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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH



"I saw it as plainly as I see you before me, yet my eyes were closed in sleep."

The Death Mask

By EARL PEIRCE, JR.

Whose skeleton lay under the dead bodies in that horrible pit? And what gruesome burdens were borne into the old castle from the graveyards? A tale of horror

ON A LAZY afternoon, in a quiet Spanish village far from Madrid, Judith married Richard and promised to love and obey him as long as they both should live.

The clergyman, a rustic Spanish *padre*, wished them Godspeed, and stood with a waving arm in the wake of Richard's Duesenberg, his sun-tanned face done up in a smile. Reckless young pair, he

thought. Handsome, too. They should be happy. . . .

The car sped smoothly over the deserted country road, a low streamlined chariot of white and red, with two laughing happy people nestled comfortably in the wide seat; a powerful car and a wealthy one, purring effortlessly and grinding out a cloud of dust from beneath its heavy wheels.

Judith was wearing a light two-piece suit with a silk scarf blowing freely over her shoulder, and her rich dark hair was held in place by a ribbon knotted over her forehead. Her eyes were sparkling, filled with gay laughter, and a smile greeted the country through the low windshield before her. Snugly next to her, dressed in loose tweeds and clamping a pipe between his teeth, was Richard Beral, driving with only one hand, driving as though he owned not only the road, but the whole of Spain and Portugal besides.

"We do own it all, you know," he told her. "We'll come and go and do as we like. But you really won't like the castle. It's an eery place, full of old remains and family skeletons. It'd be much better if you met me in London."

She silenced him with a kiss and a glance, and looked out over the rolling hillsides, her heart alive with the rhythm of their swift romance, and a little dazed because of it all.

How swift and sudden and thoughtless it all had been! So very thoughtless that she checked her breath and looked over her shoulder, wondering suddenly who this man was and why she had married him.

Less than three months ago, at Cannes she remembered, he had caught her glance and held it. Then again in Paris, as though by design, they met and danced on a moonlit roof, and sat staring at the Eiffel tower, but not seeing it. And later

at Monte Carlo over a roulette wheel, thrillingly discreet, just learning each other's last name and deciding to blend them into one.

And that wild drive at sunset through the mountains down into sleepy Spain—an all-night drive, undisturbed excepting by moonbeams and the soft music of a Riviera orchestra. Lastly that yellow church with its bronze bell and the *padre's* fat housekeeper, and some flowers gathered by dark-eyed children. Swift, sudden, thoughtless—like diving alone into a pool of clear water and coming up linked to a handsome fellow she'd never seen before.

Judith rested her pretty head against the leather cushions of the car, the wind playing through her hair and mussing it, realizing that she was tired, and that there were more days to come—and really getting down to wonder who this fellow was.

Richard Beral. . . . He might be German or he might be Viennese. But he was French, and a dash of Spanish nobility, and something Etonian, for his smile was quick and he was quiet. Where did he come from? An old castle in Spain, a musty castle he had said—but certainly a romantic castle with a legend,

A legend of a princess? . . .

All afternoon they drove, and at sundown climbed to the top of a hill and saw a village dotted out below them. The first thing they saw was the spire of a church, with its gold cross glittering red in the western light, and then—on a hill directly opposite—they saw a somber and bulky stone citadel, shadowed black by the hills, overlooking the village like a great spider.

IT WAS a formidable dwelling, bulging with towers and battlements, and grooved with narrow windows, hardly visible from where they sat on the hill-

top. But Judith could see that it was ancient and decaying, that its walls crumbled, and that the winding road which led up from the village was weed-choked and stony.

She could see, too, that the villages must have hated to have that grim place overlooking them all day; it was too much like a skeleton at a festival. . . .

"Is that your castle?" she asked suddenly.

Richard nodded, and for the first time she sensed a queer tightness in his voice. "The family castle, Judith—not mine."

He released the clutch, and slowly the big car rolled down the road into the outskirts of the town.

At the roadside, dangling their brown legs from a bridge, two young boys were fishing in the stream below. They turned together when they heard the purr of Richard's Duesenberg, their eyes wide at the sight of it. It was mere surprize, at first, to see this sleek car arise as though from nowhere. But when Richard waved to them, one of them nearly fell backward over the bridge, and there was a cry of terror on his lips. They dropped their poles, and as though the devil were after them, fled across the fields.

"How strange!" Judith said. "What on earth could have frightened them?"

Richard's lips were tight and he said nothing, but Judith saw his knuckles go white around the steering-wheel.

Then when the silence grew heavy, he turned to her. "These people are awfully rustic, Judy. Don't be bothered by anything they say or do. They may act a little—queer."

They drove into the village, past open stores and markets; past a blacksmith's and a school, past a little church and rows of dilapidated houses. In front of one store was a knot of men, and as the car went by they looked up, their faces hard with hatred. One of them cried

out a curse in Spanish and wrung his fist. Others spat contemptuously to the road, others stared at Judith with astounded eyes.

"Richard," the girl said, as they drove out of the town, "these people *are* queer. Did you see the way they looked at us?"

Richard nodded again, pushing his foot further over the accelerator.

"I might as well tell you," he said, "or you'll think that *I* am the queer one. You see, I am the last of the Berals, and these people are waiting for me to die so they can tear the castle to the ground. We were a despotic clan once, and these people's ancestors were our vassals and serfs. The Berals had Moorish blood; they were needlessly cruel. . . . The people never forget."

The car nosed up an incline, where the dark turrets of the castle loomed ahead. He gathered speed, then glanced at Judith. "But don't worry about them, Judy. They're harmless enough. Besides, I don't ever expect to bring you here again. That's why I wanted you to meet me in London."

Up the hill they went, faster and faster, until the loose stones of the road pounded a staccato into the mud-guards, and the crunch of gravel grew louder beneath them. They faced the west where the sun sank glowing beyond the Pyrenees and where the stone dwelling ahead was stained red like a mountain of rust.

There were no houses on this hill, but there were immense fields of clover growing thick on its fertile slopes. There were pastures rich for grazing, yet no cattle and no sheep. Not even a cemetery. . . .

"It's so run-down," Judith said. "Don't you ever live here?"

"Never; I pay it a visit once or twice a year, but *live* here——" He smiled, and threw the car into second. "I'd rather live with you in Monaco, in London and

New York. This place isn't for us, Judy. It's for the rats and spiders, and those things which live in darkness. Our home is the gay world behind those mountains, and beyond the Atlantic. Believe me, girl, I wish you hadn't come."

"Are you afraid for me?"

"No, but—oh well, we'll only be here for a few days. There are some business things to take care of. Then—we're off!"

They crossed a bridge which traversed a dried-up stream, dipped into a gulley cluttered with rocks and shale, up out of the gulley, and then drove into the flagstoned courtyard of the castle.

"You can see the place is pretty old," he told her.

"Awfully," she agreed, and stepped out of the car into the shadow of the battlements.

"How cold these shadows are, Richard! I feel as though I am in a different world from down there."

"You are," he answered, and handed her a metal key. "Do you want to try the lock while I get the luggage, Judy? You'll find it rusty, but it ought to turn. . . ."

It did turn. It turned with a grating screech of dry metal. It rolled inward on screaming hinges, and a smell of dankness drifted out.

Judith stepped back with a startled cry.

"What? Oh, that!" Richard laughed. "I told you it was mighty old and decaying. Go ahead in. If this happened to be any other place I'd carry you over!"

JUDITH stepped timidly into the great dark hallway. She stopped only a few feet inside, and turned to make certain that Richard was right behind.

"Aren't there any servants?" she asked.

"No longer—I can't get anyone to stay here." Richard set the bags on the floor near the stairs, and went to a window to pull back the heavy curtains. A cloud

of dust rose from them and dazzled white in the faded sunlight which filtered through the glass. Then he went back to Judy and took her in his arms.

"Not exactly my idea of Honeymoon Hotel," he said.

"We'll make it one," she answered, and kissed him. A moment later they climbed the winding stone stairway and stood at the door of the master's room.

"We can't sleep *here*, Richard! Look at those cobwebs."

So they went to another room, and still another. Finally they decided on the guest-room, and Richard went back downstairs to get the bags.

Alone now, Judith sensed a curious dread dragging on her spirits. She was no longer tired, but she wished that she hadn't come to this place. It was damp and oppressive. . . .

For a week's stay, Richard had said. A week alone in a magic castle. That had been her dream, but the sight of the castle, and the odor of its age-long neglect, was tainting that dream with nightmare. Suddenly frightened by her own thoughts, she turned and ran down the stairs, not once stopping until she was holding fast to his arm.

"I'm just as silly as those villagers," she whispered. "I'm really a child."

Later, when they had cleared the dust and debris from their room and swept the cobwebs from the ceiling and plugged up rat-holes with wads of paper, they began to wonder about their supper. They sat on the bed, dusty and happy, smoking cigarettes.

"We can always go to the village," Judith suggested.

But Richard shook his head and blew a fine ribbon of smoke. "They'd poison us, Judy," he answered.

"We've got to eat."

"Then *you* go to the village. Buy some things and bring them back here. We

can cook coffee in the fireplace, and there are dishes and glasses downstairs in the scullery. In the meanwhile I'll clean up some more, and get some fresh water. There's a well down in the rear courtyard. . . ."

At the door of the car Richard said, "Be sure and get cigarettes and wine, and see that everything's tightly wrapped." And after a kiss she was off down the hill.

In the village they looked at her curiously, not only because she was a beautiful thing, but because she lived in the castle. They served her without a word, even without smiles. From a housewife she bought some bread and preserves. From the apothecary's she bought cigarettes, and tobacco for Richard's pipe. From the main store she bought the other things, then asked a few sturdy-looking men if they didn't want to earn some money by being temporary servants; and they shrank from her as though she had the plague.

"What a frightened bunch of children you are!" she said, angered by their stubborn cowardice. "You'd think the castle was *alive* and ready to eat you up! What children you are!"

A grizzled, brawny fellow, braver than the rest, stepped from the shadows of the store.

"I would not talk like that unless I knew," he said. "We're God-fearing men and women, not cowards. If I were you, *Señora*, I would leave this place before it is too late."

"Before it's too late?" Judith laughed. "But what can an old castle do, anyway? You're just superstitious."

And a moment before she went out of the door, the skinny one had said: "No, no! It is not the castle I speak of, *Señora*—it is he!"

2

ALL the way back up the hill she kept thinking over and over, What silly, childish people they were—what children! To hate Richard for what his ancestors had done way back in the Middle Ages. For what his *ancestors* had done!

There were lights glowing from the tall narrow windows of the castle, and sparks drifted from one of the many stone chimneys. Back in the village were only a few lights, and these snapped out one after another until the valley below was in darkness. One could imagine the people down there huddled in frightened groups by their black windows, staring up at the castle and pointing their fingers at the headlights of her car as they bounced over the rocky road.

Richard had pumped a bucketful of cold water from the well, and a coffee-pot was boiling in the fireplace. When she drove into the courtyard he ran down the steps to meet her at the door. Together they went back up again and cooked their supper.

Afterward Judith began to poke around the upper corridor with a flashlight. "If we must live in a haunted castle," she said cheerfully, "we may as well enjoy it. Come on, boy, shall we explore?"

But Richard frowned. "Please, Judy, be careful. This place is rotten to the core, and, without doubting your slim lightness, the floor might cave in at just the wrong moment. No, I wouldn't explore. . . ."

She had meant to obey him, as she had vowed in the yellow church; but while he was downstairs locking the doors and windows, Judith's impossible liveliness found her wandering from one room to another with silent footsteps, mostly because she *didn't* want to meet anything, and because she wanted to show herself

that she wasn't at all like those rustics in the village.

These rooms were dark, and strung with webs like shrouds fastened across the doorways. They were dense with the reek of decay and mildew, and the furniture was sooted thick with dust. Some of the beds in these rooms were still covered with blankets, and odd suits of clothing hung in the musty closets. On the tables were combs and brushes and mirrors, and water carafes still full. . . .

Judith came back to their room breathless and perspiring. Richard had not yet come up, so she tossed the flashlight onto the bed and sat cross-legged in a deep chair.

The apprehensive fear was tugging stronger now. She felt it as an insatiable longing to be away from this place. What she had seen in these rooms, what she had seen of the whole castle, spelled a premonitory dread. The beds and closets . . . the toilet articles left strewn on the dressers . . . the half-empty water-jugs. . . . She knew that whoever had last lived in the castle had left it hurriedly, fearfully. They had left it as though *driven* out, and had never returned. And she and Richard were alone in it.

But why had he come back? . . .

Judith knew that he had work to do here—some papers, he had said, and some legal documents. He hadn't wanted to bring her; she had literally to beg him to come. And now that she was here he warned her not to explore the corridors.

Yes, in so many polite words—he had warned her!

Richard came back upstairs looking a little tired, and not a little grim.

"Suppose you get to bed," he suggested, then smiled at her just before he went out again and closed the door.

For a long while Judith sat in bed smoking a cigarette. She heard him mov-

ing in the hallway, she heard a key rattling in a lock and heard a door squeak open, and shut. Then for half an hour the place was silent.

She was just about to get out of bed and follow him, when the door outside opened and she heard his tread on the floor. A happy sigh broke from her lips, seemed to ease the strain of nervous fright which had been choking her. How silly to be frightened! She closed her eyes when Richard came into the room; pretending to be sleeping.

Through lowered lids she saw him move across the floor, and her breathing stilled.

Richard was dressed in working-clothes. He wore overalls, a sweat-shirt and gloves! His hair was mottled, and sweat glistened on his forehead. He came slowly forward, his face unsmiling. . . .

Judith didn't move. She was too surprised, too bewildered. And Richard was bending over her.

"Asleep, Judy?" His words were hardly audible.

Still she didn't move.

"Poor, sweet Judy!" Richard drew the blankets closer about her shoulders. "How I wish you had gone to London! What a fool I was to bring you here!"

He bent closer and kissed her on the cheek, ever so lightly so as not to awaken her. His hand reached up and extinguished the lamp, and he went noiselessly from the room.

JUDITH waited too long before she got out of bed and donned a negligee, for Richard had already gone.

Shaking with uncertain fear, she went down the great dark stairway, the flashlight in her hands chopping yellow holes from the endless murk. She called his name, implored him to answer her. But somehow she was afraid to raise her voice and call too loudly, for her echo might

come shrieking back alone from the cavernous halls around her.

She looked out through one of the front windows, and felt a swift relief. The Duesenberg was still outside.

He hadn't gone far, then. But *where?* And *why?*

She went back upstairs to her room, and in the upper corridor her eyes fell upon a door she had not noticed there before. It was a small, narrow door, heavily scrolled with yellow-green iron. It looked like the door of a safe—or a vault. She tried the knob and found it locked.

This was the same door which Richard had opened while she lay in bed. Something in there—

But Judith had no time to conjure up ghostly visions. Frightened though she was, she dared to go from room to room looking for a key. And she found one—a skeleton key, no doubt, for when she turned it in the lock there was a grind of metal, and the curious little door budged open before her.

She drew back suddenly as her nostrils caught the odor of damp earth. She jabbed the light into the room—into a darkness impenetrable. With the light glaring half uselessly, she tiptoed into the room, and left the little door open at her back.

A draft from a high open window came down and touched her shoulders. She seemed almost to choke on the damp mustiness that exuded in gusts from the pitchy corners. It was a big, cavernous room, maddeningly black and cold. The floor was made of great flagstones, rough and solid. The only furniture was a long mahogany table of knotted carvings which stood in the center of the floor. She could see nothing else, for all was black.

Judith's light played over the table,

and it stopped moving in her hands. It began to shake. . . .

On the table, glowing luminously white in that light, was a life-sized mask of a human face, staring directly into hers.

Judith screamed, and stifled her scream with a hand. Her face drained pale, yet filled again as the momentary horror of the thing vanished. She summoned up the courage to go ahead.

It was a death mask that lay there—a smooth white death mask, peaceful and grim.

There were rounded orbs for the eyes, and the brow was tall and sloping. It was a man's mask; a handsome man's death mask, yet bleak and unsmiling.

Judith touched the thing with her finger. It was hard and brittle, and smooth. . . . She stared at it for a long time, and as she stared an awful horror came swelling up around her heart; for it was Richard's death mask that lay before her.

3

AN HOUR later Richard came silently back to the castle, dragging a heavy sack behind him.

Judith was at the window of their room watching him as he moved over the moon-swept hillside, a grotesque shadow dragging another shadow. She knew it was he, for she recognized the overalled figure and the tall sweep of his broad shoulders.

There *was* an answer—a *same* answer! She knew it, and she swore it to herself. She couldn't let this horrify her. She couldn't run from him, screaming. He must explain. He must explain this thing, and she would no longer be frightened.

Closer and closer came those contorted shadows, until they were swallowed by the blacker shadow of the battlements. They were directly below Judith's win-

dow; she might have reached out and dropped a pebble on them. She might have leaned out and whispered to them. But she stood there too panic-stricken to move.

The door below opened, and closed again. There was a dragging, as of feet, over the floor. Then for a short while there was silence—only the light tap-tap of Richard's shoes as he climbed the stairs. . . .

Judith went back to bed and lay there quite still—all but her heart quite still!—as she waited for him to come and explain it all. But he didn't come. Instead he opened the door to the flag-stoned room, and closed it again behind him. He locked it.

It was then that Judith heard the creaking of chains and the groaning of heavy wooden beams.

It was then that she heard the grinding clank of iron pulleys, and the rasping of huge stones. She heard Richard dragging that sack over the flagstones. And again—silence.

She meant to get out of bed and follow him. She meant to learn the meaning of all these horrible things—but she was tired. She was far more tired than she had ever realized. Perhaps it is just as well. Perhaps it is a fine thing that she didn't follow Richard into the flag-stoned room, and that her head fell back on the pillow and she went peacefully to sleep.

LATE the next morning she found Richard on a blanket outside of her door, soundly sleeping. He was fully dressed in his tweed suit, excepting that his shoes were off and his shirt open at the neck. He looked tired, too; and the circles under his eyes were heavy and sad.

How long he had been sleeping there she couldn't say. But she didn't disturb him. There would be time enough to let

him awake and explain these things. She left him a note, and went downstairs. After rinsing her face with cold spring water, she drove into the village—to buy some milk, she had written him. But not that alone. . . .

These people would know the answers to her questions. Perhaps there was some little thing which Richard couldn't tell her—something which kept the secret from her. She must be patient, trusting him. But she had to know something! She had to know about that death mask, and why they hated and *feared* him so!

They looked at her even more curiously that morning, perhaps wondering that she had ever come out of the castle alive. Their glances showed awe, and fear, and hatred. So she smiled back at them as though dispelling a myth.

"Did my husband come into the village last night?" she asked. "Did he buy something? Some food or charcoal in a bag?"

One of those men managed to laugh—a hideous, contemptuous laugh. "Ha! Ha! He came, *Señora*, but not to buy anything. He never *buys* what he takes. Ha! Ha! Who is there to charge for them except Mother Earth herself?"

And they all laughed at that, but in their laughter was fear.

Judith fled from the store, angered and bewildered. She was half-way across the road from her car when she saw a priest walking on the roadside. He was a tall, quiet-looking priest, much like the priest who had married them yesterday.

"Good morning, Father," she greeted. "Your Spain is a lovely country."

The clergyman bowed, and started to resume his way.

"Please!" Judith touched his arm. "Won't you help me? Won't you tell me what is so peculiar about my husband? Why do all of these people fear him so?"

The *padre* crossed himself, and re-

garded her through half-closed eyes. "He has married you?" he asked.

"Yes, of course."

"And you love him?"

"Certainly."

"It is misfortune," said the man solemnly. "You have made a great mistake. You should never have met this man."

Judith stepped back, startled by his grave sincerity. "Never met him? B-but why? What makes you say that?"

"I should know," he answered with a sad lowering of his head, "for it was I who buried him."

"Buried him? *Buried* him? You must be insane! When did you bury him?"

"When he died—three years ago."

"Died?—When Richard died?" Judith fell back, and suddenly paled. "What a silly thing to say!" she cried. "You must truly be mad! Richard never died! Richard's alive!"

The *padre* shrugged his lean shoulders. "Who can answer for the ways of the beyond, Señora Beral? They are queer things, the undead."

"What makes you all so mad?" Judith cried. "What makes you such silly childish fools? Why don't you confess that you are trying to frighten me so I'll beg Richard to leave this place? Why don't you confess that you all hate him because he is of rich nobility? Why don't you confess it?"

The priest touched Judith's arm and tried to quiet her. He felt pity for this young girl; pity that she should love him so.

"*You* can go," he said. "There is no need that you should stay here as he does. He is bad, that one. He wanders over Spain as though he were a living man, but always he comes back here."

"Why does he come back?" Judith asked.

"Ah! You do not know? If you had been over beyond the church last night

you would have known. And if you go to Pueblos tonight you will know. Yes, at Pueblos—for they had a funeral at Pueblos only this morning."

"A funeral?"

"*Si, Señora!* And now do you blame my people for hating and fearing him as they do? Can you blame them for cursing the wrongs which he has committed—and continues to commit? Tonight he will steal yet another. It is the work of a devil! What does he do with them all?"

"He *eats* them!" cried a voice from the wine-shop.

"*Eats* them!" cried a second voice.

4

WHEN she reached the stone bridge at the top of the hill, Judith stopped the car long enough to dry the tears about her eyes. She must face Richard—face him openly and implore him to answer these questions. She must hurry, too! For already the sun was sinking behind the mountains and long fingers of dusk crept over the hills. The day had passed quickly, for Judith had not arisen until almost noon. Soon it would be night again, and Richard might go wandering. . . .

She slipped the car into gear, and drove down into the gulch and out again. She found him standing in the courtyard, and was afraid at first that he would sense the anxiety in her eyes. But he hugged her in his strong arms, and greeted her with his same cheerfulness.

It was not until they were in their room that Judith mustered up all of her courage and said,

"Where were you last night, boy?"

"Working—forgive me." He squeezed her fingers. "It was a rotten thing to do on our first night, but I had no choice. I came in to look at you late, Judy; but you were so peacefully asleep that I hadn't

the heart to disturb you. I didn't finish until two."

"But what kind of work could you possibly be doing at such an hour?" Judith persisted.

"Oh, just some things to clean up." Richard passed the question off with a shrug. "I think we'll be getting away from here tomorrow."

"Are you going to work tonight, too?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to. But once we get away from here——"

"Richard," Judith caught his eyes in her glance. "Will your work tonight take you to—Pueblos?"

And all at once he stood there like a man she'd never seen before.

"What made you say that?" he asked.

"Judith! What made you say that?"

"I—I couldn't help it, Richard. I heard some things in the village this morning. Horrible things. . . ."

"*What* things?—What did you hear? Judith, what lies have they told you?"

"Lies—of course they were lies! I knew they were lies, but still they frightened me. There is an answer for these things, isn't there? You can tell me about the *stolen* things, and about the death mask in that awful room. You can tell me the answers, can't you, Richard?"

"Judith! In the name of Heaven!" Richard gathered her swiftly into his arms. "You poor child, you frightened child! What a fool I've been to bring you here! Of course there is an answer to these things. But the answer is a ghastly one—I wouldn't want you to know it. Please trust me, Judith; I dare not tell you the answer."

"Then I'm frightened, Richard. I'm frightened more than I ever dreamed it possible to be. Because I saw you coming home last night. I saw what you were dragging, and I heard what the

padre said. . . . In the name of God, Richard, you must tell me!"

"No! I cannot!"

"Richard, *please*. . . ."

"**I**T ALL began three years ago, dear. . . .

It was shortly after my brother died and left me the estate. I was the last of the Berals, but I had only hatred for this castle and its blood-begotten lands. His lawyers called on me in England, where I had been studying. Greatly against my will I came back to this place, and found myself the master of a tenantless castle and a single servant.

"That servant's name was Venzelos, a Spaniard who first came to our services when he was a mere boy, sixty years ago. He had been my grandfather's servant, and my father's, and my brother's. I can remember him years and years ago it seems, when he used to frighten me with his tales of vampires and ghosts. I had learned to hate him—and fear him. I think he frightened all of our family, but for some unexplainable reason he has always remained here, a maggot among us.

"A maggot, I say, Judith, because he is the horror behind it all. Of his past crimes I know nothing, for he lived alone in that huge room where you saw the death mask. He lives there still. . . ."

"Three years ago, while I was here preparing for the complete destruction of the castle, I was suddenly and mysteriously taken ill with some malady which even the doctors cannot comprehend. It came upon me completely without warning while I was in the midst of my labors. I had just completed work with the dynamiters, when I was turned inside out with pain, and my brain dazed in such a way that I soon lost consciousness.

"The village workmen believed that it was the curse of the Berals for my molesting of their ancestral home—my own ancestral home. The servant Venzelos

agreed with them, and while I lay in a coma they tore up the wrecking contract and let the castle stand as it was.

"It will sound incredible, Judith. It will shock you as it shocks and terrifies me whenever I awake at night thinking about it. But I died three years ago. I died here in this castle, and the *padre* of the village performed the funeral rites over my grave.

"Of course it was not real death. It was catalepsy which choked my heart and turned me ashen like a corpse. Yet it fooled the simple doctor of Pueblos, and it fooled the townspeople of the village, for they inaugurated a celebration to rejoice in the passing of the last Beral. . . .

"I was interred in the vault far below the castle, interred where all of my family had lain buried before me. *Had* lain buried, Judith; for they have long since been rifled.

"It was the accursed *Venzelos* who saved me from death by suffocation. When I regained consciousness I was lying on the bed in my room, and he was bending over me.

"I shall never forget the look in his eyes as he watched me come out of my daze. They were like twin pits of flame in his face, burning into my brain with a power that awakened horrible loathing within me. He seemed to chop his way right through my mind and expand in it like a cankerous worm. Then he smiled, and the ghastly glance of his eyes faded as he placed a glass of wine at my lips.

"'You have been ill,' he told me, 'but you are well now. It is best not to think of it.'

"Best not to think of it! How horrible it sounded! When I pushed my way out of bed I was shaking with such a nervous exhaustion as I had never known. I was cold, inside and out. My skin was cold, Judith, as cold as death. And he told me not to think of it!

"On that very day I left secretly for England. I was so terrified that I resolved to kill myself rather than let this occur again. I went at once to Sir Lionel Blanding of Harley Street, and to him I related the whole ghastly story. For three months I was under his care in a private sanitarium, and was finally released with the assurance that my illness would never be repeated.

"And it never was repeated, but how I wish that it had been, and that there had been no *Venzelos* to rescue me!

"Forgive me, Judith, but that is how awful it is. When I left London I was healthy, mentally and physically, as I had never been in my life before. I went to Paris, where for three months I reveled in life with all its marvelous fun and excitement. And then came the summons. . . .

"WHEN I first heard it I thought I had gone insane. I thought my mind had suddenly broken under the strain of my ordeal, but how miserably I was mistaken! It was after midnight, as I was sleeping at my hotel. I had not been dreaming, as well as I can remember, but gradually out of the foggish inactivity of my brain came a dreadful ringing and a nebulous white light, infinitely distant.

"I can see it plainly now as I did then. I was curious as to what that light might be, for I was seeing it as plainly as I see you before me; yet my eyes were closed in sleep. It came closer to me at a speed that was dizzying to contemplate, and with it, that insane ringing. . . .

"It seemed as though I had been watching that light for countless years. It had no shape excepting a vague, phosphorescent oval of light, with shadows on it. It grew closer and larger, and the ringing in my ears grew to a shrilling pitch.

"Finally everything in my brain was blotted out by that glaring white light and the shriek of it as it sped toward me—larger and larger, louder and louder, until I thought my head would split open and let those things splatter out into the night. It filled the whole of an engulfing blackness with blinding radiance, partly yellow and partly shadowed, which was a gigantic human face routing me from my sanity.

"That face grew and grew. Always it was the same, a white face with shadows on it, shadows of lips and eyes, shadows of sorrow and terror which I vaguely remembered to have known before. All night, Judith, that enormous face sped at me from infinite distance, shrieking at me like cosmic sirens, and never once changing its shadows or parting its baked white lips.

"When I awoke in the morning I was physically exhausted with the battle I had waged with this incomprehensible horror. But distinctly I heard the summons. . . .

"It was a low, faintly musical voice from within my own head, repeating and repeating itself, yet never growing louder or softer. Certainly, I thought, my brain has snapped under the strain of my fears. I must be insane! But when those commands came more persistently and more clearly as the days passed, then I *knew*. . . . It was Venzelos calling me back to the castle!

"I couldn't disobey him, Judith. He was inside my brain, calling, calling, calling. He followed me day and night wherever I was, always calling for me to return. I fought him with all my strength, but he sapped the power from me, and without knowing it, I found myself driving again toward Spain. . . .

"When I drove into the village I was a specter returning from the dead. The villagers ran screaming from my approach, dragging their children in the

dust behind them. They were horror-stricken at the sight of me, and not until later did I realize why. For I was not only a ghost, Judith, but I was something else. . . .

"When I reached the castle I found it abandoned. Its windows were pitch-black, and sickening streamers of moss jutted from the cracks in its walls. It was far more repelling than I had ever known it before. And when I stepped into the hallway I heard that voice calling for me to come closer. It was louder now, a positively *gloating* voice, commanding me to come to the flagstoned room. . . .

"I know how you must have felt when you went in there, Judith. But imagine how I felt! I was drawn, as though by a magnet, over the rough stones to the mahogany table. It was unutterably black in there too, except for a dusty ray of sunlight from one of the windows high above. I walked to where the sunlight struck the table, and there I stood—face to face with my own death mask.

5

THE horror of that meeting has never quite left me, but oddly enough, I was not surprized by it. Somehow I had known that my mask would be there—never consciously, but below the strata of conscious knowledge. When I saw it I only stood there, waiting.

"The voice was louder now—yet perhaps only more distinct. It was in the very room with me, both within my brain and without it. And I knew it was Venzelos' voice.

"I can hardly remember the instructions which he gave me. I was not repulsed by them—not until later! I found myself going quietly from the room, waiting for nightfall.

"When night came I was already on my way down the hill, toward the church-

yard. There was a heavy burlap sack over my shoulders, but I don't know where I got it. I don't remember getting it; I only had it, and with it I had a spade. . . .

"When I came back I was dragging one of those things behind me. It didn't even feel heavy. I might not have known I dragged it, save that I heard it scrape over the stones. I carried it directly to the big room and laid it on the floor.

"But the horror of it hadn't come yet. I knew that my task was not complete; so I stood over that bulging sack, still waiting. Then the voice came again, more feverish, more excited. . . .

"I walked to the corner of the room and groped in the darkness. My hands found the crank of a windlass; unthinking, without foresight, I began to wind it. As the slack of the chains was taken in I heard the counterbalance of rock groaning at its supports, and a huge stone slab began to rise from the floor.

"The screaming of those chains made a din in my ears that nearly shook the daze from my brain. But always there was the voice urging me on.

"As my eyes grew accustomed to the darkness I saw a hole opening in the floor—a foul blackness of a hole. There were no sounds from down there, and no light—just blackness, seemingly unending, like a tunnel burrowed straight through to hell. And from it came an odor which I sicken to remember.

"The voice stopped calling me then, but already I knew what I was to do. It was as if some foreign intelligence dominated my mind. In those last moments of utter daze, my mind disjointed from the movements of my body, I lifted the sack to my shoulders and flung it headlong into that stinking pit, and let the great door roll down atop it.

"It was not until soon afterward, as I drove like mad away from this place, that I was again my own master, and for the

first time I realized the horrible thing I had done.

"So you can see, Judith, that this creature Venzelos had planned it all from the beginning. What he does with those ghastly sacks I dare not imagine. What he *lives* upon in that hole I cannot bear to think. I only know that he is down there, and wields this power over me at his will. For since that first mad night I have come back time and time again, and the trips are getting more frequent as the years go by. It has been only two months since I was here last.

"Always it is the same. That ghostly vision of a face speeding at me from the blackness of abnormal sleep, the shrieking of it as it comes through space, the ringing of it in my ears. And then, on every morning afterward, that weird voice from within my own brain commands me to its bidding.

"Always the same, Judith. I stand alone in the darkness before that table, my own death mask staring me hauntedly in the face, while I receive his mad instructions. Sometimes it is only one, sometimes two—and three! The day will surely come when there are no more for his demanding—when I am too weary of that midnight tramping to lift his rusty spade—a day when I shall fling myself into the pit and end it all for ever!

"If it all sounds too horrible, too hopeless, then we can but wait and see what end this monster has planned for me. You will probably leave me, Judith, and I cannot blame you. There is no future for us together, unless it be those few moments snatched away from this castle. But in the end, Judith, I must always come back. I can never escape it except by dropping into it. I must pay the price of my resurrection."

"In the name of our love, Richard," cried Judith, "you must fight this thing."

"Fight it? Merciful God, Judith, how

I have fought it! And how vainly! No, my darling, when the time comes to fight I have no will, no strength. He sucks the strength from me as a vampire sucks blood. He drains me of all the fight I have."

"We must fight it, Richard! We shall fight it! Let us leave this place now before it is too late. Let us leave now, Richard!"

But Richard stood resignedly. "I cannot. He has demanded *two*. Tonight I go to Pueblos."

"Oh God, Richard; have strength!"

"When the time comes there is no strength but his. That time has come again. He brought me back from death; he owns my life to do with as he wishes. Only a small part of my life is mine, Judith—and yours. We can have only that small part. To trespass on his would end us both. Let us be thankful for what we have. . . . Tomorrow, not tonight, we shall leave the castle. Tonight I go to Pueblos!"

THE moon was waning on that night. It hung suspended in a starry sky, one side of it washed black by the night, so that its light was cold and pale on the hillsides.

Richard unlocked the door of the big room and stepped into the hallway. For a moment he hesitated at the sight of Judith standing there before him. There came an incoherent muttering from his lips. His eyes, like clouded agates, passed over her, beyond her. He walked slowly past, the sack and spade hanging from his arms.

"Richard!" Softly Judith said his name, but he didn't answer. He went resolutely on, toward the stairs.

"Can you hear me, Richard? Can you hear me implore you?"

No; he did not hear.

Judith waited, unmoving, until he had vanished below the curve of the stairway; then she turned about and walked down the corridor to the front window. She saw the Duesenberg in the courtyard outside glowing white in the moonlight. The door below opened, a broad-shouldered shadow grew out over the yard. . . .

Richard placed his spade and sack in the front seat, and climbed in after them. He took his place before the wheel; a moment later, the multi-cylindered engine whirred into rhythm. Without hesitating, without glancing behind, he released the clutch, and the car nosed out onto the road like a phosphorescent eel.

Judith watched him as he drove around the bend. A minute afterward she saw his twin headlights splashing yellow light over the road below. But he was heading away from the village; he was heading for another village, twenty miles away.

A tear dropped over Judith's cheek as she turned away from the window. And with a slender finger she brushed the tear away.

The castle was quiet now. It seemed almost to be deserted; yet listening carefully she could hear the crickets droning in the tall grass outside, and rats gnawing in the walls. And she could hear water dripping . . . water, drop by drop, wearing away some huge stone.

She went down the corridor to her room. She was only half-way there, when suddenly she stopped, and the rising-falling of her breast grew quiet.

For a weird moment a draft touched her, but it left her untrembling. Her head lifted slowly and her eyes focused along the corridor. A light of desperate fear was in her eyes; they widened at the sight of a little door with the yellow-green scroll. . . .

6

RICHARD drove back up the road into the courtyard. The moon was higher now; far, far up in the sky as though it had been repulsed by what occurred over beyond the hills. Insects, too, had stopped singing, and when Richard turned off the engine there was a deathly hush.

He opened the rear compartment of the car, and, bracing himself on the rear bumper, he bent over and dragged something out onto the road. He dragged it across the stones and through the doorway, and up the wide steps to the hall above. At the door of the big room he dropped it unceremoniously while he fumbled in his pockets for the key.

It was then that Judith called to him.

He heard her voice, for his eyelids moved in a queer flickering motion. He paused, the key in his hands, looking up the corridor where he had heard her voice. Her words had been:

"Please come here, Richard."

Then he inserted the key into the lock and turned his wrist.

"Please come here, Richard."

Again he paused, and his lips twisted grimly. Sweat was breaking out in his forehead.

"J-Judith!" The name slipped falteringly from his mouth. He shook his head, as though shaking a fog from his brain. Then he saw her coming down the hall from their room. She was fully dressed, and a little hat was set over her dark hair.

The muscles in his face tightened as he looked at her, a mystic cloudiness settled down over his eyes. His lips closed, and opened.

"You should be in bed," he said tonelessly.

"I have packed our bags, Richard. Shall we go now?"

Dazedly he looked at her, blinking his eyes. He shook his head again, negatively. "I must finish my work. Tomorrow we will go. Please go back to bed."

"Can't you hear me, Richard?" Judith touched his arm. "Don't you understand what I am saying? If you go into that room our love is ended. If we lose the fight with this horror there will be nothing left. It would be better to be dead."

He drew his arm away. "No, no! We will leave tomorrow. Please go back to bed. I must finish."

He turned back to the door and gave the key a final twist. The door opened half an inch, and the smell of earth drifted out.

"Richard, it would be better to be dead. I would rather die than have this go on. Unless you get our bags and put them in the car, then I shall go into the room—not you. And I, not this thing at our feet, will go down into the pit."

"No, no—you must go back."

"Richard!" The word was a sudden scream from Judith's lips. She threw out her hands and pushed Richard from the door. As he fell back, momentarily stunned, she pulled his key out of the lock and threw it to the floor. The door opened as she pushed; she stepped inside.

Before he could regain his balance her key fitted into the lock; the door was barred between them.

"Good-bye, Richard!" she cried.

"J-Judith!" Richard's face broke from its daze. Then, from within, was the shrieking of the chains. "Judith!" He flung himself against the door. "In Heaven's name open this door!"

His answer was the rasping of the stone as she ground the windlass.

With a cry he backed away and hunched his shoulders. He was still crying her name when he smashed into the little barrier. The door shook as he hit

it; it bent in and out again like a huge diaphragm.

"Judith! Please open the door!" He backed away, swearing, and threw himself at it again.

A terrific jolt, which sent dizziness reeling to his brain. The door cracked up the middle, echoed the shriek of its iron screws. Then came Judith's scream:

"God help me, Richard!"

"Judith! Don't go down there! Keep away from the pit!"

Tears blotted in his eyes, tears which twisted his vision into warped focus. He saw no yellow-green scrolls; he saw implacable red. . . .

A third time his weight catapulted into the door.

"God help him," he cursed, "if he touches a hair of that girl's head!"

The door flew open under his assault, its screws flying from their sockets like whining slugs. Richard fell shoulder-first into the room, one hand ripped crimson by a twisted iron hinge.

As he pushed to his feet he heard Judith's voice from within the pit.

"The mask! Throw down the mask!"

Swift agony burned through his fist as he clenched it. He was half-way across the floor, his hand a bloody knot. . . .

"No, no, Richard! Don't come down! Throw the mask—the mask!"

"I'm coming, Judith. If he's touched you——"

But Judith's voice came screaming back at him:

"If you want to save me, *throw down the mask!*"

A curse ripped from his lips as he reached the stairs of the pit. He stopped suddenly, his nerves tingling with the pierced sincerity of her cry. He whirled around and raced for the table.

"Stand aside!" he cried. He raised the white mask high above his head and

hurled it smashing down into the blackness.

He heard the crunch as it hit the stone below, heard the cracked spattering of its hundred broken pieces. Then his outstretched hands touched Judith's, and he carried her back up the steps.

"Turn the lever," Judith gasped. "Let the stone fall. . . ."

Richard's hand reached out and touched the lever. . . .

They were both at the door when the stone came hurtling down. The whole of its incalculable weight struck the floor with a deafening crash that sent a reverberating tremor through the whole section of the castle. It shook the floor and shook wooden beams from the wall.

From outside came a thundering avalanche of stone, wrested loose from a crumbling buttress.

"Quick!" It was Richard's voice. "This wing is caving under. There's dynamite below."

Thundering stone-fall grew louder around them. Seismic-like cracks widened in the floor.

"To the car, Judith!"

Richard scooped the girl into his arms and ran down the hall. Just at the foot of the stairs they heard timber cracking far below them.

"The whole understructure is giving way," he cried as they sped to the door. "When it hits that dynamite this whole hill will be leveled!"

But not until many minutes later—as they drove out of the far road—did the first blast rocket into the night. They saw an immense stone tower suddenly rise out of itself, and come tumbling down to earth.

7

ON THE boat out of Calais Richard said, "I never before realized what a terrible burden it was. I honestly feel

as if the weight of all hell has been lifted from my shoulders."

"And you look as much better for it," Judith answered.

They leaned close together at the ship's rail, with the soft throbbing of the screws and the wash of the propellers swelling symphonically in the night. A myriad lights of the seaport twinkled in the thin fog; the coast-line was blurred, unreal. . . .

"So very unreal," Richard whispered gently, "that we can soon forget it. But I am still horrified by what you did, Judith. It was mad to go into the pit. He might——"

"There was no 'he', Richard. There was no one in the pit!"

Richard whirled back from the rail. "No one——"

"I went down there *twice*," she said; "the first time while you were in Pueblos. . . . You must forgive me, dear, but I had no choice. I knew that it was a battle to the death between our love and his power. I knew that there could be no compromise. If there was a Venzelos down there, then he must be destroyed. I went down with your revolver, prepared to destroy him."

"Judith!"

"I shall never tell you what I saw, but there was nothing *alive*. There were many—sacks, and a skeleton. Perhaps—I do not know—the skeleton was his. The skeleton was twisted beneath a hideous, worm-eaten sack. It was as though the sack had struck it and knocked it down for ever——"

"Judith! What are you trying to tell me?"

"A horror far beyond our greatest imaginings has happened to you, Richard. It was killing you surely, day by day. If this creature Venzelos ever really lived in the pit, he died there, too. He died years ago, and you have been tossing those things to emptiness.

"No, don't interrupt, dear. I thought I sensed the answer as I stood half-way down the stairs and saw the skeleton and the sacks. I was stunned and horrified—and then I realized about the mask.

"The mask was his medium of hypnotism. It was the mask that summoned you from your sleep and dragged you to this place. It was the mask that stared at you so hauntingly and awakened his commands within your brain. It was the mask that frightened you and dazed you, and brought you back time and time again to an endless bidding.

"How or why he did these things, we can never know; they are things we never want to know. It was a challenge to our love, Richard—but we have victored over it. The power of the mask, once in your mind, never left you. It was a malignant thing, lying dormant. Venzelos died before he could remove the hypnosis—the hypnosis remained, recurring more frequently as the months wore on. There might have been no end at all. . . .

"I tried to appeal to you when I learned that he was dead, but you could not hear me. I went into the room and barred the door. Only then did my screams really reach you.

"I was truly afraid, Richard. I was afraid that his power had dragged you down too deeply. He was dead, but he lived on in the evil of the mask. Someone had to break the mask—you had to break it, dear; for only then could you feel yourself its true master. But the very mask itself prevented you from doing so.

"It was a battle to the death between our love and a nameless thing. When you came flying through that door, and when I saw the maddened glint in your eyes and heard your curse, then I knew, Richard, that shattered or unshattered, dead or undead, the power of Venzelos and his mask was broken for ever!"