

THE DOOR OF DOOM

A Short Story of Tragic Love

By MARY SHARON

MINERVA LANGDON listened to the regular breathing of the man in the bed, and then, satisfied that he was asleep, slipped out of bed and stole across the room to her dressing-table. Noiselessly opening the drawer, she took out a small glass jar and tiptoed over to his bed. Looking down upon the sleeping man, her lips curled contemptuously. Minerva Langdon felt secure in the knowledge that she could do the thing she had planned without fear of discovery. An item in the morning paper had assured her that the time for retaliation upon the man she hated had arrived. That this man was her husband and that she had promised to love, honor and obey him, mattered not at all.

DR. LANGDON was his wife's senior by fifteen years, and he worshipped her with heart and soul; yet his love for her had not prevented him from joining an expedition to Africa for the Museum. Upon his return, eighteen months later, he learned that the heart of his beautiful wife had not grown fonder in his absence—at least, not for him. He had been supplanted in her affections by Richard Montrose, man of the world, globe-trotter and accomplished lover.

Minerva made no attempt to conceal her love for Montrose, and soon after her husband's return, she asked him for a divorce. Langdon refused, thinking that the affair might prove a fleeting infatuation and he would be able to regain her love.

The Langdon home was a large, old-fashioned Colonial mansion, surrounded by a grove of trees, which quite obscured it from the highway. Since they had spent their brief honeymoon here, Langdon hoped that memory might aid him in his effort to regain the love of his beautiful, titian-haired wife, but Minerva repelled all his advances and made it plain that his very presence was hateful to her.

Langdon wandered disconsolately about the grounds of his estate, accompanied by Hugo, a giant ape he had brought back from Africa. Denied the love of his wife, the doctor sought solace in the company of the beast, which plain-

ly loved him as much as it is possible for an animal to do. Wherever the doctor went, Hugo accompanied him. Sometimes he would walk upright and clutch the doctor's hand, much as a child would have done, but more often he shambled along at the doctor's heels in his peculiar shuffling gait. The sight of the ungainly beast served to heighten the aversion Minerva felt for her husband.

One warm afternoon Langdon was dozing in the hammock when the sound of voices nearby aroused him. He sat upright as he recognized the low, throaty voice of his wife in earnest conversation with Montrose. Not caring for the role of eavesdropper, he stepped boldly around the shrubs which had concealed his presence. The tableau which greeted him brought an involuntary cry to his lips. Minerva coolly disengaged herself from the arms of Montrose and stepped back. The air was electric with possibilities. No one spoke. At last she tossed her head back defiantly.

"Well!" she challenged.

"Very well," the doctor told her as he took a step forward.

Montrose was pale. The situation had reduced him to a cataleptic state. He watched Langdon advancing upon him, aware of his intentions, but, like a bird hypnotized by a snake, unable to move. Minerva gave a little cry and ran between them, but Langdon brushed her roughly aside and, leaping at Montrose, drove his right fist squarely into his face. Montrose crumpled up and lay in a heap. Minerva screamed and dropped down beside him. Langdon dragged her to her feet.

"None of that." His voice was like the snap of a lash. "I've acted pretty white, up to now. As long as you are under my roof, you will observe the letter of the conventions if not the law. Go to your room."

Montrose stirred and sat up, a look of wonderment on his blood-streaked face. Hugo seemed to enjoy the scene, almost chuckling to himself. As understanding came to him, Montrose rose and awkwardly brushed off his clothing. Minerva glared at Langdon and rubbed her red-

dened wrists. The doctor took out his watch.

"I'm going to give you a coward's opportunity, Montrose. You should be able to make it to the gate in eight seconds. I shall be timekeeper. If you are longer, I shall send Hugo to bring you back."

Montrose gained courage from the sympathy that flashed from the woman's eyes.

"See here, Langdon—" he began.

The doctor held out his watch.

"You are wasting time, Montrose, unless you wish Hugo to give you a round. I am beginning to count. One—"

Montrose did not linger. One look at the grinning ape sent him flying. He did not make a pretty picture as he fled to safety, and Minerva put another mark down against her husband. She shook her clenched hand in his face.

"Beast! How I wish I were a man!"

A peculiar noise sounded behind him, and Langdon whirled just in time to prevent Hugo leaping at the enraged woman. He called the ape by name and made a clucking sound with his tongue which Hugo seemed to understand, for he sat back on his haunches. Red fire rimmed his eyes and he gibbered and gesticulated angrily at the woman. Minerva fell back aghast at the intensity of the beast's hatred. Completely unnerved by the experience, she allowed Langdon to lead her to the house. Safe inside, she withdrew from the support of his arm and spoke abruptly:

"I am going to demand that you get rid of that ape or chain him up while I am here."

"Hugo would not harm you under ordinary circumstances. He believed you intended to harm me."

Minerva shrugged her shoulders.

"Very well. I shall leave tonight."

The doctor betrayed no feeling at her announcement.

"I have not yet given up my chance to regain your love. A divorce would be contested. A husband has some rights and any court would allow that I have not overstepped mine."

Minerva drew herself up to her full height.

"And a wife does not need to be imposed upon by a ferocious ape. Unless you chain the beast up during the night, at least, I shall not remain another minute."

Langdon bowed.

"Very well. I shall see that he is chained."

And that had ended the episode, but Minerva did not forget the events of the afternoon. And then she read an item in the *Morning Tribune*, which stated that Philip Mendoza, a gardener on the Holbrook estate which joined the Langdon property on the south, had succumbed to an attack of influenza. There was nothing startling about the announcement, but to Minerva it seemed a lightning stroke of fate; for Philip Mendoza shared with her a secret which no one else in the whole world knew. During her husband's absence, Minerva had hired Mendoza to build a cement vault in the basement of her home, in which she was storing gold against a possible elopement. She had bound the superstitious Mexican by strange and solemn oaths until she felt secure in the belief that the knowledge of its existence would never pass his lips, and now it could not, for those lips were silenced forever. Minerva had trusted her secret to no other living being, not even Montrose himself. She had exchanged her jewels and many of her other personal belongings for the gold which now reposed safely in the vault.

After she had read the item concerning Mendoza's death, the thought of murdering Langdon and hiding his body in the vault occurred to her, but Minerva knew she could not do it. She was not lacking in physical courage, but the idea of murder seemed too revolting.

However, the suggestion would not down, and at length she hit upon the plan of chloroforming him and placing him in the vault alive. After she had decided to do the deed, she could hardly wait for night to come. The day seemed propitious, for her maid of all work was going to attend a dance at the village, accompanied by the Langdon gardener.

THAT night she secured the jar of chloroform and, satisfied that he was asleep, cautiously lifted the lid and extracted the sponge. As if warned of approaching danger, the doctor moved

and threw up his arm. Minerva, watching him dispassionately, smiled cynically as she heard him mumble her name. When his breathing became regular again she held the sponge tightly over his face. It was the work of a moment to overpower the sleeping man. When he relaxed and fell back on the pillow, she turned on the light, and her face beamed with satisfaction as she assured herself that the worst part of her work was done. She knew that he was good for a half-hour at least, but she must hurry if she would finish her plan.

With a flashlight, she started for the basement. With superb coolness, she hummed a little song as she felt her way downstairs. On the landing, she stopped and listened. She thought she heard someone following her, but, even as she listened, she knew this could not be. She hesitated only a second, and then, dismissing her feeling of uneasiness, groped her way down the cellar steps.

As she pushed open the cellar door, she stopped again and listened. Some subtle warning of danger carried to her subconscious mind, and she heeded it without thinking. Her sixth sense told her that danger hovered behind her. A board on the stairs above her creaked slightly. She turned her flashlight toward the spot, but there was nothing.

She thought she heard a rat scurry across the floor in front of her and, making a grimace, she picked her way daintily toward the far corner. She kept close to the wall on her right because she dreaded passing close to the spot where Hugo was chained. She experienced a feeling of repugnance at the thought of being so near the ugly beast.

The silence was oppressive. As the hull quiet precedes the tempest, so the deathly quiet in the musty cellar seemed to her alert senses to presage some sort of eerie doom. Minerva would not acknowledge her fear, but told herself that in a few minutes her task would be finished and she would be free. *Free!* The word held a world of meaning to the woman who had toyed with the idea for months until eventually nothing else seemed of any moment to her. Even the thought of taking the life of the man who loved her so absolutely that he had tried to keep her against her will, could not deter her from her evil purpose. For five months she had been bargaining and

hoarding until the little vault held enough gold to take her and her lover far from the scene of her crime.

She felt along the rock wall until she came to the depression and found the delicate spring which controlled the lock of the vault. Slowly the huge door swung outward. It had been several weeks since she had visited her storehouse and to her sensitive fingers the spring seemed slightly rusty. She tried it twice before she was satisfied that the mechanism was in perfect order, and then, stepping forward into the vault, she picked up a bag of gold which she carried outside and leaned against the cellar wall. She returned and picked up another.

Though Minerva did not realize it, she had hoarded the gold for her flight until it had become an obsession with her and she had come to love the gold for itself. She had become as heart a miser. As she caught the second bag to her bosom, a pleasant thrill warmed her being. She dropped gracefully down upon her knees and, thrusting her hand inside the sack, she brought out a gleaming mass of gold. She directed the rays of her flashlight upon the yellow metal and caught her breath at its beauty.

All thoughts of the man who lay unconscious upon the bed upstairs, as well as those of the man who was waiting to fly with her, vanished as she fondled the golden metal. While on her knees, she heard a sound behind her that curdled her blood. Langdon had failed to chain up his ape. As the shrill burst of simian laughter sounded behind her, Minerva turned and hurled herself frantically against the massive wall of concrete. In another moment the giant ape swung it shut upon her.

WHEN Doctor Langdon recovered from the effects of the chloroform, he searched wildly for his wife. He labored under the delusion that robbers had broken in and had made away with her. His theory seemed partially substantiated when Hugo brought him a bag of gold, for Langdon decided that the robbers had dropped a part of their night's loot in making a get-away. Though the doctor offered large rewards for the apprehension of the "robbers" and the return of his wife, no clue to her tragic end was ever unearthed.



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