

# The Arkham Sampler

SUMMER, 1949

THE ONE WHO WAITS  
by RAY BRADBURY

IN THE YEAR 2889  
by JULES VERNE

THE DOOR  
by DAVID H. KELLER

ARKHAM HOUSE + PUBLISHERS  
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# THE DOOR

by DAVID H. KELLER

One day Carmen was very late for lunch. It was an unwritten law that none should be on the desert during the summer's mid-day heat. At first Arnold was merely annoyed; as the time grew longer and the heat increased he was worried. Expert horse-woman though she was, there were dangers in the blazing, blistering, mirage-filled desert. Just as he was about to call for the saddling of his horse, intending to search for her, he saw her approaching at a canter. That was bad. She ought not to hurry in this heat.

Instead of going to the corral she rode directly to the ranch house. As he walked out to greet her, he noted that she was flushed and not by the sun alone. There was in her face the expression, accompanied by the peculiar blush, which he had learned to call "that dangerous look." If they were walking or riding together when that combination of look and flush occurred, he managed very well; but if she were in the saddle and he afoot, or standing and he sitting, then he felt an overwhelming sense of inferiority. Now, as she looked down at him, he knew that he was wholly unable to cope with whatever her devious mind had found disturbing.

"Today I saw something new and interesting, Arnold," she said in a monotonous voice.

"How wonderful—that after all these months you should have discovered something interesting!" he cried. "What was it?"

"I saw a door."

"Is that new? I thought they were familiar, everyday objects in the house and bunkhouse." Arnold was thinking fast.

"But this is different. I never saw or even imagined a door like this. Why didn't you tell me about it? Show it to me?"

"Maybe I wanted you to have the thrill of finding it."

"No," Carmen replied, dismounting and seating herself wearily on the lower step of the porch. "No," she continued, "you knew about that door but for some reason didn't want to tell me. I think you were afraid."

"Why should I be afraid to talk to my wife about anything?"

"I don't know; but I believe you were and still are. Did you make the door?"

"No. It was there when I bought the ranch."

"Then who did make it?"

"How do I know?"

Arnold called to one of the hands to take Carmen's horse to the corral.

"That door must be very old," Carmen resumed. "Perhaps time and the wind rotted the house it was a part of and the shifting sand covered the foundation—everything but the door is gone—nothing else remains."

"I don't think there ever was a house. When I first came here I dug very deeply all around it trying to find some trace of a foundation but there was nothing to show there ever had been a building. There never was anything but a door."

"But why should there be just a door?" she insisted. "There seems to be no reason for its existence. It serves no purpose. I examined it very closely. I rode all around it. It's surrounded by the desert. In front, and a bit to one side, is a cactus rearing its seven candlesticks sixty feet toward the sky. Behind the door stands a huge, twisted and wind-tormented Joshua tree. Mesquite and sage are all around. What does it mean, Arnold?"

"First tell me about the door and then I'll ask you a question."

"I suppose you want to test my faculty for detailed observation. Very well. Standing upright, its base evidently deeply buried, is a piece of timber, about eight inches square and at least six feet high. It may be mahogany, ebony or ironwood. In any event, it's black and highly polished by the wind and sands of years. This timber serves as the doorpost on which the door is hung with three hinges. These are either silver or copper; the metal is tarnished and greened by time. The door is almost as tall as the post, about four feet wide and the planks are so cleverly joined that it has the appearance of being made of a single slab of wood. And there is a doorknob."

"It must be a real door if it has hinges and a knob," Arnold said.

"But there is no frame; neither settle, inside jamb nor lintel. Nothing but the desert around it, a cactus in front and a Joshua tree behind. It shuts out nothing and can open into nothing. Whenever I find anything like that—purposeless and mysterious, I mean—in the desert or in my life, I am both intrigued and frightened."

"I understand how you feel. Is the fact that it is frameless and seemingly purposeless the only remarkable point about the door?"

"No. There's a woman on the door. A metal woman, about five feet tall, set on the door like a medallion. She's very beautiful, perfect in every detail and very feminine in her appeal. When I first saw her I thought perhaps she was the reason you hadn't shown me the door. I said perfect, but not wholly so, for she has no face; simply the contour of a head, her hair wind-blown and streaming—no eyes nor ears—not even a mouth. But there's no doubt about her being a woman. I told you that her nude body is beautiful. Her head and the hinges haunt me. You never saw such hinges—but you said you had."

"Yes," Arnold admitted slowly, "I have seen them—but you tell me."

"The hinges are hands and arms, but only half of the upper arms. The elbows form the bend of the hinges; the upper arms fastened to the post and the hands extended onto the door. The lower hinge is feminine, with slender arm and wrist, the fingers long, smooth, lovely. They are clasped around the ankle of the medallion woman, holding her fast."

"Peculiar concept of a woman being immobilized by another woman."

Ignoring his comment, Carmen continued: "The middle hinge is distinctly masculine; a powerfully muscled arm and a large, broad hand with strong, stubby fingers, wide spread as they press deeply, crushing into the woman's abdomen."

Carmen paused as if expecting some comment or question but, as her husband remained silent, she continued her description, but now her voice was low and her eyes filled with fear.

"The third arm is fleshless; just the bones. I am positive that it's made of silver. The skeleton hand is gripped tightly around the woman's throat, strangling her." Carmen shivered.

"Perhaps the artist made her featureless so that, tortured, dying horribly, she might retain her dignity and pride by not showing the world the agony that would have been depicted in a distorted face. A beautiful woman would not like to be made ugly, even by death." Arnold spoke quietly, sympathetically.

"Millions of women are like that. They die, body and soul, and no one has the slightest idea of their suffering, not even their husbands; and they are too proud to ask for understanding or pity."

"Nicely said, Carmen. You make the female seem heroic. Even Prometheus was not too proud to show the world how he suffered. Now, had he been a woman—"

She rose quickly and stood tense. Turning toward her husband she asked in a cold, hard tone: "Did you really see the door?"

"Yes. Did you open it?"

"There was no need."

"Then, if you left it closed, how did you *know* there was nothing on the other side? Had you opened it, walked through it, then you would have been absolutely sure of what the closed door concealed."

"Have you opened the door?"

"No. I wasn't afraid to, yet I was curious; but I realized that it would be wise to leave it closed."

"Then you think there's something important behind that door?"

"Quite possibly. One might find anything. You might find a Virginia garden. Who knows?"

"Oh! You brute," she cried furiously. "That was the most cowardly thing you could have said." She ran, crying, to her room and did not reappear until dinner time. All during the meal she was remote and morose. After a few minutes on the porch she pled a headache and retired.

Habitually, each morning after breakfast, Carmen went to the corral where Dinwiddie, her palomino gelding, stood saddled and waiting for her. After a few minutes of nuzzling his mistress' hand with his soft pink nose he would receive bits of sugar and much neck-patting as his reward. Then Carmen would mount and ride into the desert.

The morning after the talk with Arnold about the door, Carmen felt a great desire to ride as fast as she could, to the mystical creation standing isolated in a sea of sand, as inexplicable as the Sphinx. Day after day she left the ranch heading in a different direction but always circled to the door, where she sat for hours, pondering its meaning. Always she left it with increasing morbidity and a deepening sense of futility.

She had tried, honestly and sincerely, to learn to love this waste-land desert, barren and forbidding, but could not. Her soul continued to cry out for the soft green land, the rolling hills and cool, fragrant gardens of her native Virginia. Tall

spikes of yucca could not compare with her beloved delphiniums nor the sun-burned Joshua trees with the soft pungent cedars of home.

Night after night she had been sleepless, recreating in her memory the narrow boxwood-bordered walks, in her home garden, drinking deeply the scent of roses, lilacs and jasmine, hearing again the plash of the fountain and seeing the lilies and goldfish in its rippling pool, tasting the delicate ripe fig. Finally she would begin to sob, face buried in the pillow, so Arnold would not hear her and realize her heartache. Overwhelmed with the futility of life she would beat against the mattress with clenched hands.

Following one night of nostalgic suffering she asked Arnold: "Do you think real flowers would grow in this desert?"

"Anything will grow here if the soil is irrigated. Why?"

"I was thinking it would be lovely to have a real flower garden."

"Why not set out a cactus garden? They are mighty pretty when in bloom," he suggested.

"No. It would be best to leave them in the desert. They would feel like prisoners if we confined them in a garden."

He looked at her, trying to understand.

"Do you feel like a prisoner?"

"Sometimes," she replied.

Without a word he drank his coffee and left the table.

Carmen wrote her mother for seeds and bulbs and waited anxiously for their arrival. She loved her husband sincerely and felt that if she had a garden she would be perfectly happy and forget the heat and the wide vistas of nothing but sand. Her love held her to this land of desolation but the bonds were cutting so deeply that they hurt.

Finally the seed came. Carmen was delighted. Arnold was mildly enthusiastic.

"You plan the garden, Dear, and the hands will fix it for you, just the way you want it. They will lay a pipe and make a fountain; only an iron pipe at first, till I can buy you something fancy."

During the cool of every morning Carmen worked singing; she planted the seeds and bulbs, watching anxiously for their sprouting. She visualized the stand-pipe spouting into the cement pool as really a marble Cupid standing under a shower of

sparkling water. In the pool she saw the lilies and goldfish Arnold had ordered. Finally a bud showed on one of the iris.

Then one evening it did not cool off as usual after sundown. The night was as suffocating as the day. Carmen heard her husband rise before dawn and ride away with the hands. All morning the bronze-red sun poured a concentrated fire down on the desert but about mid-morning it suddenly blacked out. The wind rose, howling like ten thousand banshees, driving the sand before it with ever increasing velocity. For three days the furious wind whipped the sand until it became like talcum, penetrating every part of the house and piled in huge dunes and banks around the building. Carmen by turns had cowered, crying and praying or angrily paced the storm-darkened rooms.

The wind died as suddenly as it had risen. Carmen dashed out into what had been her garden, now only heaps of powdery sand. Frantically she dug into the mounds of dust trying to find some trace of her beloved flowers, but only the iron pipe stood out above the waste, mockingly throwing a stream of water into the brilliant sunshine.

After an hour of futile effort to find even one plant she dashed into the house and threw herself on her bed, sobbing uncontrollably, as though she had just seen the dead face of her first born.

Just before noon Arnold and the ranch-hands returned, haggard, exhausted and grim-eyed.

"Arnold! Arnold!" his wife cried. "Your terrible desert has buried my garden. It has killed everything. I have nothing to live for now."

"I'm very sorry, Dear," he said perfunctorily, his mind absorbed with the thought of the sheep and cattle smothered to death by the wind or buried alive in the hills of sand; the water holes which would have to be relocated and dug out. Subconsciously he resented her lack of interest or concern for his comfort after three days of battle with the elements.

Carmen stood looking at her husband. Could it be possible that this unsympathetic man was the one for whom she had sacrificed two years of her life? Was there nothing more he could say when he learned of the destruction of her garden than "I'm very sorry"?

Now, in her mind, he had become one with the desert, heartless, receiving all and giving nothing in return. He was just another man, selfish and incapable of understanding the lone-



liness and heartaches of a woman. For a moment she hated him as she hated the desert.

The next morning, for the first time in weeks, Carmen went riding. During the following days Arnold was preoccupied with repairing the damage of the storm and saw his wife only at supper time. He noticed that she was very unhappy, and decided, when the ranch was running smoothly, to take her on a vacation. Perhaps a visit to Virginia would help. In the meantime Carmen was riding, riding, always riding.

Then she discovered the door.

While they never resumed their discussion of it, Arnold was disturbed by its evident fascination for his wife. Her increased moodiness told him that she went there nearly every day. He considered asking her to ride with him so they could look at it together; perhaps that would break the spell it seemed to have cast over her. When he had released her from its power he would donate it to a museum. But for some reason he could not broach the subject.

Lambing time made him forget everything except the welfare of the ewes and lambs. Finally the time came when the hands could take care of everything and, sighing with relief, he rode home about mid-afternoon. Instead of going directly to the corral he rein-tethered his horse by the porch.

Carmen was not in her room. The Mexican cook said that she had not returned from her ride. Arnold waited on the porch, his impatience increasing with the passing hours. Finally he started scanning the horizon with his field-glasses. At last he sighted Dinwiddie, riderless, trotting homeward. At once Arnold sprang into his own saddle and rode swiftly into the desert, passing the palomino with only a glance.

Disregarding the welfare of either himself or his horse he galloped straight to the door. Anything might have happened. Dinwiddie attacked by a rabid coyote or plunging and rearing at sight or sound of a rattler could easily have thrown Carmen and left her seriously injured on the hot desert. Arriving at his destination he first rode around the door and finding no trace of his wife, dismounted in front of the mysterious panel. Pausing anxiously before it for a moment he grasped the metal knob and pulled the door open.

For some seconds he stood, incredulous, unbelieving, yet knowing that what he saw could mean but one thing. A cool

breeze, as from a garden, caressed his face; the mingled fragrance of many flowers, and the twitter of many birds.

Just a few yards beyond the opened door, Carmen, relaxed and fully at ease, sat on the trunk of a fallen Joshua tree. All lines of discontent were erased from her delicate face as she smiled happily down as her empty arms, held as if she cradled a bouquet. She was surrounded by an aura of perfect peace and contentment; a soft breeze tousled her lovely golden hair.

With a sigh Arnold stepped back and closed the door.