

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

Strange STORIES

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A Complete Novelet of Evil Powers

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The Dead Know All

By NORMAN
A. DANIELS

*Author of "The Man Who Was Death,"
"The Talking Clue," etc.*

A Would-Be Murderer Meets His Nemesis When a Woman's Indomitable Spirit Conquers Hate

IT FELT good to be out of the room where Death's wings cast murky shadows. June Hunter, immaculate in her starched white nurse's uniform, stood on the terrace overlooking the sea, inhaling fresh, pure air untainted by the medicinal odors of the sick-room. She moved over against the waist-high iron grille-work which protected anyone who stood too close to the edge of the terrace.

She looked down at the jagged, ugly rocks far below and shivered. The first day she had arrived at Fenton Manor, Jim Fenton's body was being lifted from those rocks. A dozen hours later he died without regaining consciousness. The coroner's verdict had been suicide. Jim Fenton had fallen from this terrace and the guard rails were too high to permit the death to be listed as accidental.



He could see his own hands through her throat

Phyllis Fenton, old, wrinkled, austere, was Jim Fenton's grandmother. After his death she seemed to lose whatever spark of vitality had kept her frail body from going far beyond the normal span of life. June Hunter had stayed on to take care of the old lady. Not that she liked the job so much, but jobs were scarce, and the salary was good here.

Someone stepped beside her, and June caught the odor of whiskey. She didn't have to turn her head to identify the newcomer. It was Clyde Marshall, the only surviving member of the Fenton family. Marshall, who drank too much, gambled too much and hated the old lady who ruled his life. Now she was dying, and he was already mentally spending the fortune she would leave him.

"A long way down," he said sarcastically. "Jim found out just how far down, eh, June?"

"I'm sorry. Mrs. Fenton needs me." June faced him, her cheeks flushed in anger.

MARSHALL grabbed her arm. "Now see here," he snarled. "I haven't done anything to make you despise me. Listen—the old lady is going out for sure this time; I know. Soon as she kicks off, I'll have plenty. I'll be a nice guy to know."

June pulled herself free and walked off the terrace. Marshall followed her, but he stopped halfway across the big living-room. Dr. Redfern was coming down the stairs. He looked at Marshall coldly, motioned June to follow and led her into the study. He closed the door before he spoke.

"She'll slip out this afternoon, I'm afraid. Poor old lady. Nothing left to live for since her grandson fell over that terrace. Look here, June, I don't like leaving you alone in this house with Marshall. He's not to be trusted. In fact—I'd lay an even bet that he's a murderer."

"Murderer?" June gasped. "You mean he—Jim Fenton?"

"That's what I think." Dr. Redfern nodded. "Jim was not a suicidal type. The old lady believes the same thing. Just told me so, in fact, and—she also told me other things— Well,

if you're sure it's all right, I'll be on my way. Phone me if she goes out."

Redfern picked up his bag and closed the front door. June walked slowly up the stairs to the sick room. She stepped in and walked over to the huge bed on which lay a tiny bit of humanity with only a meager spark of life left. The dying woman opened her eyes as June arranged the pillow gently, and a smile stole across her thin face.

"You won't have to put up with me much longer, my child. No, don't lie—I know when the end is near and honestly I'm not sorry. I've lived long, too long, since Jim died. But I wanted to talk to you. There is something—"

"Please." June patted the old woman's hand. "Don't try to talk. Tomorrow you'll feel stronger."

"Tomorrow?" Phyllis Fenton cackled in dry humor. "All my tomorrows are wrapped up in today, child. There will be no tomorrow for me, not one. Now listen carefully. They told me Jim committed suicide. I don't think he did. Soon, very soon, I'll know for sure. They say the dead know everything. My nephew, Clyde Marshall, is hanging around like a buzzard, waiting for me to die. He believes he will get my money, but I've fooled him. He's a philandering wretch, not worthy of this family. He is the only man who would profit at Jim's death.

"Therefore—I gave Dr. Redfern a new will which names you, my child, as the sole beneficiary. Clyde gets what he deserves—nothing."

June only smiled. She had heard dying, delirious people talk this way before.

"Please Mrs. Fenton, don't talk," she murmured. "I'd rather you rested. You need all your strength."

PHYLLIS FENTON coughed. A paroxysm of pain crossed her face. The breath in her throat rattled horribly, and June felt the aged hand tighten on her arm. The old woman's eyes were filming over. This was to be the end, then. June picked up the hand, held it gently and let her finger rest against the pulse. It was flicker-

ing, like the flame of a candle when it reaches the final drop of tallow. Somehow June found herself murmuring a prayer and tears rolled, unchecked, down her cheeks. One last, convulsive shudder—and Death picked up his trappings, to move on to a new victim. Phyllis Fenton was dead, her face creased in the last frozen lines of agony.

June drew a long breath and checked the time automatically. It was just ten after two.

It was better this way. She had lived long, and for weeks the spark of life had slowly grown weaker and weaker. June arose. She had certain duties to perform before she phoned the doctor and the undertaker. She took a spool of surgical gauze from her bag, tenderly crossed the old woman's dead arms and tied them together, fastening the gauze with a safety pin. Then she tied the ankles, closed the staring eyes and pulled a sheet over the corpse.

As she straightened up, someone stepped from behind her. With a cry of horror, June moved back. It was Marshall. He didn't look at the sheet-covered corpse of his aunt. No sorrow registered in his deep-set eyes; only a hatred that brought his lips back in a scowl.

"She's dead, and I'm glad. But she tricked me at the end. If I'd known that fool doctor had a new will, I'd have killed him. I waited twenty-five years—only to be cheated by one of her whims. Damn her soul!"

June put both hands against his chest and pushed him out of the room. She said nothing, but slowly a feeling of terror was creeping over her. This man was half-mad. He had listened, heard his aunt's dying words, and he knew he had lost everything. Marshall was strong, powerfully built and cruel. She was alone in this vast house with him. The influence of his aunt's character, and her millions, on him was gone now.

He suddenly seized June's arm in a painful grasp and yanked her out of the death room. Without a word she was propelled down the steps and into the spacious living-room. Marshall flung her into a chair.

"So," he snarled, "you are the heirless. A doublecrosser who convinced her I shouldn't have the money. Well, I shall have it, do you hear? It's rightfully mine. I've put up with her tantrums for years to get it and I won't be cheated now."

JUNE forced herself to remain cool.

"You're mad," she said. "Listen to me. I don't want that money. I didn't encourage her to will it to me. But it is mine. You can't stop Dr. Redfern from turning the new will over to the attorneys."

Marshall's eyes narrowed. Suddenly he lunged for her, pinned her to the chair and took out a coil of thin rope from his pocket. When she tried to resist, he struck her savagely across the face. He twisted the rope around her wrists and ankles, lashed them tight. Then he stepped back.

"No—you're right. I can't stop those lawyers from getting the will, but I can stop myself from losing the money that I've lived years to get. My aunt made a will leaving you the money. But what if you died? What if you had an accident? I'd swear you were dead before my aunt died. I'd testify she was alive when you died which automatically voids the will and I get everything. Who'd dispute my word? The difference in time between your death and hers is so small that no doctor could swear who died first. I said I'd be a nice guy to know—after I got the money, but I'm not a nice guy when I see that dough slipping out of my hands."

Marshall wheeled and walked swiftly out on the terrace. June, her eyes wide with horror, watched him. Marshall took a wrench from his pocket and carefully padded its teeth with pieces of soft flannel. Then he attacked the railing until he had one length of it free. He glanced over his shoulder, grinning sardonically at June. He calmly reinserted the length of railing, twisting it only a slight bit. Then he carefully wiped the metal with a cloth to remove fingerprints. After that was finished, he returned to stand over June.

"See what happens, beautiful?"

You're going to have an accident. I've been prepared for something like this. You'll lean up against the railing and it will give way. They'll find one part of it badly rusted. I took care of that weeks ago, right after Jim pitched over. They said he committed suicide. What a laugh! He leaned against the railing too and it gave way. He went over, but I put the railing back in place so nobody noticed it. They thought he jumped on purpose. I'm clever, you see. Nobody even suspected. I was going to let it look like an accident, but I thought if they said suicide, it might make the old lady die faster. It did, too."

"You murdered him," June cried. "You fixed the railing so he fell."

"Sure I did and I got away with it." Marshall's lips parted in a cold smile. "I'll get away with it again, too. This time they'll say it was accidental and I'll be very, very sorry that I didn't have the railing examined more carefully after Jim died. The rust on it looks real. No one can prove I weakened it with acid."

MARSHALL untied her ankles and then freed her wrists. He seized her by both arms and propelled her toward the terrace. June screamed, but it was only a release for the emotions raging within her. No one lived within five miles of this big house that overlooked the sea—and the jagged rocks on the shore.

Then, suddenly, Marshall paused. Somewhere upstairs a door slammed. He let go of June and she made a valiant effort to get clear of him. But he was faster. He lunged after her, whirled her around and struck her a cruel blow under the chin. June saw the room gyrate crazily. She was aware of a blackness stealing over her; the floor came up mysteriously. She crumpled and lay very still.

Vaguely she seemed to remember that slamming door in this house of death and murder. But nothing else happened. The wind, perhaps, had forced a door shut. Marshall regained control of his nerves and bent down to pick her up. It would be over soon now. She was only half-conscious, and incapable of the slightest resis-

tance even if she had been strong enough to overcome his brutal strength. His hands curled around her wrists.

Then Marshall paused again and cocked his head. Someone was moving down the stairs. Walking down with light, steady steps. And the only other occupant of this house was—a dead woman!

Marshall spun around, darted into the hallway. He seized a heavy silver candelabra. June watched him. Everything seemed miles away. Marshall looked up the stairs. The heavy weapon he held over his head came down slowly and his arms hung limply by his sides. He began backing into the room. His face was dead-white, his lips trembled and his eyes were dilated in terror.

June gave a gasp. She saw the hem of the old-fashioned nightgown Phyllis Fenton had worn in death. Naked feet padded down the stairway slowly, methodically.

It couldn't be Phyllis Fenton. Yet it was. She had died—June knew the symptoms of death. She couldn't possibly have been mistaken, yet Phyllis Fenton came into that room as austere and stately as she had moved in life.

"A-Aunt Phyl-Phyllis," Marshall gasped. "I—I thought—"

"You thought I was dead," she interrupted. "Fool. Did you think I'd go and leave this girl in your hands? Clyde, sit down."

But the madness that had seeped into Marshall's soul wasn't to be routed so easily. He looked from the white, pallid face of his aunt, to June's staring, horrified eyes.

"It's a trick," he snarled. "It's an attempt to fool me, but it won't work. I've wanted to kill you for years—years. You wouldn't die! You hung on to tantalize me, to wave that will before my eyes, force me to obey every damned crazy whim you could think up. Well, that's over now. You're really going to die this time. I'll wring that scrawny neck of yours. I'll kill you slowly, make you suffer as you made me. I'll have your money. You can't stop me!"

"No," June heard her own voice pleading wildly. "Marshall, please

don't. Don't kill her. She's ill. I—I thought she had died. She won't be able to stand much. You can't do this. I'll turn all the money over to you. She's old—terribly sick."

June tried to get up from the floor. A hand she couldn't see had closed about her wrist. It was a wrinkled hand with thin, emaciated fingers. It was the same hand she had held in death! It was Phyllis Fenton's hand. Yet—she stood ten feet away and her arms were at her sides.

A soft, gentle voice whispered and it was the voice of Phyllis Fenton. Yet her lips never moved!

"Don't worry, my child. You have nothing to fear. He can't harm me. And now I know what happened to Jim. Didn't I say that the dead know everything?"

A scream welled up in June's throat but something held it in check. Perhaps it was the soothing quality of that ghostly voice. Perhaps it was the tender touch of the hand on her arm.

Marshall roared in mad rage. He leaped for the old woman. His hands gripped her throat, squeezed it unmercifully. June started up again, but that same gentle touch checked her. She could only watch, while her heart pounded wildly.

Marshall lifted the old woman from the floor, lifted her with his hands wound about her thin throat. He hurled her on the davenport, put both knees on her frail chest and his fingers sank deeply into her throat.

"You'll not rob me," he howled. "Not of the money that is rightfully mine."

She didn't move, didn't try to fight back. Marshall squeezed that age-wrinkled throat for five minutes. Then he shoved her back, arose and rubbed his hands.

"There," he snarled, "you'll not trick me again."

"As for you—it's your turn now." He whirled about and grimaced at June.

He advanced a step and June tried to scream again. The gentle touch on her arm was gone. No voice whispered words of encouragement in her ear. She was alone with him. Unutterably alone, for this time there

could be no question of Phyllis Fenton's death. Marshall had all but broken her neck.

He leered at June, reached out two clawing hands.

"Clyde!"

The voice was calm, without either reproach or surprise. Marshall flung himself around, his mouth agape. Phyllis Fenton stood in the doorway, exactly as she had been standing when he leaped upon her with strangling fingers. He looked at the davenport. There was no corpse lying there, stilled in death.

Marshall's face was crimson. As June watched, it slowly turned to purple. His eyes were protruding from their sockets, his whole body was trembling visibly.

A SCREAM of rage escaped his lips and once again he leaped for her. She didn't move. His hands closed around her throat. But there was no throat! He found that his fingers interlocked, squeezed only themselves. Yet she stood there, calmly, sedately. He could see his own hands through her throat. . . .

Marshall flung himself away. He was cackling horribly and now the signs of stark madness shone on his face. He covered his eyes, staggered back.

The old woman moved toward him, slowly, inexorably as death itself. Marshall gave a strangled shout and retreated. She matched her steps with his own. He was out of the room, on the terrace now, and still backing. He touched the loosened rail, strained forward. The old woman was still coming toward him. He forgot about the railing, put his weight against it. His hands grabbed vainly for support but found none. June had a fleeting glimpse of a face creased in terror. Five seconds later she heard the crash of Marshall's body against the rocks below. June closed her eyes and shuddered. Something touched her wrist gently and she looked up. Phyllis Fenton stood over her, smiling gently.

"I am so tired, child. This has been a great effort. Sleep a few moments. You'll be quite all right then. Sleep

brings dreams. May all the rest of yours be sweeter than this one."

June found that her eyes closed involuntarily. How many minutes she remained like that she didn't know until much later. When she opened her eyes again, she was alone in the room. She seized a chair and pulled herself up. She slowly rubbed her forehead and tried to puzzle out what had happened. Then memory returned. She whirled and ran out on the terrace. The waist-high railing was broken. The ends of it showed rusty brown. No one would prove it wasn't real rust, Clyde Marshall had said. She looked over the edge. There was a dark object flung across the rocks. June turned quickly and raced upstairs.

The door of the death room was closed. She opened it and turned on the light. The sheeted form of the old lady lay on the bed. June raised the cover. Phyllis Fenton's face wore a composed smile of peace. The

agonizing lines brought on by death were gone.

Her hands were folded across her thin chest, the wrists tied by surgical gauze. The safety pin glittered oddly in the light. Her ankles were similarly fastened, just as June had left them.

For a full minute June stood there quickly, her head bowed. Then she looked at the clock. It was two fifty-four. Phyllis Fenton had died at two-ten.

June walked over to the phone and dialed a number.

"Doctor Redfern? This is Nurse Hunter. Please come up here quickly. Clyde Marshall tumbled off the terrace. Yes, just as Jim Fenton did, but this time the railing gave way. It must have been rusted and weak. I—I don't feel very well. I guess I fainted, because I should have phoned you the moment Mrs. Fenton died. Yes—she's gone. She died," June looked at the clock again, "at exactly two-ten."