

Weird Tales

ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

JANUARY, 1946

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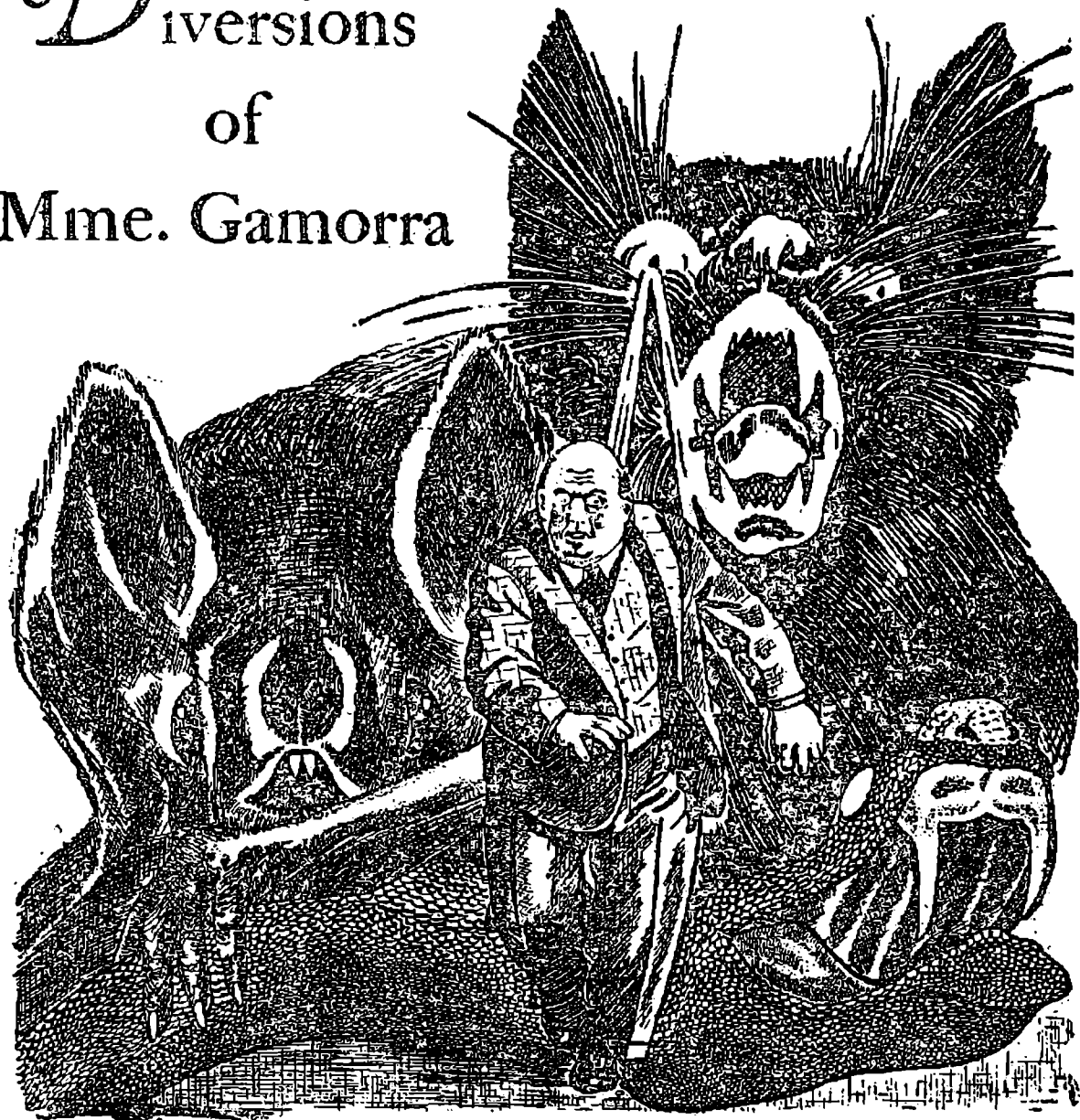
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The
Diversions
of
Mme. Gamorra

BY HAROLD LAWLOR



.... it might have been a rat, but a rat grown to monstrous, misshapen proportions

HE COULD stop now. He's run far enough. Maybe. But in any case he had to stop. Here in the shadow of the great oak, its bark rough and reassuring under his touch, he had to stop to still the pounding of his laboring heart, to wipe from his forehead the dew of fright and ex-

ertion, to ease from his gross body the fear-sweat shirt.

But he couldn't halt this convulsive shivering, as of a million loathsome crawling things inching their way on icy feet up his shrinking back. He couldn't control the jerking of his head—jerking, jerking spas-

Heading by A. B. TILBURNE

modically over his right shoulder so that his dilated eyes might sweep behind him over the sandy, hump-backed country road, searching, fearing to see again the thing, creature, *it* that had crossed his path back there near the Gamorra farm.

But what *was* it? What had *it* been?

Osbert Horland cowered against the oak, peered down the sandy road. Air sucked into his lungs, agonizingly. He waited. Cloud-wrack covered the moon, swept on.

Nothing. Not in ten years had Osbert Horland thanked his Creator for anything, but—oh, blessed God! Nothing. It was gone.

But it had been there. His vision hadn't tricked him, nor his fear. If there was anything on God's green earth it had resembled at all, it might have been a rat. But what a rat! A rat grown to monstrous, misshapen proportions. A rat that magnified a thousand-fold your natural repugnance for one of its kind.

Osbert had been walking along, coming home, when suddenly it had crawled from the ditch at his left, directly into his path. For a breathless moment they'd both stopped, paralyzed. The thing had seemed equally startled. Then it had scurried into the underbrush, he had heard the crackling of its passage. And Osbert, galvanized, had started to run wildly, panic-stricken, his great belly shaking, his balding head glistening under the intermittent light of the moon.

God!

He wiped his forehead anew. He swallowed carefully to settle his queasy stomach.

The thing had made no move to attack him. He'd have died of sheer terror if it had. It was fully three or four feet wide and possibly five feet long, and its four small legs held it barely six inches above the ground. It had no neck; its flat skull merged directly into its short-haired, dun-colored body. A body that was shallow, like a turtle's. But a turtle was a clean, a normal thing.

It was not.

Again, at the memory, Osbert swallowed hastily. But it was useless this time. He turned and retched helplessly.

Someone should warn Madame Gamorra, he knew hazily, through his nausea. But not him. Not now. He couldn't go back. Not alone. Not on foot. A little farther on, and

he'd be safe. Home. He'd get Ada. And the car. The thing in the road had even made him forget the fiasco of his marriage with Ada. For once he'd be glad to get home to her. For once he'd welcome her companionship.

Nervously he left the shelter of the oak, with many a backward glance, stepping high as if even yet he feared treading on—*it*.

ADA was on the sofa, in satin lounging pajamas, indolent as a sleek black cat. Even now, shaken as he was, Osbert wondered again that people ever thought her attractive, with her black bangs, her wise green eyes, her scimitar-slim body.

He never had. He'd married her only because she'd led him to believe she was rich, the lying, devious, little—!

She looked up as he came in. "Why, it's Osbert! My darling, my own true love." As always, specious endearments tripped from the tongue that he sometimes thought the devil had touched. She delighted in pretending theirs had been a love match, much to his irritation, though they'd both long since known the truth.

But he ignored her inflection now. He stood there, his fat jowls ashen. "Ada—"

"Why, whatever is it, lover?" She put down her book falsely solicitous. "Tell Ada what troubles you."

Her eyes, her lips mocked him. But haltingly he forced himself to tell her of the thing in the road.

"What an imagination you have, Osbert!" she said, when he finished. He writhed under the mocking way she pronounced his name. Everyone else called him Ozzie. "Are you sure you didn't dream it all? Just as you dreamed of the vast riches you told me you had?"

As usual, she succeeded in baiting him. His recent fear was swallowed up in a swift surge of anger. She'd never let him think well of himself. She seemed determined to tear down the facade he'd been years in building. He couldn't stand it. It was getting under his skin.

"Stop talking to me like that!" he cried. "In that sneering, superior sort of way—"

"Superior, Osbert?" The green eyes were delighted. "You know I'm definitely your inferior when it comes to turning a dis-

honest penny. Shady deals, gypping here, cheating there—"

"I can't help it if I'm cleverer than other people," Ozzie said sullenly. "Anyway. You're just sore because I lied about my income. Don't know why you should feel so set up about yourself. You did the same thing to get me to marry you. You're no better than I am."

She stretched languidly, nodding agreement. "We're just a couple of bums who out-foxed ourselves. Hoist by our own petards, whatever they are. How the gods must have laughed! I suppose I ride you because you're such a stuffed shirt. I'm phony, and I know I'm phony. But you—you small-time pork-and-beaner!" Her green glance withered him. "You try to fool even yourself. You can't face the truth about yourself. Small wonder I find it such fun to deflate you, you big windbag!"

The lazy purr of her voice nearly maddened him. "If you don't like it, why don't you get out?"

"Oh, I will, duck, never fear. I'm keeping my eye open for a likely young feller. He might be slow in the coming, but in the meantime—" she gestured with the book in her hands—"this is a roof over my head, and two can live as cheaply as one. Cheese and kisses with you, in a word, till my knight comes riding along."

Ozzie gritted his teeth. If he could only slide his hands around that throat, claw at that smug, smiling face!

"Some day," he snarled, "I'm going to kill you!"

But Ada only laughed. "Oh, no, you won't. You'll just continue to take anything I care to dish out, sweetheart. And like it. You'd never put your fat neck into a noose just for the pleasure of finishing me off."

Well, that was true enough, Ozzie admitted to himself in a rare moment of honesty. But just the same, the time would come when he could get back at her safely. And when that day arrived, by gad—!

BUT he was forgetting. With an effort, he controlled himself. Why did he idle in profitless argument with Ada when there was that creature in the road, up to who knew what?

"Come on," he said. "We must warn Madame Gamorra. If that thing gets in among her Angora rabbits—"

Not that he gave a damn about Madame Gamorra's rabbits. It was the woman herself, an enigma since moving here five months before. No one had been able to learn anything about her. It had galled Osbert more than a little that he'd been unable to add anything to the general lack of information, for he liked to pose as an oracle about the countryside and an authority on its inhabitants. Here was his chance to visit her house, learn something of her.

Besides, she appeared to be wealthy, and—who knows? There might be something in it for him.

Ada must have sensed his eagerness and made her own deductions. For perversely, to devil him, he supposed, she refused to go. "What's the old woman to me? When she first came here, I called, and she wouldn't even let me in. We've never seen her, except at a distance."

"Then I'll go alone!" Osbert cried rashly.

"Hurry back, Romeo." Ada returned to her book, indifferently. "You know how I pine when you're gone."

Ozzie swallowed an oath. But he had to go now, despite his reluctance. Because if he stayed, Ada would know he was afraid. It would be one more thing for her acid tongue to scorge him with. Damned if he wouldn't rather face that horror in the road!

The driveway to the garage was dark, and he didn't feel safe until he was in the sedan, with the doors shut. Even then he switched on the tonneau light to be sure there was no one—no *thing*—in the car with him. The dread of it returned in full force now that he was again alone.

He backed out, still smarting under the memory of Ada's voice. He hated her, more and more. But what could he do? He had no grounds for divorce. He couldn't even beat her, for he was afraid of her. Under that languid exterior, she could take care of herself. He remembered her long scarlet fingernails. Yes, she'd fight back, pointed teeth and blood-red claws, like the cat she was.

Oh, if he could only think of something!

His headlights picked out the bridge over the narrow gully, and again Ada was for-

gotten. It was just this side the bridge that he'd seen—*it*. Panic overtook him again. What if the thing should run out in front of the car? What if he should run over it? In his imagination, he could feel the *squish* the thing would make under his tires. Ugh! His toes curled in his shoes at the thought.

It was a relief, then, to find the Gamorra farm dark when he reached it. Any respite was welcome. Anything that would keep him from the necessity of opening the car door, setting foot in that dark driveway, overgrown as it was with shrubbery that afforded excellent hiding places for lurking monsters. What were a few Angora rabbits measured against that horror? By now he really believed himself they were his reason for coming.

But—tomorrow. Tomorrow would do as well.

He needn't go back to Ada. He could drive instead to a tavern in town, and stay there late enough to insure that she would be asleep before he returned.

THERE was no one in the place but the bartender and Quale, the town's chief of police, who was having a beer. Osbert wanted companionship this night, longed for it. He lifted his bulk onto the stool next to Quale, though he knew the chief didn't like him. But the fellow couldn't very well get up and walk away, or ask Ozzie to sit some place else. It was a free country.

A conversation had evidently been going on for some time.

"... and they don't know what happened to him?" asked Joe, the bartender, polishing a glass.

"Disappeared, like that." Quale snapped his thick fingers. "Last his wife knows, he went up to Gamorra's to do some carpentry work."

"Ain't wimmen the darnedest?" marveled Joe. "Beatin' her evvey night, putt' near, and now she's lookin' for him, 'stead of bein' thankful he's gone."

"Remember the time he held his youngest kid's hands against a hot stove for losing a dime?" Quale said. "I saw to it he got thirty days for that myself, and wished it could have been more."

"Who are you talking about?" Ozzie horned in.

The chief drank his beer then, so that Joe would have to answer. "Al Sneed."

"Oh," Ozzie remembered the hatchet face, the slitted sadistic mouth, the long lean figure in green-patched blue denims and torn tee shirt. He'd sold Al some substandard lumber last year, and he could still hear the thin mouth, voicing dire reprisals. But pshaw! Nothing had happened. Was it his fault Al wasn't sharper? Let the buyer beware.

"A rat, if they ever was one, that guy," Joe said. "He musta been just about the biggest rat in the world, you ask me."

Quale nodded. Ozzie remembered with a shudder. Was everything going to remind him?

"No," he said. "Not the biggest rat in the world. I saw that tonight up at Gamorra's place."

He told them, and whether they believed him or not, he didn't know. Probably not. For Joe laughed.

"Say, maybe it was Al you seen," Joe cracked, cackling.

Ozzie let it go. Let them think it was funny if they like. But he'd seen it. He wished he could forget the damned thing. He'd dream of it tonight.

WHEN Chief Quale left, Joe shook his head sadly. "Yes, sir! Chief Quale is mighty upset about the disappearance of Al Sneed. He's got to find him, or it just won't look right."

"Can't see why," Ozzie objected idly. "Al was worthless. Good riddance, I'd say."

"Well—" Joe let the word imply polite agreement. "Still when you take it with that other disappearance, why, say! Makes the chief look like he just don't belong in his job."

"What disappearance? Oh, you mean—" Joe nodded. "Annie Cowell. Up and gone these two months, no one knows where."

Ozzie remembered, but he did not sorrow. Nerve of that old maid, Annie, lighting into him just because he'd sold her mother that mining stock. Annie said her mother's death was his fault, that her discovery the stock was worthless had killed the old woman. But pshaw! Her heart would have given out anytime, probably. When the garrulous, bitter Annie disappeared, it was no skin off

Ozzie's nose. He'd been relieved, and had quickly forgotten her.

"'Course there were plenty people," Joe went on, "who hated Annie. Said she was a malicious gossip, a viper. Said she whispered lies about that little young Mrs. Morton till she broke up with her husband. And she drove that druggist, Alwyn, out of business, hinting he made too many mistakes in prescriptions. Came out later, it was all lies, started because Alwyn went around with her for awhile, then dropped her.

"Yep, guess you could call Annie a viper, right enough. Well, anyway, she went up to that Mrs. Gamorra's to do some sewing, and ain't never been seen since. Mrs. Gamorra said she left when she finished her work, and that was all *she* knew about it."

Joe surveyed the polished glass lovingly, chose another. He thus missed Ozzie's start. But—Gamorra's, Ozzie thought. Funny both disappearances should bring in Madame Gamorra.

Joe stopped polishing the glass. "Say, that's kind of peculiar—"

Ozzie held his breath. He didn't want anyone else connecting those disappearances too obviously with Madame Gamorra. Not just yet, not till he found out if there could be anything in it for him. But he needn't have worried. Joe was thinking of something else.

"Come to think of it," Joe said, "both them people were like animals, kind of. If a snake's a animal. There was Annie, a viper, and Al, a rat." Joe laughed sheepishly. "Well, shucks, I just thought of it," he apologized.

Ozzie hardly heard him, for his mind was busy. More than ever he was determined to visit the mysterious Madame Gamorra. You never knew what could be turned to your profit. With which pleasant reflection he called it a day.

MADAME GAMORRA, Ozzie discovered next morning, was almost incredibly the wicked old duchess of fiction. He'd half-expected to be denied entrance, at least at first, but she received him in the living room—black-clad, withered, her coiffure a dyed jet cuckoo's nest above her raddled face. Her liver-spotted hands, covered with dirty gems, rested on the gold head of her

ebony stick. Her pointed chin rested on her hands. And her sharp black eyes watched Ozzie scrutably as he told her of the thing in the night.

Ozzie was in his best form. His courage, such as it was, always rose with the sun. Now—pink-shaven, white-flannel-clad, self-important—he was heroic.

"I returned later, of course, with a gun to protect you," Ozzie finished, lying pompously, "but I saw no sign of the creature. And as your place was dark, I hesitated to disturb you."

"Ah, so?" Madame said. "That was most kind of you."

Didn't she believe him? Was there a faint ironic cast to her words of gratitude? Ozzie shifted somewhat uncomfortably under that steady gaze. The woman was amazingly self-contained. Prowling monsters, it would appear, had no power to alarm her.

"It looked like a monstrous rat," he said uneasily.

"It *was* a rat," Madame answered, her eyes on the rings.

"What!" Ozzie cried. "You've seen it, too? You *know*?"

Madame raised her head. "You misunderstood my inflection, Mr. Horland," she said suavely. "I said: 'It was a rat?'"

But she hadn't raised her voice questioningly the first time, Ozzie was sure. She'd made a definite statement, and now must be trying to cover up her obvious break. He shifted uncertainly in his chair again. He scented something wrong here, radically wrong. Madame was much too polished. Urbanity, to Ozzie, was always suspicious. He used it himself when he was most nefarious.

But he'd better accept her explanation, for the moment, anyway. The wordly Madame Gamorra, he saw, was no silly creature to be stampeded easily into damaging admissions. His curiosity aroused to the boiling point, he turned the conversation to rabbit-breeding, about which he knew nothing and cared less, and hinted he'd like to see more of the Gamorra farm.

Again she surprised him by making no demur. He wondered if she knew he was wary of her, and hoped to allay his suspicions for all time by seeming frankness. At any rate, she rose and offered to show

him about the place. Despite the cane, she was neither lame nor feeble. Osbert would have preferred to poke about the farm for himself, but there was nothing for him to do but offer Madame his arm.

They went out through the kitchen, where a middle-aged foreign-looking servant, whom Madame addressed as Tina, was stirring something in a pot on the coal-burning range. She looked up incuriously as they passed, but it seemed to Ozzie that a significant look was exchanged between maid and mistress.

The farm was smaller than he'd supposed, and there was really nothing to see but a series of white-washed hutches containing soft furry docile-looking rabbits. Only one thing aroused his interest. A small square white shed, nestling under maples, at the far end of the hutches. It looked innocuous enough in itself, but it seemed suspicious to Ozzie that Madame Gamorra was taking such elaborate pains that they should not approach this building too closely.

"And what is that structure there at the end?" Ozzie gestured grandiosely.

"It is nothing. Merely the shed in which the rabbits are plucked. Now over here, I plan a rock garden. Come. Your arm, if you please, Mr. Horland."

The wind changed, and Ozzie thought he caught a faint whiff of something unpleasant from the direction of the shed. An odor of decay, and something else indefinable. Before he could determine with exactness what it was, Madame slipped her hand through his arm. It was done skillfully, but Ozzie had a feeling he was being out-manuevered. Certainly Madame was succeeding in leading him farther away from the small white shed under the maples, covering her purpose with an effortless flow of small talk.

Osbert's interest was whetted still more.

But the visit, as a whole, would have been dull and unproductive if they hadn't elected to return by way of the kitchen. Perspiring freely from his slight exertion, he asked if he might have a drink before returning to his car. And thus it was that they came upon the maid, busily feeding clothing into the maw of the great black range, in which a fire was now roaring despite the heat of the summer day.

The sight seemed to arouse Madame to a

fury. She unloosed upon the maid a frenzy of foreign invective that reduced the woman to sniveling abjection. Abruptly the storm was over. A swift glance at the studiously impassive Ozzie, and Madame erased all trace of emotion from her face.

Gently steering Ozzie from the kitchen into the entrance hall, Madame said, "These servants. But they are of a stupidity! Wasting fuel, on such a day!"

But Ozzie wasn't fooled. That wasn't the source of her anger. He had seen. That clothing. The faded blue denim levis with their distinctive patch. The red and white striped tee shirt. It had been Al Sneed's costume for months.

And Al Sneed had vanished.

Just as gently, Ozzie resisted Madame's efforts to propel him to the door. He turned instead back into the living room.

"I think I should like a further word with you, Madame Gamorra," he suggested silkily. And his small eyes disappeared in creases of feigned good humor.

MADAME, evidently, was a fatalist. Good! It should simplify matters. One sharp glance, then she seated herself calmly enough opposite him, and the attention she bent upon him was admirably courteous. Ozzie, not to be out-done, was equally polished. They might, you'd have thought watching them, be going to indulge in a courtly discussion of abstract matters.

But Ozzie confidently spoke of murder.

"Chief Quale," he began blandly, "is very anxious to locate Al Sneed." A significant glance at Madame. "Or his *body*."

Madame shrugged. "He would find no trace of Mr. Sneed here."

"I recognized that clothing," Ozzie said bluntly.

Madame spread her hands. "It is destroyed by now."

The woman was fencing with him. Ozzie betrayed no annoyance. He waxed, instead, ponderously arch. "Come, Madame Gamorra! Enough of this quibbling. I can be a most persistent fellow, I assure you. If I should send Quale here, he'll make a thorough investigation next time. A word from me, and he'd be most interested in that shed out there that I'll wager he skipped over before."

This was a shot in the dark, but it worked. Alarm flickered in the black eyes watching him so intently. Ozzie felt a glow of satisfaction.

"I see," Madame said thoughtfully. Surprisingly, she threw back her head and laughed heartily. Wiping tears of mirth from her eyes, she said, "You are a most amusing gentleman, Mr. Horland. Shrewd, too. And your purpose in all this? Surely you can care nothing for the fate of Mr. Sneed. I understand men, Mr. Horland. I can have your silence for a price, is it not so?"

Ozzie beamed. He couldn't resist rubbing his hands together in his pleasure. This was more like it.

"Is it money you wish, Mr. Horland?" Madame regarded him amiably. "Name your price. I admit I should not like the—inconvenience, shall we say?—of an investigation into that shed. And money means nothing to me."

Ordinarily, money would have been his first consideration. But that could wait until later. At the moment, something else was of prime importance to him.

"It would appear, Madame, that you have successfully murdered Al Sneed. I am equally confident," Ozzie said, paying no attention to Madame's gesture of protest, "that you also murdered Annie Cowell." Ozzie cast down his eyes, and sighed windily. "Alas, I am most unhappily married."

He looked up under his thick white eyelids at her. Madame needed no diagrams. "It is your suggestion, then, I murder your wife?"

It was Ozzie's turn to look shocked. "Madame! Need we put it so baldly?"

Her rings seemed to fascinate her. She never took her eyes off them. "There is only one error in your reasoning, Mr. Horland. I didn't murder those two people. I merely turned them into the creatures that they were."

Ozzie looked annoyed for the first time. "You disappoint me, Madame Gamorra."

DID she think him a fool? Certainly she had murdered Al and Annie. Their bodies were buried beneath that shed out there. Why else was she so anxious to avoid a visit from Quale?

She was looking at him now, shaking her head. "You do not believe. You think I am insulting your intelligence. Nevertheless, I speak the truth."

It was ridiculous to prolong the discussion. But he heard himself asking, "What would be your purpose, even supposing—?"

"Ah, *zut!*" Madame clicked a thumbnail contemptuously against her teeth. "Always there must be the reason for everything, the logic. Can nothing, then, be done for one's own amusement? But listen, if you must. Long ago, in another country, my late husband was a power in politics. In the course of time, he fell into disfavor with a certain regime, involved himself in serious trouble. Trouble from which his friends might have rescued him. But did they? They did not, Mr. Horland. They turned their backs. They took, but they never gave. Ah, we learned then what some people could be like! In his despair, my husband killed himself."

Madame's eyes blazed, fire behind ash. "Later, in my bitterness, I reflected upon this: What, I wondered, would they be like if people of that sort were reduced to their least common denominator, their unpleasant qualities magnified? What manner of ugliness should we not look upon? The idea held interesting possibilities to one in my frame of mind. I had loved my husband dearly. Perhaps, in my grief, I had grown a little mad. But, at any rate, I began to investigate, to probe into things perhaps best forgotten."

Ozzie's bulk seemed to shrivel in his chair, though he felt his cowering to be absurd. Surely he would be more than a match for this crazy old woman if she should grow violent?

"Dusty books, dead legends," Madame was saying softly, remembering. "I shall not bore you with a recital of my researches. It is enough to say that the peasants of my country, stupid though they appear outwardly, know many things they do not tell. They taught me much. Too much, perhaps." For an instant the black eyes were hooded as if they could not bear to contemplate the things that they'd looked upon. "It was fascinating, fascinating. I experimented over a period of many years. At long last, successfully. Ah, Mr. Horland, you should have seen my lovely collection. of—shall we call them *animals*, for lack of a better word?"

Ozzie shut his jaw with a snap. The woman's voice had been persuasive. "Where are they?" he asked, in spite of himself.

"The war, the war," Madame said impatiently. "I was forced to destroy them when I fled. Now I start anew. A smaller collection, perhaps, but more select. Tina, on her errands, learns and brings me gossip of the more unpleasent characters about the countryside. I find her help invaluable."

Madame eyed him grimly. "So you speak no more to me of murder, Mr. Horland. Your wife? Certainly. I shall be happy to dispose of your wife, that I may be left to my hobby in peace. I, Luzia Gamorra, offer you my assurances."

Madame sank back, exhausted.

Ozzie stared. Though her cold emotionless words had sounded so cerebral, clearly the woman was insane. But—was that bad? Insane people were often crafty. Certainly she'd been clever enough in the past to fool Chief Quale. What did it matter, then, if Madame chose to think herself a Circe, rather than a murderess? For of course her story was ridiculous.

True, he'd seen with his own eyes that monstrous rat in the road. But fugh! It had probably been small enough. Only magnified by darkness and the flitting moonlight and his own shock at seeing it. A freak, no doubt, escaped from a traveling carnival. What did it matter? The important thing was to get rid of Ada.

"It is agreed, then," Ozzie said, collecting himself. "There remains only the difficulty of getting Ada here."

"That will not be necessary," Madame said.

Ozzie impatiently waved her to silence. Did she think he wanted Ada murdered in his own house? Madame's reasoning was erratic. But then, of course, she was a lunatic.

"I'll send Ada here tomorrow," he said. "Wait till then."

ADA greeted him with an emerald glance of distrust.

"What have you been up to now, my sweet?"

"Up to?" Ozzie looked shocked. "My dear Ada!"

"Ah, ah, ah!" She wagged a chiding finger. "You can't fool Ada. Canary feathers on your chin, dear heart! Don't tell me you've succeeded in rooking Madame Gamorra already?"

"Not at all," Ozzie denied stiffly. He must play this right—so much depended on it. "I found her very charming. She and her neph—"

Ozzie stopped in embarrassed confusion, pretended to bite his lip.

Ada smiled thinly. "Oh, she has a nephew? I wonder I've never seen him around."

"He has just arrived for a visit." Ozzie made it seem a grudging admission.

Reluctantly—or so it appeared—he let her pump him for the rest. And gradually there emerged a picture of a young man, unattached, handsome enough, apparently moneyed. The nephew of Madame Gamorra, who had no existence save in the fertile imagination of Osbert Horland.

Ada was puzzled when he finished. "He sounds like the ideal second husband for me. I wonder this hasn't occurred to you? It seems strange you were so unwilling to tell me about him. Surely it would be fatuous of me to suspect you of jealousy?"

Osbert's glance agreed that it would, indeed.

Ada threw back her head and laughed. "There is only one other possibility, then. You planned to 'take' this young man yourself before I could do any mischief."

Ozzie permitted himself to look crestfallen. But his soul was doing nip-ups inside. It was working! It was working!

Ada looked at his sulky face, and laughed again. "Oh, Osbert! You'll be the death of me yet." She sobered suddenly and her eyes narrowed. "Get this, stupid. You're still in the bush leagues, and no match for me. You're riding for a disappointment, for I'm calling on Madame Gamorra tomorrow."

Ozzie said nothing at all. Stupid, eh? If Ada only knew!

TRUE to her promise, Ada left next afternoon for the Gamorra farm.

And she did not return.

Ozzie hardly dared to hope. He danced on the hot sands of suspense all that after-

noon and night. It was the following morning before he got in touch with Chief Quale, telling the man no more than was necessary. His wife had set out the previous afternoon for a walk, and she had not returned. No, there'd been no domestic differences. Yes, he was completely at a loss to explain her disappearance.

Quale, looking none too happy, promised to get busy on it.

Ozzie returned home. He had a bad moment at eleven o'clock when the bell rang. Damn it! He must stop this guilty jumping.

But it wasn't Ada. It was the surly Tina. "Madame would like to speak to you," Tina gestured toward the road with the buggy whip she held in her hand.

Madame, still in her elegant rusty black, sat erect in a carriage beyond the gate. Ozzie wondered fleetingly where she had ever resurrected the vehicle; it suited her style. He lost no time in getting down the walk.

She greeted him with a slight inclination of her head. "I thought you would like to know that everything went off well."

Air leaped into Ozzie's lungs. "You mean—?"

Madame tapped his arm lightly. "I have such a lovely new pet, Mr. Horland. Though lovely only to my own eyes, perhaps."

"A p-pet?"

"But certainly. A cat. Oh, but a most unusual black cat!"

Ozzie understood then. Madame was still pretending. He ignored her circumlocutions. His heart leaped, and he exulted. It was done. Ada was dead. For a second he shivered apprehensively. Murder! No wonder Madame Gamorra shied from the word. But pshaw! He was safe enough. No one knew but himself and this foolish old woman. He could go on now to other things.

"Fine!" Ozzie said. "And now that that's out of the way, we can clinch the bargain."

Madame looked at him askance. "I don't understand you. I have fulfilled my part of the bargain. It is finished."

Ozzie shook his head, mock-regretfully. "Money, now. I must have money. You see, I reported Ada's disappearance to Chief Quale. But I neglected to mention the fact that the last time I saw her she was on her way to visit you. I'm afraid I led the good

chief to believe she merely went out for an aimless walk." Ozzie cleared his throat delicately. "I should dislike to have it rectify any erroneous impression he might have received."

He smiled affably.

Madame pursed her thin old lips, and looked at him searchingly. "Ah, so. I under-estimated you, Mr. Horland. How you must have laughed at my naivete! But surely I am worldly enough to appreciate the jest, too. Come then." Her gesture invited him into the carriage. "We will drive to my place. I carry about with me no such sum as you doubtless expect to receive."

But Ozzie made no move to get in. "I fear you're still under-estimating me." He chuckled jocosely. "If I go to your farm, there is always the possibility I might join Ada. I shouldn't like a knife in my ribs, or poison in my drink."

Madame chose to find this entertaining. She shook her head fondly, as at an engaging child. "I've said it before. You're an amusing scoundrel, Mr. Horland. Clever, too."

"There isn't any hay in my hair," Ozzie admitted smugly.

"I'll send the money to you tomorrow. Come, Tina."

Ozzie watched the carriage roll off, the sand dripping from its wheels. He was glad she'd been so sensible about it all, but he thought it strange that she was still laughing as she drove away, for he'd stipulated a rather fantastic sum. Her cheerfulness disconcerted him a little until he reflected that, of course, the woman was mad.

Ozzie spent the rest of that day immensely pleased with himself. Every few minutes, quite unconscious he was doing so, he rubbed his hands together and chuckled. With the money he'd receive from Madame Gamorra, he could leave here and go to some city where there would be greater scope for a man of his talents. True, there'd be a slight delay. He must wait long enough for the talk of Ada's disappearance to die down. He must arouse no suspicion till Quale finished his investigations.

At the mental picture of Quale, even now busily engaged no doubt in running himself bow-legged after clues to Ada's disappear-

ance, Ozzie chortled and slapped his fat thigh. He wouldn't mind waiting. Not when he, and he alone, could really savor the joke.

Ah, but it was peaceful with Ada gone! No more would he be driven from his own home by the lash of her scorpion tongue. He read. He puttered about. He was still luxuriating in the freedom of it all when he retired that night.

HE AWAKENED with a start at three o'clock. His brow was wet with sweat. His lungs were laboring, his limbs threshing about on the bed. His eyes rolled widely, seeking aid that was not there. He cowered in superstitious terror, from this nameless feeling of menace. What was wrong? What was the matter with him?

It was growing stronger. Every atom of his being wanted to stay here where he was. Here in the quiet of his room. But there was this other thing. This inner urgency, this mad compulsion to rise. He was rising. He was on his feet, staggering to the hall, slipping, sliding down the stairs.

"No!" He sobbed weakly, his fat jowls shaking in terror. He fought every inch of the way, hanging back, digging his heels into the smooth oak of the steps, throwing the weight of his great bulk backward. He clung to the newel post, his wet fingers slipped.

New sensations now. Growing even more intense. Air, he must have air! He clawed at his night-clothes. His gross body stripped, his eyes still rolling wildly, he slipped and slid across the floor.

He heard it now. Someone was calling. "Come, Mr. Horland! *A moi, my lovely!* To me!"

Softly, gently came the calls, yet they would not be denied. Oh, that voice! Seductive. Irresistible. Bittersweet. Honey over acid. He knew now. *She* was doing this. She wasn't fooling him.

The door. Oh, God! He had to open the door. He *wanted* to go there now. He was out! He was free! He was running down the long white sandy road leading to Madame Gamorra's. He was going to kill her! To rend, to tear, to mutilate—!

BUT he fawned, he groveled. For she was waiting at her gate, still in somber black, a lantern in her hand. And her eyes and rings gave off an unholy light.

"Come, my pretty one!" wheedled Madame Gamorra, leading him down the winding lane to that shed under the maples.

He laughed in mounting hysteria. Slavering, he licked her hand. Obediently, he followed.

"The others—they're waiting for you. The cat, the rat, the viper. Listen to them!" A hissing, a spitting, a snarling. "How pleased they are at your coming!"

The thing at her side shrilled now piteously. But there was no one else to hear. Only the moon saw Madame open the door and admit to the eager presence of the others, a ponderous creature that might have been—

But, wait! Look again! Surely there was never cast in so grotesque a mold—such a *hideous* hyena?