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The Dinner Cooked in Hell

by Mindret Lord



That grisly meal was prepared in the kitchen of hell and served by the beautiful, evil daughter of the devil. And afterward, for entertainment, I had to watch my wife and friends twist to the tortures contrived by this Princess of Pain and her ungodly followers . . .

TO ME, it seems so much more horrible because it happened right in my own house in the middle of New York City. It would have been ghastly enough, God knows, no matter where it happened—but in my own house!

That afternoon my wife had been to a matinee, and she called for me at my

office so that we could drive home together. As we got into the car, I noticed that the sky was dark over the river. One of those sudden and dramatic summer storms was sweeping in from New Jersey.

My wife said, "Oh dear! I hope there's not going to be any thunder!"

I laughed at her. "What's the matter, Dora? I never knew you to be afraid, before."

"It's our maid, Martha, I'm worried about. She's told me several times that she's terrified of thunder. She says when the Thunder God speaks, it means death."

"That's nonsense," I said. "And if you ask me, I think we ought to get rid of her. She's cracked. And if it does thunder tonight, she can lock herself in a closet and we'll go out to dinner."

"We can't," Dora told me. "Michael and Mary Royce are dining with us—"

Thunder growled in the sky and a few drops of rain began to fall on the traffic-crowded streets. It was sultry and threatening, but it was still not raining hard when we parked the car and entered the doorway of the three-floor house where we lived.

In answer to our ring, the door opened, but it was not the familiar Martha who opened it. Instead, it was a girl whom neither of us had ever seen before. She was dark and rather handsome in a bold, Italian way, and the figure that filled the maid's uniform was much too voluptuously curving to suit the costume.

Dora said, "What does this mean? Where is Martha? Who are you?"

The girl smiled apologetically. "Martha was suddenly taken sick and she asked me if I would help out, tonight. I hope you don't mind, madam?"

Dora hesitated. "Well—we're having guests, so there doesn't seem much we can do about it. Do you know how to cook and serve?"

"Oh yes, madam."

"And what did you say your name was?"

"Lucia, madam."

"Very well, Lucia. I'm going up to dress now. We'll dine at a quarter to seven."

Dora went upstairs. I went to the bar to mix myself a drink, and asked Lucia to bring me some ice. In a moment she returned with it and asked, "May I help you, sir?"

"No," I said. "I'll put it in, myself."

"Yes, sir."

I dropped a couple of cubes into the whiskey and soda and then looked up. She was still standing there.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

Her black eyes were shining and her deep red lips were soft and moist.

"It's the thunder, sir," she said.

"Oh lord! Are you afraid of it, too?"

"Oh no, sir! I love it! It—it—" I don't know what she was going to say, but apparently she thought better of it and merely repeated, "I love it!" But there was something about the way she said those words that made me shudder. It was as if she were speaking of a passionate sweetheart.

At that instant, lightning flashed through the window drapes, and in the few seconds that elapsed before the following thunder, I looked at Lucia. I could see that some strange and intense excitement was causing her breast to swell against the black silk of her uniform. Her eyes sought mine in an ecstatic stare. Then came the deep roll of thunder. Lucia sighed heavily and without another word, turned and left me gazing after her. For some reason my hand was shaking when I raised my glass to my lips.

I WENT up to see Dora and found her combing her long, flaxen hair. She made some comment about what bad luck it was to have a new maid on a night when company was expected and then

she asked, "By the way—you didn't happen to hear what's the matter with Martha, or where she is?"

"No—but I don't suppose it's anything serious. Anyhow, she wouldn't have been any good in this storm."

"Well," said Dora. "I'd rather have Martha even though she was scared to death—than that one downstairs."

I showered and dressed and got downstairs just as Mike and Mary Royce arrived. They're a good-looking young couple, about our age. Lucia had let them in and I noticed Mike's eyes following her as she left the room.

Mary said, "I see you've got a new maid." I explained about it and then Dora joined us. For a few minutes we sat around, talking about nothing important. Then Lucia came in with a tray and four glasses.

Dora looked at it and laughed. "A tomato juice cocktail! I didn't even know there was any in the house. Oh well, it's good for us."

We each took a glass and drank it politely, but at the time, I remember thinking, "If that's tomato juice, I'm the Queen of the May." I didn't know what it was—it was so cold and so highly seasoned—but after I had swallowed it, I knew I didn't want any more.

At dinner, I think that all of us were nervous and jumpy. It was partly the storm that now crashed directly over Manhattan, and partly the dinner, itself. I don't know how to explain about that meal—the food was good and it was well served, but nobody seemed very hungry. Lucia had carved the roast in the kitchen, and as Dora helped herself, she asked, "What is this, Lucia? I ordered roast beef for tonight."

The girl shrugged her shoulders and smiled as if to say, "I cooked what was there."

"The butcher must have made a mistake." Dora cut at piece and tasted it.

"Pork," she said. And to Mary, "I hope you like pork?"

"Of course," said Mary. "We both do. And this is perfectly done. Your new girl's a treasure."

"It is good, isn't it?" Dora agreed—somewhat curiously, I thought.

The meat was good—very white and very fine-textured. But I noticed that nobody ate much.

When Lucia removed our plates, before bringing on the dessert, she must have left the kitchen door open, for I heard a voice speaking in a cautious undertone—so low that the words could not be distinguished.

Dora heard it, too, and asked, "Who is out in the kitchen, Lucia?"

"Just someone who is waiting to take me home, madam. Would you prefer that he waited outside?"

"No," said Dora slowly. "No—it's all right."

It occurred to me that there must be more than one person waiting out there—unless he was talking to himself. However, I said nothing about it.

MEANWHILE, Mike Royce's behavior had done nothing to make the dinner more pleasant. He seemed to be in a kind of stupid daze. When he was spoken to, he scarcely heard. If the remark were repeated, he mumbled some inadequate reply. Dora and I felt embarrassed for Mary and tried to keep up a sprightly conversation, but it was far from easy—particularly when Lucia entered the room. Then, Mike's eyes would follow her every movement, even though he pretended to be looking at his plate.

Dessert was ice cream with a thick, dark wine sauce that tasted more like—like what that tomato juice cocktail had tasted—than like wine. Not that it was actually bad. It was just different from anything any of us had tasted before. We ate a few bites and then went into the

living room where Lucia was to serve coffee.

Instead of passing over, the storm was increasing in intensity, so it was no great surprise when the lights suddenly flickered out.

I said, "They'll probably come back on in a second."

While we waited in the dark, the flash of lightning behind the drapes was almost continuous and the peals of thunder seemed to overlap, so that there was a constant, uninterrupted roar. I lit a cigarette. Before I blew out the match, I noticed that Mike Royce was no longer in the room. I didn't mention it, of course, and the girls seemed unaware of his absence.

Finally, Dora said to me, "George—there are some candles in a box in the basement. Don't you think you'd better go down and get them?"

I groped my way through the dining room to the kitchen, half expecting to find Mike there, with Lucia. But I was wrong. There was nobody in the kitchen at all—as I could see by the ghostly glow of the gas stove's pilot light. I thought that Lucia had probably decided to go home with whomever had been waiting for her, without bothering to finish her job.

I struck a match and went down the flight of wooden stairs to the basement. At the bottom, the match went out, but I knew my way well enough, and the lightning was frequent enough, so that I could move without danger of cracking my head against the low beams. The box I was looking for was on an old carpenter's bench, against the farther wall. I crossed the basement, felt the side of the bench against my thigh and put out my hand to where the box ought to have been. My hand met something that froze me with horror—incredible, unbelieving horror! It *couldn't* be!—and yet, that first grisly touch—when my hand rested

on cold flesh and wet, sticky blood—told me the truth, whether my brain would admit it or not. Before I could draw my hand away, the lightning flashed and I had a momentary glimpse of the mutilated thing that once had been a woman.

Nausea gripped me. It was as if some terrible, live thing had suddenly jumped in my stomach. I wanted to strike a light—but more than anything in the world. I wanted to get away from there. I turned and ran three steps before the top of my head seemed to explode. I don't even remember falling. . . .

I AWOKE to the din of thunder, the clamor of the storm—to a blinding, splitting headache—and to the sound of men's voices near me.

"I think he's coming to," one said. "Will the ropes hold?"

"Sure. They're strong."

"Shall we carry him?"

"No—make him walk."

"I don't see why we don't finish him off right here."

"Lucia would be sore if we did. Besides, it'll be half the fun to watch him when we go to work on his wife—"

At that, I opened my eyes and saw two nightmarish figures bending over me. Even in the feeble light of the flickering candle that one of them held, I could see that these men were mad. Degeneracy was written upon their lantern-jawed faces and in their piggish, cunning eyes. And I, with my arms roped behind me, was completely helpless to defend either my wife or myself.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I never got the words out. One of them kicked me hard in the ribs, and the other yanked me to my feet. Then, between them, they dragged me up the stairs and through the kitchen. As we passed the stove, something caught in the pocket of my coat and ripped it down. It was the handle that turns on the gas in the oven.

I didn't know whether it had opened the valve, or not.

There was nobody on the first floor of the house and the men who held me did not stop as we went through. Instead they took me up the stairs and into the big bedroom that was Dora's and mine. They threw the door wide and shoved me in.

A fire had been started in a coal brazier, and the red flames lit the scene of terror. Hanging from the heavy, rustic ceiling beam, was the stripped body of Mary Royce. Hanging beside her, naked to the waist, was Dora, my wife! Michael was suspended a short distance away. Behind him, Lucia held a glowing poker within inches of his bare back. In her left hand was a vicious, snake-like whip.

As I stumbled into the room, Lucia whirled and faced me, her eyes blazing with raging madness. "Good!" she said. "I was afraid you had gotten away—"

"Damn you!" I shouted. "What—"

"Shut up! One word out of you—and both you and your wife will get worse than this!"

"But what do you want?" I begged. "I'll give you anything—"

"I want your lives," she said, matter-of-factly. "I am the Thunder God's bride—and I want your lives for him—to-night!"

As if in confirmation of her crazy statement, a clap of thunder literally shook the house. When it died away, Lucia pointed to a chair and said, "Sit there! And remember—one word—one sound—one movement. . . ."

She didn't need to finish the threat. What could I do but obey?

Mike Royce hung perfectly still—staring vacantly at the tortured, writhing body of his wife. Now that my eyes were more accustomed to the light, I could see that his back was scorched and burnt to such an extent, that he had gone insane from the pain.

While one of my lunatic guards remained near me, the other took the cooling poker from Lucia's hand and exchanged it for another which he withdrew from the fire. But Lucia waved it aside and lifted her whip. The slow, inhuman punishment began again. Mary's slender body was soon torn and bleeding in a hundred places as the merciless lash bit deeply into her tender flesh again, and again. . . .

The room was reverberating with sound—the thunder, Mary's screams, the mad laughter of the men—yet through it all, I heard Dora's voice raised in a shriek of agony . . . and at that moment, I knew the terrible misery of helplessness.

IF I had been roped into my chair so that I could not possibly move, it might have been easier for me to bear. But to be able to get to her side and yet not be able to fight for her—

Lucia yelled, "What are you doing, you fool? I told you to leave her alone until I was ready for her!"

The idiot answered like a petulant child. "I just burnt her a little bit. Why can't I have some fun, sometimes?"

"Oh well," said Lucia. "All right. But I warn you—don't kill her!"

Almost instantly, Dora cried out again—cried my name, begging me to help her. My arms were slippery with blood, but still the ropes would not give.

I was so concentrated upon my struggle to free my arms that I scarcely saw the ghastly tableau before me, and I have no clear idea of how long it lasted. Finally, however, Lucia halted.

"She's dead," she said, tonelessly, and raised her whip to strike Dora.

At this instant, there was a sudden gust of hot wind that blasted through the bedroom door, followed by a sound that was something like a gigantic sigh. The floor heaved, the windows blew out and the ceiling crashed down. I knew what

had happened—when my coat caught on the stove, it had opened one of the burners and the gas had collected in the kitchen until the pilot light had exploded it.

Unthinkingly, the three men raced out of the room and down the stairs. The heavy beams had fallen on Mary's dead body, and they had also caught Michael and Lucia. He was dead, with a point of the splintered wood through his skull. Lucia was alive, though crushed and unable to move.

I backed up to the brazier, pulled one of the irons from the embers and managed to burn through the ropes around my arms. Then, it was the work of a moment to release the chains that bound Dora. I took her in my arms, climbed through one of the shattered windows and set her on the wide ledge, outside.

Lucia was still alive when the firemen took Dora and me down their ladder, but

when they asked me if there was anyone else to be saved before the house burned to ashes, I lied about it. I told them that everybody else in the house was dead. Anyhow, she couldn't have lasted long—not nearly long enough to suffer for the ghastly carnage she had caused. . . .

* * *

Several days later, we found out what happened. Martha, our maid, had once been confined in a private asylum for the insane from which she had been discharged as cured just before she came to us. Lucia and the three men had been patients in the same asylum—and when they broke out, they came directly to their old friend, Martha. They were violent, to begin with, but the thunderstorm aroused them to even greater violence.

As for Martha, herself—my wife will never know what happened to her downstairs, in the cellar. I will bear that nauseating memory alone.
