

*The Clank of Chains; a Whisper in the Dark;
a Woman's Scream of Terror; and Then—Read*

The House in the Forest

A Strange Tale

By HAROLD WARD

A WOMAN'S scream, shrill and filled with agony! A low guttural muttering. The crowd rushed in from all sides. When they arrived they found her lying dead, her throat torn and bleeding, her face disfigured, her clothing ripped almost from her body.

"And not a sign of a footprint but her own. Not a single trace of the murderer anywhere. She was killed—murdered in cold blood! Choked to death! How? We want you to run down her slayer and bring the wretch to justice. The business men of Como are ready to pay any amount—even into the thousands—only put the guilt where it belongs. Will you take the case?"

Thus, tersely and to the point, did John Brayton, the mayor of Como, summarize the peculiar and horrible crime that had caused a wave of rage to sweep over the entire vicinity.

I hesitated. My time was filled to the limit. My men were all out on big cases—cases from which I did not dare to take them. Yet here was an opportunity to accommodate an old friend. I have long since given up active work, devoting my time to the business end of my agency. But here seemed an opportunity to pick up a little easy money and, at the same time, demonstrate to the youngsters of my force that the "old man" had not yet lost the cunning which had made me—if I may say it without egotism—one of America's greatest man hunters.

Briefly stated, the case was a peculiar one, yet one I believed, from what Brayton had told me, I could solve. The business men of the little town of Como had closed up their stores the day previous and gone to the woods in a body for a community picnic. Miss Claire, one of the picnickers—a girl of unusual beauty, and extremely popular with all who knew her—had quarreled with her sweetheart during the afternoon, following which she had wandered off into the woods a quarter of a mile from the others, probably to enjoy a woman's privilege—a good cry.

They had heard her cries for help. Rushing to the spot, they found things as Brayton had described. The murdered girl's fiance, James Finch, had a clean cut alibi; he had been with the others when the screams were heard and was among the first to reach the slain girl's side.

Naturally, so popular a girl had had other suitors, but according to Brayton all were accounted for at the time of the murder. It looked more like the work of some tramp or wandering degenerate—only there was still to be accounted for the lack of footprints.

The Como police force, consisting of a single constable, had been able to do nothing. Nor had the sheriff's office done any better. The county officers joined with the business men in asking that my services be secured.

Before Brayton finished his narrative, I had decided to accept the commission. I told him of my decision much to his relief, and we were about to enter his car to start for the little village when the telephone on my desk rang violently. It was a long distance call for Brayton. He answered, then suddenly grew white faced.

"Great God!" he exclaimed.

He turned to me, his hand over the transmitter. "There's been another mysterious murder!" he whispered huskily. "In the same woods. Another woman, the wife of a farmer. The body was torn and mangled as in the case of Miss Claire. And not a single clew. What shall I tell them? The body has been undisturbed, waiting for news from me."

"Tell them to leave things alone and keep away from the spot!" I exclaimed, leaping for my hat. "Order them not to tramp over the ground or disturb any clews! For we're going to get there as fast as that big touring car of yours can carry us."

Shouting his directions into the phone, Brayton rushed out with me, and an instant later we were burning up the smooth asphalt road towards Como.

WE reached the village in the dusk of the late afternoon to find the little place agog with excitement over the second murder within two days. In company with the constable and a half dozen of the leading citizens, we set out for the scene of the tragedy, arriving just as the sun was sinking over the western horizon.

A little group surrounding the body gave way at our approach—all except the victim's husband, a stolid-faced yokel with a tiny, unkempt youngster hanging onto his hand, who sat a short distance away from the body, his head bowed in grief, his eyes filled with unshed tears.

The dead woman lay under a huge tree with low, overhanging branches, located deep in the forest. My orders by telephone had been scrupulously carried out, for, with the exception of the footprints made by the husband when, alarmed at his wife's prolonged absence, he had set out to find her, there was not a single mark on the soft, spongy ground except those made by the woman herself.

Like that of the earlier victim, the body was badly mangled. The neck had been broken, the head being twisted grotesquely out of angle with the trunk. The upper clothing was torn almost from the body, while the flesh was bruised and battered as by a giant fist.

Such an investigation as I could make by the light of my flash light and lanterns hastily procured from nearby farmhouses failed to disclose even the vestige of a clew to work on.

Nor did the story told by the husband assist me any. One of the cows had broken out of the pasture a quarter of a mile away while he had been at work in the fields, he said, dumbly. He being busy, his wife had volunteered to go in search of the straying animal. After an absence of nearly an hour, seeing the cow returning leisurely to the stable and his wife not yet having returned, he had tied his team and gone to look for her, thinking that perhaps some accident had befallen her. He had found her just as we had seen her.

Unlike the case of Miss Claire, however, he had heard no cries, nor had he seen any strangers in the vicinity either that day, or the day before. His wife had been dead a considerable time when he discovered her, and she had been killed too far away from the house for him to have heard the noise of the struggle from the field in which he was at work.

Clearly, the husband did not possess sufficient imagination to commit a clueless murder. Hence I did not advise holding him, but turned my attention to searching in other directions.

My efforts were fruitless. At every angle I ran up against a blank wall. There was nothing from which to make a start.

Turning the body over to the coroner and the sheriff, who arrived shortly after us, Mayor Brayton and I returned to Como. The darkness of the dense forest had put a stop to any more investigations for the night.

THE following morning I took up my work in earnest. Visiting the local undertaking establishment, I attended the inquest over the body of the first victim of the murderer, then announced to Brayton and several others my intention of going back into the forest to look the ground over in daylight immediately after lunch.

But the night had brought upon the citizens a sort of terror of the unknown. The constable, with downcast eyes and crimsoned cheeks, apologized for not being able to accompany me, asserting that his wife had passed a bad night and could not be left alone. The sheriff was but little braver, having found, he said, that sudden business called him into another part of the country. Brayton alone offered to go with me. His offer was made, however, with such reluctance that I gravely informed him that I would go alone, adding that I could think better when by myself—greatly, I believe, to his relief.

I allowed him, however, to take me to the edge of the woods in his machine, where he dropped me after giving me precise directions how to find the spot where Miss Claire had met her death.

Striking out at a brisk walk, I reached the place within half an hour and made a thorough examination, failing, however, to find anything that would add to my store of knowledge. But this I felt, was due to the fact that the ground had been so thoroughly tramped over the day of the murder that even had there been anything out of the ordinary it

would have been eliminated by the over-zealous country officials.

Yet there was something that gave me cause for speculation. I climbed into the lower branches of the tree under which the body had been found. On one of them were several peculiar marks as if someone wearing hobnailed shoes had been hidden among the leaves. I had no way of ascertaining whether the amateur sleuths had searched the branches or not, but inasmuch as Brayton had said nothing about it, nor had it been mentioned at the inquest, I was safe in presuming that I was the first to make the discovery. It was a step in the right direction at any rate, I felt.

With this as a starting point, I sat down under a great oak a short distance away and tried to reason the thing out from every angle.

HOW long I sat absorbed in my own thoughts I do not know. Possibly hours. At any rate, I was suddenly aroused from my reverie by the fact that darkness had commenced to settle down. I looked at my watch. It was past six o'clock. In the blackness of the forest it grew dark early and, to make matters worse, a storm was impending. Already the skies were overcast and checked here and there by nasty forked streaks of lightning.

I leaped to my feet and started out to retrace my steps. I had gone possibly half a mile when night settled down in earnest and, a few minutes later, the storm burst in all its fury. The rain fell in sheets accompanied by a wind that bent even the monarchs of the forest. Heavy branches fell about me. My haste to get out of the accursed place may have had something to do with the matter, but, at any rate, I suddenly awoke to the realization that I was hopelessly lost.

I quickened my steps and hurried on. But the further I progressed the more certain I was that I was getting deeper into the forest. Finally, in desperation, I turned and struck out in a new direction.

I had probably been walking two hours when, suddenly, a little clearing appeared before me in the midst of which was set, as best I could observe by the lightning flashes, a tumbledown house. In one of the windows a light gleamed through the rain and storm. Never in all my eventful career have I welcomed anything as joyfully as I did that spot of light. With my heart beating happily I hurried on toward its source.

The place appeared, as best I could make out, to be of two stories and a lean-

to, with a flat roof and high, crumbling chimneys. Many of the windows were covered by weatherbeaten boards. On others the shutters hung from broken hinges. The yard was filled with weeds and clumps of high, coarse grass, with here and there a mournful evergreen tree to add to the general dismal aspect of the place.

I approached the door by means of an ancient brick walk, nearly getting a bad fall as a result of a loose board in the porch floor, before I gained it. I pounded lustily several times before I could elicit a response.

Finally the stumping of feet reached my ear. The key turned and the door swung slowly back with many a protesting squeak of its rusty hinges the space of a few inches, and a tall, unkempt man with long gray beard and hair, holding aloft an ancient lamp which smoked and spluttered in the draught, gazed out at me with a sour expression.

"What d'ye want?" he demanded ungraciously.

I explained my predicament as best I could and asked for supper and a night's lodging. When I had finished he looked me over with evident disapproval.

"I'm not running a hotel," he growled. "The road's only half a mile away."

He was about to close the door in my face when I managed to stick my foot in the crack and hold it open for the minute.

"But, my dear sir," I exclaimed in as wheedling a tone as I could assume, "I have been out in this entire storm. I am wet, chilled to the bone and hungry. Surely you can find some place to put me up. Anywhere will do."

He was about to refuse again when a woman's voice, thin and trembling, piped up:

"Let the poor stranger in, Hank. I can get him a snack to eat and he can sleep in the spare room."

Still grumbling, he opened the door a trifle wider and I slid in. Banging the door behind me and locking it with painstaking care, he led me down a milk-dewed hall to an antiquated kitchen located in the lean-to. He put the lamp down on the table while I underwent the squinting inspection of an old woman, half-blind, wrinkled and bent, evidently his wife.

Despite her seeming infirmities, she soon placed a cold lunch out on the table, chattering and clucking to herself as she did so, while her husband, saying nothing, eyed me with ill concealed malevolence as I disposed of my meagre supper.

Cold as it was, and poorly cooked, I have never had a meal that tasted better, so tired and exhausted was I.

No sooner had I completed my repast than the old fellow again picked up the lamp and, with a nod toward me, declared that it was bed time and that he was tired. And, truth to tell, I was ready for bed myself.

The room into which he led me was stuffy and filled with mildew. I attempted to raise a window, only to find that it was tightly boarded on the outside. Evidently the place had been unoccupied for a long time. On the tumbledown bed was a soiled comforter and an even more dirty pillow without a covering. The only other furniture the room boasted was a chair with one leg missing. Before I could complete my inventory, he stumped out with the lamp, leaving me to undress and crawl into bed as best I could in total darkness.

The room oppressed me. Not only was it the stuffiness, the tomblikeness, but the general air of antiquity and mystery that surrounded the old house and its occupants. Outside, I could hear the rain beating against the sides and roof of the house. The venerable old pile seemed filled with rats; their squealing and scurrying across the floor annoyed me for what seemed hours. The boards of the floor squeaked and groaned, while the wind caused the trees just outside my window to moan and sigh as it hurled them to and fro. Sleep was an impossibility, despite my exhausted condition.

Then, suddenly, I sat upright in bed, my ears pricked up, listening, I knew not what for, every nerve on edge.

With that sixth sense that all good detectives must possess came the thought that in this old house lay the key to the two mysterious murders I was seeking to solve. Call it intuition, or what you will, I was confident that this was the reason for my peculiar restlessness.

Crawling slowly out of the protesting bed and making as little noise as I possibly could, I hurriedly dressed, groping in the darkness for my sodden clothes. Then I crept to the door in my stockinged feet and opened it a crack.

As I did so I heard a noise. It sounded to my straining ears like the rattling of chains.

A door of one of the rooms down the hall was ringed with light. Halting just outside my room, I listened again. The place seemed filled with a whisper, hoarse—almost a low, rumbling bass, filled with menace. It was awful—inhuman. My flesh rose in goose pimples at the sound.

"Fer Gawd's sake, Hank, chain him tight!" I heard the woman say in her peculiar, cackling whisper.

There came to my ears again the rattle of chains. And once more that low, bass rumbling—menacing, angry—followed by what sounded like a blow.

"I'll fix ye, damn ye!" I heard the old man mutter.

I crept closer and closer to the door from behind which came the vague whispers. For a second there was silence, broken only by the man's asthmatic breathing and the slight rattle of the chains.

SUDDENLY I heard an angry roar.

Then came a woman's piercing scream. The sound of blows! Then the scream again and a menacing, barking growl.

Leaping to my feet and drawing my revolver, I seized the knob of the door and turned it.

It was locked. Stepping back, I threw my entire weight against it. The rusty hinges gave way before my onslaught and I leaped into the room.

Chained in one corner was a huge black man with the head of an ape, his face twisted with rage. His tiny eyes glowed and burned, his thick lips were writhed back from huge, yellow fangs which chattered his fury. His hair, matted and coarse, hung down over his squatty forehead.

In his arms was the form of the old woman. The old man was beating the brute over the head with his stick. Just as I appeared, the creature hurled the old crone from him and, before the man could leap to safety, had seized him by the throat.

With a single twist of his brawny hands, the brute twisted his victim's neck until I could hear it snap. Then, dropping the palpitating body, he leaped toward me, his fangs bared, his venomous, menacing eyes advertising his hate.

So terrific was the strength exhibited that staple and part of the wall came with him. He reached one long arm for me as I jumped for the door, firing as I fled.

My bullet had no more effect on the raging creature than a pebble thrown by a child. I sent a stream of lead at it, filling its body with bullets until the magazine of my automatic was emptied. But still he came, shrieking with fury.

With a flying leap, the brute seized me. His long fingers grasped my throat! I felt the breath being choked out of me—

Then, suddenly, the terrific hold gave way and with a hollow cough he crum-

pled up in a heap at my feet, dead, the blood flowing from a half a dozen wounds.

For a second I stood leaning against the wall, my breath coming in gasps. Then, recovering myself, I seized the lamp which, through some peculiar circumstance, had not been overturned despite the rickety table on which it stood, and made a hasty examination. The man was dead, his neck broken. The little old woman still breathed, however. Gathering her up in my arms, I carried her into the room I had occupied and laid her on the bed.

Running back, I secured the lamp, and attempted to administer first aid. She opened her eyes for an instant, recognizing me. Seizing my hand in her skinny talons, she drew me close to her and poured forth her story. Then, with a deep sigh of relief, she closed her eyes and, a second later, her soul had passed into eternity.

BRIEFLY, she and her husband had been circus performers in their younger days, he owning the ape-faced boy act in a sideshow and she assisting him. Growing too old for their profession, they had retired with their small savings, buying the little tumbledown house in the midst of the forest in which to spend their declining years.

Hank, her husband, had laid the basis of his good fortune on the work done by "Jingo," his black, malformed idiot, and had insisted on bringing the creature with him instead of selling it with the remainder of the show. For years the old couple had led a cloistered existence in the midst of the forest, happy in their retirement, their only contention being the brute-faced black. Mrs. Lang, as she called herself, had demanded that the thing be sold, while Lang, who was evidently a contrary old fellow, objected. Of late, however, close confinement—for they feared letting the demented creature out, even under guard, because of their neighbors—had told on him and he had gradually grown ugly and more violent than usual until even Lang had difficulty in handling him.

On the day of the murder of Miss Claire, "Jingo" had broken his bonds and escaped among the trees. Hanging from a low limb, he had seized the poor girl and strangled her to death, afterward throwing her body to the ground where it was found, and escaping among the trees, which accounted for the lack of footprints. Lang searched the forest for the brute, only finding him the fol-

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THE HOUSE IN THE FOREST

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lowing day, after it had killed the farmer's wife.

Fearing the anger of his outraged neighbors, he kept his own counsel, chaining the creature up until such a time as he could dispose of it. My presence in the house led the old people to go to its room to make doubly sure that it was properly secured.

The crazed animal—man, or whatever it may be called—had attacked the old woman, Lang, rushing to her assistance, lost his own life as I have described.

When she had completed her story, I again sought the outdoors, preferring the storm to another hour under the roof of tragedy. Before morning broke the storm abated and I finally ran into a party of searchers organized by Brayton who, alarmed by my prolonged absence, had started into the forest in search of my body, believing that I, too, had fallen a victim to the murderer.

The people didn't merely look at Prof. Branefog—they stared. He knew he was absentminded at times, and he wondered whether he had rubbed his face with boot polish instead of cold cream after he had shaved, or whether he had forgotten to change his dressing gown for his frock coat.

But a kindly policeman put things right.

"Are you aware, sir, that you are carrying a joint of beef in your arms?" he asked.

"Goodness me!" said the professor. "I knew something was wrong. My wife told me to put her Sunday hat on the bed, to place this joint in the oven, and to take the baby and the dog for a walk."

"You've not put the baby in the oven, surely?" said the policeman.

"I put something in it," said Branefog: "but I don't know whether it was the baby or the dog!"

With bated breath they hurried to the professor's house. Here, on the bed, lay the baby and the dog; but it was just as bad for Branefog. It was his wife's Sunday hat that was in the oven!

The traveler had returned to his native village after being abroad for twenty years. He stopped as he saw a little boy with a small baby coming down the road.

"Ah! a new face, I see!"

"No, it isn't, sir," replied the boy, looking at the baby. "It's just been washed, that's all!"

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