraid of the place, as a man is afraid of the dark for a reason which he cannot understand, some dark memory buried in his forgotten boyhood. But Randall was the sort of chap who would be happy to inherit a ghost.

For six months Randall rented the estate, staged the lavish parties for which he was famous, and never complained.

On the seventh month in place of his regular check I received a terse note, which said: "You are an excellent and generous landlord, Avery. You mind your own business. I like that. But please explain why you have rented the house to another party without my knowledge. It is a very uncomfortable situation, sharing the house with another family. The lady is wonderful, but you might have introduced me formally. Her husband is a devil! Will you straighten out this matter at once? Come up for the week-end. Randall.

I asked Dr. Rascob to drive out with me Friday evening. The thin, shriveled little doctor had been the family friend and adviser for two generations.

We neeled our way through the heavy

traffic of the Coast Highway. By the time we reached the foothills moist fingers of fog slithered around our headlights like the tentacles of an octopus.

"I am not happy," I muttered, poking the sedan cautiously through that boiling gray scum. "If Randall is pulling a joke, I'm going to be damned sore! I didn't rent that house to another party. I've never even considered it!"

"It's very strange," the doctor admitted. "I have never yet heard of anyone moving into the wrong house, but I suppose it can happen."

"As far as that goes, there's room for three or four families at the Oaks," I said.

"Why did your brother waste his fortune building such a monstrous place? Did he ever explain it to you?"

Groping back in my memory was like probing through that blanket of fog. "I think he did," I mused, "but I was too young to remember. He was almost a generation older than I, y'know. He died so young!"

"So young!" echoed Dr. Rascob. "I wish I was sure of that."

"So do I. They told me he died of a mysterious malady. Malady, hell!" I sneered. "It was the house! It's like an evil disease, that place. The house killed him!"

THE doctor swung around to study my tight face and twitching cheeks. "Non-sense, Avery!" he snorted.

"No, no! I believe that!" I insisted. "Doctor, can you imagine a place in this world where time does not exist, where life does not move forward or backward but in a kind of revolving cycle, like a roulette wheel?"

"Whatever made you think of a thing like that?"

"I don't know, exactly," I admitted. "I believe it was something Garson told me before he died. I was so young. Sometimes I get to thinking about time, how

slow it moves—like a millwheel. But what if it were suddenly speeded up? What if it became a terrific tornado sweeping us out of existence. Remember, Doctor—you told me yourself! Garson Rydell lived only a year at the Oaks, and yet in that year he grew to be an old man!"

The two great oaks guarding the Rydell driveway loomed in the fog like massive staring heads with long hanks of hair standing stiffly on end. Old Bixby, Randall's only servant, waved us into the garage with a flashlight.

The house was a sprawling black island in the sea of fog. A solitary light gleamed from the library windows. Bixby showed us the way, and we found Randall Bauder there, his long striped pajama legs dangling over a chair arm.

I stared down at him in the hard light. He had been dozing, and his head lifted wearily to greet us. There was a moment before he moved that he seemed to be an inhuman thing, a kind of plaster model of himself, like a man who has mummified while he slept.

THE doctor noticed it, too. Every line, every crease in Randall's face had lengthened and deepened, as though time had been hacking away at it with a chisel.

"Glad to see you," he said, and his face came alive again when he pulled his long body out of the chair.

Randall was a handsome, keen-eyed fellow with a shock of thick black hair. I wondered if the gray streaks were really there, or just some trick of the smoky light.

He waved us to chairs, and I noticed the slightly bored look of the wealthy sportsman was missing. Instead his eyes and hands were shifty, restless. He kept peering over our shoulders as if he expected someone to appear.

Dr. Rascob perched on his chair, toying with his tiny gray mustache, studying Randall.

I didn't waste time. "What sort of stunt is this?" I demanded.

"Stunt?" he repeated.

"That letter of yours," I said. "What did you mean by it?"

He frowned. "On the contrary, Avery—what did you mean by it? It isn't like you to rent the place without even giving me notice."

"What nonsense is this?" I exploded. "I haven't rented this house to anyone else?"

One thin eyebrow cocked up, skeptically. "Oh, come now, Avery. Don't try to duck out like that. The lady says she rented it from you personally."

"What lady? What the devil—"

"Are you trying to tell me that you have never seen these people?"

"I'm telling you that I have never talked to anyone about renting this house, never so much as thought about it!" I snapped. "If there's someone making such a claim, I wish you would produce him!"

Randall's eyes flashed. "I will! I'll get them down here right now. We'll have this thing settled tonight!"

He was gone up the stairs in a bound.

"By George, he's not joking. He's got someone here all right!" I muttered.

We both moved to the library doorway when a door slammed overhead. Randall appeared, drifting down the long curved stairway, which seemed to flow out of the upper darkness like a winding, sluggish stream.

At the foot he turned back, facing the stairs.

"Have you people met Avery Rydell, or haven't you?" he demanded coldly.

Dr. Rascob and I stared upward. Sweat broke out on my face. The stairway and the upper hall were empty.

OF COURSE we had to tell Randall that there was no one in the house. He wouldn't believe us at first. How can you

possibly convince a man that he is suffering a delusion?

For a while Randall was nasty, almost ferocious about it, but Dr. Rascob's psychology was brilliant, and he finally soothed the patient. The doctor insisted it was only a temporary mental derangement, definitely curable.

I was not pleased with Dr. Rascob's suggestion that I move in with Randall for a while, but I had no choice. Any man can be a coward, but only an extraordinary man will admit it.

My peace of mind was not improved next morning when I talked with Bixby. The tall, hook-shouldered old fellow had been a butler so long that I don't think he ever had a thought of his own. His mind worked mechanically, turning off and on at his master's wish.

"No, sir, I haven't seen the other people, sir," he told me. "Mr. Bauder likes me to keep close to my own quarters when he don't need me, but I must say, sir, they do make a mess of my kitchen, the new folks."

"How's that?" I snapped. "Randall doesn't use the kitchen."

"Only on parties, sir. We have in the catering people to help us then. But I keep an eye on things, I do, and nothing's like it was since the new ones came."

"You mean the utensils have actually been used?" I said.

"Yes, sir. That they have. I don't rightly think they would move around by themselves."

"You too, Bixby?" I groaned. "Well, I'll be damned!"

This was a new angle. It was too much to believe that two men in a house were suffering the same delusion.

I found Randall moping in the library and dragged him out to breakfast at the local hotel. We sat through the meal scowling at each other.

"Randall, I have a theory," I said suddenly. "Would you mind describing that

lady to me—the one who's been haunting you?"

His face brightened. "It's a pleasure! She would be about shoulder high to you, Avery. Very beautiful, but she has a manner of melting into the scene. Shy, she seems. Her skin is white as—as a ghost, I guess. Very odd style of make-up she uses, too. I've never seen anything like it; under certain lights it makes the face as radiant as a sunset. And her hair! Well, that's really something out of this world! Instead of pouring down around her shoulders, it flows up from her head like water running up-hill. It's a fountain of gold!"

"Wonderful!" I breathed. "Y'know, Randall, I don't entirely agree with Dr. Rascob. I think the real source of your mystery is that house. Here's my theory: You've lived at the Oaks for six months. This phantom, or whatever it is that you see, is visible only to people who have lived there—*who have come under the strange influence of the house!* I say the mystery is some illusion—a kind of mirage—created by the house itself!"

Randall clutched suddenly at my hands. "Bixby! I never thought to ask the old boy. What about Bixby? I've told him about these people, but has he seen them—?"

I shook my head. "I asked him this morning. He's seen nothing, but he does complain about misplaced utensils."

"That's it!" Randall was on his feet yanking me up by the shoulders. "You see, Avery. If another man can be aware of it, then it's not in my mind. It's something real—something that lives in that house!"

I looked long at his gleaming, sunken eyes. If there was insanity in them, I couldn't see it.

"I think I'll stick around," I said. "If this girl is as lovely as you say, I'd like to be haunted myself!"

Randall sighed deeply. He squeezed my arms until they ached.

MY VISIT ran over into the second week. Fascinated, I watched Randall Bauder gradually display all the symptoms of a lunatic, although his face and eyes were sane. Finally, when he began to talk and gesture to himself, I cornered him in the great vault of a salon.

I had paced off that salon more than once, and it was only ordinary size, but somehow it gave the impression of vast space. You can look into a well and it seems utterly bottomless until a dropping stone wrinkles the water into life, and so this room seemed limitless until persons moved in it to give it perspective. The furniture was a collection from many parts of the world, and it ranged in style as far back as early Egyptian. That was part of my brother's absurd idea of architecture and design. He seemed to have crowded all of space and time into a single room.

I pushed Randall in a Louis XIV chair and towered over him to the limit of my six feet. "You've really got it bad, brother," I said. "Did you know that you're actually talking to yourself?"

His feverish eyes gleamed. "Really?" he gasped. "Did you hear me? When?"

"Yesterday. The day before. It's getting to be a regular routine."

"The hell it is! What did I say, Avery?" I pondered. "There was one queer moment right in this room. You were facing my chair here, just as you are now. I was standing on the curve of the stairway which offers a direct view. I distinctly heard you say, 'This is my home. There must be a mistake. I've lived here for months. Not that you aren't welcome. In fact, if you would just sit there for a half hour and let me look at you, I'd happily hand over my keys to you—'"

Randall's maniacal shriek cut me short. "Avery, I remember that! I remember every word of it! Then, I have found her, Avery. I've talked to her. She's here in this house!"

"Nonsense!" I scoffed. "You were talking to an empty chair. You've simply let this mental illusion take hold of your imagination."

"But she answered me, Avery! We carried on a regular conversation. I thought it was just my crazy illusion again, but this proves it was real!"

Fiercely, I shook him until his teeth chattered. "Shut up, you fool!" I hissed, and sweat broke out on my face at the stupid, groping look of him. "There can't be any girl, really. It's madness!"

He rose stiffly. "I think you're getting a little jealous of me, Avery. Maybe you should leave."

"Like hell, I'll leave, and let you beat out your brains on the furniture! Next thing you'll be making love to the lounge!"

I stormed into the hallway and phoned Dr. Rascob. "Get over here in a hurry, Doc," I snapped. "This thing is getting beyond me."

I WALKED out to the end of the long, oak-lined drive to meet the doctor. The disc of the setting sun was balanced on a black mountain peak—a red ball on the nose of a seal.

At a curve of the road, I swung back to face the house. My knees suddenly gave way in sheer panic.

Rydell Mansion was gone and in its place was a tortured skeleton of a house! Only a few blackened stumps of the framework were standing, as though the whole sprawling structure had been blasted into ruin by a single, soundless explosion. Some tangent of my brain issued orders to weakened legs, and I staggered back along the road. I ran faster as reason seemed to pump back into my mind. At the edge of the vast carpet of green lawn I came to a stunned halt.

"What—?" I gasped. The house was still there, exactly as it had ever been. Old Bixby was clipping rosebuds in the arbor.

My mind couldn't grasp an explanation. I just sank into the grass and waited for Dr. Rascob.

The doctor noticed my trouble when his gray sedan pulled up beside me. "Who's the sick man here?" he asked, pulling me to my feet.

"Watch your step, Doc," I muttered. "This house creeps up on you. It's a monster, damn it, a monster!"

"What's happened to Randall?"

"He's babbling," I said, leaning heavily on the doctor. "Thinks he's found his girl, and goes around talking to empty furniture!"

Before we reached the salon, I cautioned, "Let's try to avoid Randall until you've had time to observe him in action. He might clam shut, if he suspected he was watched."

"What do you suggest?"

"I'd like to have a look at his den on the second floor," I said. "It belonged to my brother once. I've been afraid to look in it by myself."

IT WAS not difficult to trace Randall to the library, where he was drinking himself into a stupor. We left him alone and slipped furtively up the stairway.

I stepped first into the den, took one look, and whirled frantically toward the doctor. My breath whistled out in a long gasp.

The doctor studied me shrewdly. "What is it?" he said.

"The sight of this room stirred an old memory," I explained. "I thought for a moment that it was Garson, my brother, standing behind me. Thank heaven it was you!"

We sat down in semi-darkness. I had lost all enthusiasm for exploring. As twilight deepened, the walls of the small den gradually moved out of range of my sight, giving the impression that the room was expanding like a tremendous balloon and

leaving us in the center of a vast well of space.

"Do you feel anything?" I asked suddenly.

The doctor laughed. "Am I supposed to?"

"How long have we been sitting here?"

"About five minutes, I guess," he said. The flame of a lighter sputtered between his fingers, splashed the vague walls with bars of light. I heard the doctor give a soft cry. "It's impossible!"

"What?" I demanded.

"My watch says eleven o'clock!"

My trembling fingers dragged a watch out of my vest. "That's right! Why, that would be six hours!"

"It can't be!" insisted the doctor. "Come with me."

The two of us groped into the black hallway, hand in hand, and felt our way down the endless, twisting staircase. At the last bend in the stairway we both stiffened. Light boiled out of the salon in a blue mist. I smelled tobacco fumes. Randall stood alone beside a low Regency couch, but his attitude was appalling. His arms were looped wide in front of his rigid body and his head bent forward, the lips pressing downward. His body swayed slightly, for all the world as if he held a slender woman in his arms and was kissing her passionately!

At that very moment his head jerked sideways and he sprawled to the couch as though he had been struck a heavy blow. He staggered slowly to his feet and spoke to someone out of sight in the darkened hall below us.

"You don't understand!" Randall gasped.

There was a horrid pause, but no one answered.

"It was not her fault! I am to blame!" Randall went on.

Still that awful silence in response.

"Punish me!" Randall pleaded. "I

forced myself upon her. I don't belong here. I know that now."

Moving in unison, Dr. Rascob and I crept slowly down the stairs.

"Don't shoot!" Randall choked, panic in his voice.

"Come on!" I hissed.

I caught one glimpse of Randall's lunging body before I lost sight of the salon door. Tumbling recklessly down the lower half of the stairway, the doctor and I piled in a heap at the bottom. We both had heard a dreadful, faint spat, spat, and then the thud of a falling body.

Dr. Rascob reached Randall's body first. He rolled it over and I stared for a moment at the ghastly blue face. Then I saw two tiny holes in the white shirt-front. Some thick, scorched stuff that was more like red powder than blood oozed slowly out of them.

I whirled with a roar and dashed along the dark corridor. I gripped a chair and hurled it wildly into the blackness at the murderer who lurked there. There was a splintering crash, silence, and then a low sobbing which seemed to come from my own throat.

IT WAS only the presence of Dr. Rascob and the absence of a weapon that saved me from a charge of murder. I believe the local townspeople have always been suspicious of me since the case was abandoned.

The circumstances were damning: No signs of any persons whatsoever in the house except Bixby, Dr. Rascob, and myself. The murderer had safely hidden not only himself but the gun which fired those fatal shots.

Young Sheriff Stone was the most puzzled man of all. I became quite friendly with him during the investigation. A month later he told me the final summary of the most amazing case he had ever studied.

Thin, sharp-eyed, the sheriff faced me

sternly across his desk, and said, "We're letting you go, Rydell. Our police system hasn't much imagination. We can't understand how a man could have two bullet-holes in him, and no signs of the bullets, or the gun, or the man who fired it. As far as we have been able to determine there is no gun in existence capable of killing a man as Randall Bauder was killed; the best we could do was to turn up a remote inventor on the other side of the continent who claims to be in the process of inventing such a gun! There has never been such a deadly instrument known to science. I couldn't describe those wounds to you in my own words!

"What kind of bullet is it that penetrates a man's heart and then dissolves itself into his flowing blood? We can't figure it out, Rydell; so we're bound to close the case without a verdict."

After my release, I paid only one final visit to Rydell house. It would be sealed shut, I decided. There was no use attempting to rent a place with two black marks on its reputation. My brother had died from a fantastic malady. Randall Bauder was murdered by a killer who did not seem to exist. Two mysterious deaths in a house are enough to put it in permanent quarantine.

I don't know what possessed me to make that final inspection of the house before boarding it up, or what mysterious guide led me that afternoon to the room that had been Randall Bauder's den, and my brother Garson's study.

I shuddered unnaturally when I pushed through the door. My eyes were slow in becoming accustomed to the light which filtered through drawn blinds. I heard the door click behind me. Then I saw the man sitting behind the desk, and I turned and tore frantically at the knob which had suddenly become useless.

"Sit down, Avery," said a dreadfully familiar voice. "There is nothing to fear."

Automatically, I drifted to a chair in the

corner. I sat paralyzed. I could say nothing. I dared not look down at my own body for fear I would find the trembling limbs of a little boy. I realized suddenly that I was listening to a memory which had haunted me for nearly twenty years.

It was my brother who sat behind the low desk. I could only gulp and stare at him. His black brow was lifted in a weird slant, and one round, popping eye dangled in its socket, regarding me from every angle. Garson Rydell had always looked and acted like a caricature of a man. His tall, grotesque body moved in great heaves and leaps, and he loved to sit in ugly, twisted postures like a performing monkey.

Perhaps my parents were to blame for Garson's streak of the fantastic. Mother wanted her eldest to be a minister, and Father wanted a scientist; so Garson compromised by being neither. He became a rather bewildered cross between inventor and philosopher, with the imagination of an artist. He finally settled on architecture, and built only one house!

This was the day that I, Avery Rydell, his little brother, had seen Garson's house for the first time. I sensed rather than saw the strangeness in it.

Garson was trying to explain. Although he was born almost a generation before my time, he always spoke to me as though I were his own age. The memory of his hoarse, croaking voice was perfectly real:

"You will be one hell of a good, solid citizen, Avery; but I am a fool who can't let things be. Whatever happens to me, always try to keep your good, earthly sanity, and you'll be safe enough."

"What's going to happen to you, Garson?" I heard myself whispering.

"Oh," he said carelessly, "some day I'll become the victim of my own mad imagination. I'm glad that Father never lived to see how I've used his money. Sometime this house may belong to you; so I hope you will never be afraid of it—ever."

"A-afraid?" I quavered.

"It's different, Avery. In fact, 'different' hardly describes it. It is, you might say, a mathematical phenomenon. I'll try to explain. You won't understand now, but later it will come to you like a sudden shock, and you will understand.

"Listen closely, Avery, and try to remember: Do you know what we mean by 'space'? Most men always think of space as being confined by six basic walls or sides—that is, the four directions like north, east, south, west, or their variations, plus the up side and the down side. Look, I'll act it out with this twig I've been chewing. This is me, except that I'm not quite so lumpy."

I smiled weakly at the knobby, twisted stick.

"Now," Garson went on, "wherever I happen to face, I am standing in a natural cube with right, left, front, back, top, and bottom sides. All right, I take a look around and I discover that there is one direction I have overlooked. Can you see it?" "No," I murmured.

He shook his great, shaggy head. "Well, suffice it to say that I have proved that time and space are not separate quantities, as science has always believed." His voice suddenly thickened with excitement. "Time is a part of space! It is the seventh side!"

"See!" he cried. "I am this stick. I move myself up and down, back and forth, around a circle. All the while my position changes in respect to the six sides of space that surround me. Well, where was time while all this happened? Has not my position also changed in regard to time?"

I struggled to make an intelligent, grown-up answer. "Time isn't like a wall, Garson. You can back away from a wall. You can't back away from time."

He snapped the stick, and flipped the fragments at me. "Pretty smart, for a boy; but you are wrong. Science has missed that point for centuries. They've got time

marked up as a one-way street, but it isn't at all.

"Listen!" he hissed, leaping to his feet. "My house has seven sides! That is all I can tell you, because it is all you will understand. I have taken the element, *time*, and built it into the structure of this house! What do you think of my house, Avery?"

"It's crooked, Garson!" I cried. "You look at it, and it's crooked!"

My brother threw back his great, ugly head and roared. "Yes, it's a crooked house," he said, and I could still hear the echo of his laugh when I slipped into the hallway, and down the long, endless stairway, and out into the deep afternoon shadows.

I had never been so frightened. I didn't stop running until I reached the crook of the drive. When I looked back, I could plainly see a great black coach drawn up at the door of the house, and six men were carrying a flat wooden box on their shoulders and putting it in the coach.

"Garson! Garson!" I wailed in terror, but I kept on running away from him.

Somewhere on the long hike back to my cottage at Ocean Villa I realized that I was not a little boy who could run away from fear. I was a grown man, Avery Rydell, who had been tricked by an old memory, but I knew now why I had always been afraid of my brother's house; for that day, years ago, after listening to Garson's explanation of his house, I had looked back from the long drive and I had seen my brother's coffin carried away, and a year later my brother died.

AFTER that encounter with a twisted memory in my brother's study, I stayed clear of Rydell House. Occasionally I would have the place cleaned, out of respect for Garson, but I doubt that I would ever have consented to rent it again, if my income had not begun to dwindle. Like so many sons of wealthy men, I had always

considered my Father's success quite enough for two generations. As a result I was beginning to feel the pinch in my late thirties.

During a period of ten years I turned down or scared away a dozen renters, but I finally found a man of such a terrifying manner that I decided he would surely frighten anything more than it could possibly frighten him. He was a European, not very large, but his face displayed the sleek, calm viciousness of a Doberman Pinscher. The thin, pointed strands of his mustache curled and snapped on his lips, accenting the whiplike sting of his works.

He laughed outright when I told him the morbid history of Rydell Oaks. "If every home must be idle because two men had died in it," he said, "we should have a world of vacant houses!"

And so Rydell House became the home of Verni Mauselle and his wife. I often wondered what kind of she-wolf would be the companion of such a man.

TO MY surprise I received a letter from the lady herself within a month, and the same evening I paused once more on the threshold of Rydell House, cold panic fingering my throat.

The door finally drifted open and a woman stood there, a long black gown churning around her body in the draft. Against somber shadows of the hallway her face stood out like a rare jewel. She was very young and very pale, but the rich coloring of her painted cheeks contrasted nicely with the dazzling gold of her hair.

I might have gone on staring for hours. "You're Mr. Rydell?" she questioned cautiously.

I muttered a vague answer and followed her into the salon, awed by the graceful flow of her supple young body.

I toppled from full height, sinking deep in a luxurious divan. The lady's red lips quivered with a smile.

"Have I alarmed you?" she asked, sitting beside me.

I recovered myself. "I'm a bit shocked," I confessed. "Haven't I seen you before?"

"I think not," she said.

I spoke boldly: "Of course I know you! You're the woman I should have married, but never met."

She did not blush. Instead she leaned toward me, trembling, and although it sounds utterly mad I suddenly gripped her shoulders and kissed her like a man possessed.

She did not draw away. For a long timeless moment her lips clung warmly to my own.

"Why did we do that?" she whispered finally.

"I'm sorry," I said. "For just a flash it seemed as though you really were my wife, and this was a perfectly natural thing to do."

HER voice was awed, husky. "Do you know, I felt the same thing. It seemed so perfectly right. I hope you don't think—"

"I think you are a very wonderful lady," I said simply. "Knowing you for a single moment is like having known you for a lifetime!"

She sighed. "Well, this seems a queer way of getting down to business, but I really asked you here for a purpose."

"Yes?"

"My husband is—er—rather strong-minded in certain matters. He wouldn't hear of your coming; so I had to see you privately. I don't think he will disturb us."

Her long, gold lashes fanned wide, and the blue eyes studied me. "Who is the other person that lives in this house?" she asked.

I gaped at her.

"I know there is someone making use of this house," she went on quickly. "There are signs that can't escape a woman's eye. Why, I remember—"

"You remember?" The word seemed to stir my own memory.

"Distinctly," she replied. "Yesterday I thought I saw someone here in this room. I was standing on the stairway, but I didn't have the courage to speak. He was gone when I finally came down."

I swallowed unhappily. "Did your husband tell you anything about the house?" I asked. "It has a gruesome history, I'm afraid."

"Every fine old house has its ghost legends," she said.

"I have seen this house in action, and it is not a healthy place," I said. "Now that I have seen you, I wish that you would leave—immediately! My darling—I mean, Irene, you must get out of this house at once!"

She gasped: "My name! How did you know my name?"

I pressed my head between my hands. "I don't know! Anything unbelievable can happen in this house. I tell you, anything can happen!"

Desperately I seized her hands and started to draw her toward me, but she shrank back. "Don't ever kiss me again. Please!" she pleaded. "I'm afraid. My husband is insanely jealous. He—"

Her eyes bloated with horror, and I swung around. Verni Mauselle stood in the corridor by the staircase, his lips curled back from his teeth.

Irene gave a feeble laugh. "I was just telling Mr. Rydell about that man in the house, Verni. I thought he might be able to solve the mystery."

Mauselle advanced stiffly. "Oh, I'm sure Mr. Rydell has soothed your fears, my dear, and I think we can promise that there will never be another man to annoy you in this house. Eh, Rydell?"

Awkwardly, I released the lady's fingers and rose to my feet. "I—I hope so," I mumbled. "However, you are aware of my angle on the place. If Madame is really

annoyed, I hope you'll feel free to cancel our terms at any time."

He squeezed his wife's arm until she winced. "Oh, we are very happy here. The perfect couple, aren't we, my dear?"

"Yes, yes," she echoed hastily.

I bowed out of the house, shuddering with rage and bafflement. How could she have married that vicious fellow? What could I ever do about it? It was like falling in love with a beautiful picture that would be held forever in the cold embrace of an ugly black frame.

IT WAS a week at least before I saw Dr. Rascob—the first time in years. The smiling wrinkles in his round cheeks had become permanent ruts, but shrewdness still flashed from his darting bird-eyes. I told him everything that he had not known about Rydell House, ending with the most recent chapter. "I can't go near her," I said. "There's no telling what that man Mauselle might be capable of."

"Murder, perhaps," suggested the doctor, and I saw that he was studying an old almanac. His finger traced across a calendar on his desk. Abruptly, he leaped to his feet. "I wonder what could have brought you to me today? Avery, the pieces of your puzzle are gradually slipping into place. We must go to Rydell Oaks at once! A life may be at stake!"

"We can't. I know that kind of man. Jealousy clouds all reason out of his mind."

"Avery, I've never thought of you as a coward," the doctor said softly, "but you do a wonderful imitation of one. What do you care for a man like that, if you're really in love with this woman?"

"I was thinking of her," I protested.

"I know. So am I. Come on!"

I couldn't follow the doctor's reasoning, but I raced my sedan up the slippery, rain-sudded highway as if Irene's life were in danger. The pelt of rain against the glass

beat that thought into my brain: "Maybe it is! Maybe it is!"

By the time we skidded to a stop in the slush of Rydell Oaks driveway I was prepared to find Irene's poor, beaten body huddled somewhere in that gloomy prison. I don't remember that we even stopped to knock.

"Well, it's quiet enough," muttered Dr. Rascob, peering into the shadowy vault of the salon. Twilight had blanketed the house with a thick web of gloom. "I could be wrong in my guess."

My heart was pounding wildly. "We could carry her off—the two of us," I said.

"Don't be a fool!" he snapped. "Since we're alone, I think we might have another poke at that upstairs den, while we wait."

My knees sagged at the thought, but I followed the doctor's lead up the great flowing stairway. He pushed into the room without fear, and we took our places in two chairs as though we were acting out a scene which had been rehearsed before. I could not look at Garson's old desk for fear my brother's grotesque face might be there nodding at me.

For a brief, terrifying moment I felt adrift in a vast sea of space. I clutched at the doctor like a drowning man.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"I can't stand this room," I whispered.

For answer he struck a match over his watch, and then leaped to his feet, twisting my arm. "Good heavens! Why didn't I remember about the time? Quick!"

He dragged me out to the landing, and down the stairway. This all seemed to have happened before. We were acting out a dream—

At the first landing Dr. Rascob pressed me against the railing. I stared down at the figure of Irene Mauselle standing in the salon.

She was speaking to someone beyond our view! "I'm sorry that I have given this impression. There is nothing between us,

really. What have I done to make you think so?"

Whoever the party was, he spoke so softly that we heard not a breath.

"But I do not love you!" Irene protested. "There is another man, believe me."

Still that perplexing silence.

"No, not my husband," she sighed. "I don't know why I tell you this."

I could have leaped the banister, but for Dr. Rascob's fingers digging my arm.

Irene went on quickly. "I owe much to my husband. There is a debt between us, and that is all. Have you heard enough? Why do you stay here, haunting us? Why don't you leave?"

I saw her draw back, crouching as if to hide her half-clothed body from view. She threw out her hands in a gesture of fright. "No! Please do not! Don't kiss me! I couldn't bear it!"

I TRIED to cry out, but the voice was frozen in me. Slowly her attitude changed and the whole scene sickened me. At last she staggered backward, and at the same time I heard a voice directly below me. I looked down on the lean figure of Verni Mauselle.

"A very pretty scene," he hissed. "Too bad that I must put in the unhappy ending."

Irene's lips moved stiffly, but she could not speak.

"On the contrary, I understand perfectly," said Verni to that mysterious third person, and there seemed to be words groping in my memory that would reply to his.

"She is entirely to blame," Verni went on coldly. "She is not capable of a love like mine. Are you, Irene? Answer me! Could you kill for love? That is the final test. I can do that. To kill is the supreme passion. See!"

He drew a long, queer-shaped pistol from beneath his dressing-gown. He bit off his speech without emotion like an ex-

cutioner: "Why don't you speak, my dear? I'll treasure the words."

Irene flung her arms over her face and moaned, "Oh, dear God! You are wrong, Verni. This man is nothing to me!"

"The more shame to you!" sneered Verni. "I've had enough of your affairs. I mean nothing to you. I've known that always, but now you must flaunt these lovers in my face! First that Avery Rydell and now this one!"

She seemed to snatch at my name: "Avery Rydell!"

I saw the gun barrel drift to a bead on the white V of her breast. Irene's words were springboards to my feet, and a single twist of my hand launched me clear of the banister. While my body kicked into a dive I could hear the sharp cough of the gun, and then my shoulder struck with stunning impact. There was a dreadful crack of bone beneath me and my body sprawled over the buckled form of Verni Mauselle.

The pain grinding out of my shoulder was a kind of paralysis. Numbly, I raised myself and the head of the man squatting under me toppled back horribly on a broken neck, the hair falling loosely, and the eyes bursting outward.

Vaguely I saw Dr. Rascob bending over Irene's limp form, and I crawled toward them. With glazed vision I could still see the heave of her breast. Where there should have been two red holes there was only soft white flesh.

"Thank heaven!" I heard the doctor breathe. "He only fired twice!"

On my knees I fumbled at her, played with the warmth of her cheeks, and the doctor turned to Verni.

"Her husband is dead," he announced coolly. "We must move him before she regains consciousness."

"Out of here!" I cried, with a painful gurgle in my throat. "We must get her out of this house!"

"Yes," said Dr. Rascob, and he lifted her with an effort.

I staggered wearily to my feet, and swam through a nausea of pain. Dragging through the outer corridor, I saw and registered the blinking light of five burning candles. In a last gesture of fear and hate I swept up the candelabrum with my free hand and hurled it back at the ugly black maw of the house. The five flames streaked through darkness, struck a curtain, and scattered like frightened birds.

The car was already in the outer drive when I had slumped against the cushion and looped my good arm around Irene Mauselle's sagging waist.

At the outer bend Dr. Rascob glanced back, and skidded to a halt. "What have you done, Avery?" he gasped.

I looked dully at Rydell House. Flames, like little red gnomes, were bobbing at the windows and dancing across the roof. A monster fist of black smoke coiled around the house, slowly crushing out its miserable life.

I shrugged my crushed shoulder, and groaned at the pain. "A fitting funeral pyre for Verni Mauselle," I muttered. "Jealousy had burned the life out of him, anyway."

"You're a crazy fool, Avery!" said the doctor, and added quite calmly, "get down and let me look at that shoulder."

BY THE time my broken shoulder was bound and Irene had come alive enough to be told, the house was a smoldering crust, exactly as I had glimpsed it years before from this same bend in the road. The three of us sat on the ground. Irene's trembling body was warm, clinging against me.

"We can tell the sheriff that the house caught fire in the struggle," said Dr. Rascob, drawing from his pocket the gun that I had last seen in Verni's hand. "It will not be hard to explain that a man like

Verni Mauselle was trying to kill his wife."

"How could he possibly have missed her?" I said.

The doctor studied my face. "Don't you remember, Avery? He didn't miss. There was another man who jumped between them and saved her life."

My reason fought against the idea. "How can it be?" I said.

"I don't know how it can be. I only know what you have told me of that house. A man has fired two shots across ten years of time."

"You mean it was Randall Bauder, there in that room with Irene?" I gasped. "Randall Bauder jumped between them and saved her life?"

"It must have been!" he declared. "This woman was the vision that Randall told us about. He was able to talk to her and to touch her across the years. Your brother Garson told you that he had built time into his house as you might build an ordinary wall. That salon must have been a kind of miniature infinity; ten years of time was only a thin curtain that could be pierced by a voice—or a bullet!"

I shook my fist defiantly at the house and its ugly secret.

"This afternoon I guessed the truth," said the doctor. "There was no saving Randall Bauder, who was already out of our reach, but I was afraid Mauselle might fire a third shot and kill his wife."

At the last I was the skeptical one. "It seems like an impossible dream!"

"Shall we always think of it that way?" suggested the doctor. He carefully wrapped the gun in a handkerchief and replaced it in his pocket. "I believe the sheriff already has seen the wounds that are made by such a gun as this. Sheriff Stone is a practical man. He will never understand everything which you and I have seen, but he will be glad to know that Verni Mauselle, a jealous husband, was the murderer of Randall Bauder!"