

Weird Tales



ALL STORIES NEW—NO REPRINTS

MAY, 1945

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The Legend of 228



By HAROLD LAWLOR

THERE was someone living on the fourth floor of the frame dwelling place at 228 South Railroad Avenue. The first three floors were vacant,

and so, presumably, was the fourth. But there was someone, or *something*—

The Valley, whispering, thought it was *something*. Something not human.

Heading by A. R. TILBURNE

*You keep thinking there's someone, something, up there under the roof
listening, making plans*

For quite a while now the gaunt gray structure in its scabrous paint had been a place to be avoided. Lights were to be seen flickering from its upper story, and strange guttural mutterings were said to issue from it. But no one investigated. The Valley believed in letting well enough—or ill enough—alone.

You probably don't know the "Valley"—even if you live here. It isn't really a valley at all. Roughly one-half mile in length, it's a two-block-wide depression between elevated railroad embankments at either side. Hence the name. Ironically.

Its inhabitants—middle-Europeans for the most part, originally—have so kept to themselves and inter-married as to be almost a race apart. The City itself pays no attention to the Valley at its heart, isolated as it is by the embankments at either side, by railroad yards to the north, and Lake Wasco to the south, foul with the outpourings of the factories lining its shore.

Perhaps the City has forgotten it.

Vida Beck hated the Valley from the first, and everybody in it. And her hatred was cordially returned. She was that cooch dancer from a traveling street carnival whom Sam Beck had married. Or perhaps Vida had married him. They wouldn't put it past her. Married him for his pink shirts which were silk, and for the huge diamond that glittered on the little finger of his hairy left hand.

He was a good man, Sam Beck. Thrifty, and prosperous for the district. He ran the local grocery store and did some banking on the side. The Valley trusted him. But that wife of his! With her rope-colored hair, and her bad eyes, and her sultry mouth, like a wine-red wound in her white face. That Vida!

The women made tongue-and-teeth sounds. And muttered among themselves.

The men said nothing. They only stared, wet-lipped.

IT WAS from Sam that Vida first heard the story of the dog and the terrible tenant in 228.

He was sitting at the kitchen table in his undershirt, sucking up coffee noisily from the thick white cup.

"They was on the other side of the street,

these kids," he said, "when they seen the dog go in."

Vida slammed the coffee pot down on the greasy stove, wiped her hands down the front of her housecoat, and sank listlessly into the chair opposite Sam. Look at him there. Dribbling and spitting in his excitement. Agh! He made her sick.

She hated him—this greasy, stingy little man she had married. And she thought: If she could only get her hands on his money! It wasn't the first time this thought had occurred to her. But she had to be careful. She had to take it slow. She wouldn't want Sam or the cops coming after her.

"Pretty soon," Sam was spitting, "these kids, they hear this dog snarlin' and growlin' like he's fightin' wit' somep'n. Then he give a kind of yelp, they says—real high, like screamin'."

Vida stirred restlessly. Sometimes she felt it would be better if she just got Sam out of the way altogether, first. If she could do it safely. If she could only meet some guy, not too bright, who'd do it for her.

"Somp'n comes flyin' out the fourt' floor winda, then—all cut and mashed up. All horrible." Sam, shuddering, paused dramatically. He whispered, "*Is the dog!*"

WELL, what did he want her to do, faint? He had too-eager eyes, Sam. Made you want to kick him like you would a cur. Deliberately, to spoil his pleasure, Vida took a long, slow sip of coffee. She raised an eyebrow, lazily.

"So what?" she said.

Sam looked crestfallen, but he explained patiently, "Is someone *livin'* on the fourt' floor there. Or some *Thing*. Something—*awful!*" He stared at her, round-eyed.

Vida sniffed. "Well, why don't somebody go over there, then, and find out who it is? Or what?"

"Is all scared," Sam defended. "All the people in the Valley, they no go near the place. They afraid."

"Dumb slobs," Vida sneered. Her favorite epithet for the Valley dwellers. It was like them to be scared about nothing. Catch her believing such a dopey yarn.

But she remembered the story. And the fear that kept the Valleyites away from 228. It came in handy, later on.

THERE was nothing to do, daytimes, in this lousy place. You could walk up Railroad Avenue and back again. That was all. A hell of a thrill, that was. It served one purpose, though. It annoyed Sam.

"Why you all the time walk up and down, up and down?" he asked plaintively.

Vida stared at his thick lips. "You don't like it, you know what you can do."

And though he wasn't there to see, she always went by the cigar store in low gear. She liked skin-tight, knee-high dresses. And no stockings on her shapely legs. She enjoyed the little stir she created among the male loungers there. They could look, but she made it plain they aroused no interest in return. It pleased her to let her own glance trail indifferently over them, then flick away.

Until the afternoon that Joe Ross was there among them.

That wasn't his real name, of course. His own name was so full of *c*'s and *z*'s and *v*'s that the Valley had been forced in self-defense to shorten it to Ross. He was a no-good, a low-life, a bum. Handsome, though. You had to say that for him. There was something about the insolent stare of his fig-colored eyes that made the girls of the Valley tuck in stray wisps of hair self-consciously when they saw him, and giggle more than usual.

He's been away.

"Where ya been, Joe?" the boys asked.

"Oh, around." He gestured vaguely. "Just bummin' around."

Thrown out of the Army, maybe. If, indeed, he'd ever got in. And now he was back. Now you could see him on the street, talking listlessly to some agitated seventeen-year-old girl. Elena Ostrowski, perhaps. Until an angry female voice would call. "Elena, you come here, like I say! I tell your Pa on you, you be sorry, I betcha!" Humiliated tears in Elena's eyes, then. And Joe—

Sometimes he'd make a rude sound with his lips in the direction of the worried maternal voice. But mostly he just smiled. His eyes didn't smile, though. His eyes were never amused, or even interested.

They say the only time his eyelids lifted above half-mast was the first time he saw Vida Beck.

Their glances caught and held. It was almost as if they exchanged a silent message.

She faltered in her insolent step. His hand with the cigarette halted halfway to his lips. The other men there stirred uneasily, vaguely sensing drama. It was like a show, kind of. You kept watching to see what would happen next.

Then Vida's eyelids dropped, and she went on. Joe squashed his cigarette under his shoe, and followed her without a word.

That was the way it began.

SHE couldn't let him come to the flat over the grocery store, for Sam would be sure to see him. But she remembered the lonely house at 228 South Railroad Avenue. She could meet Joe there, afternoons.

He didn't like the suggestion much, when she first made it. "*There?*" he protested half-heartedly. "But lis'en—"

So he'd heard the story already?

She leaned against him. "Don't tell me you're like the rest of the dumb dopes around here. Believing that crazy stuff—"

But she was not displeased at his unwillingness. It seemed to prove that he was just as she had sized him up at first glance. Handsome and vain and stupid. He would be ideal for her purpose. Just give her a little time.

He was crazy about her from the beginning, but he never grew used to the gaunt old house. There were times when he'd take his mouth from hers, and raise his head, and listen. But there was never anything to be heard but silence—a sinister silence, it seemed, as if the house had paused just then to listen too.

"It gets you, kind of," Joe whispered once. "I keep thinking there's someone, or something, up there under the roof. Listening to us. Making plans, maybe. To use later on. To catch us when we're not careful."

Vida didn't like it when he talked like that. His husky hesitant voice, his flickering light eyes—Honest, it was enough to give you the meemies, she thought irritably. But she was careful not to let him see she minded.

They used to meet in the living room of the first floor flat. Someone had left a few pieces of furniture not worth moving away—a rickety chair or two, a table. They always used the back entrance, coming sep-

arately so that no one might see them together. Once there, they were almost certain to be free from interruption. For who would ever come?

But one day someone did.

IT WAS Joe who first heard the footsteps. He was off the daybed like a cat. Going to the scarred oak door giving on the hall, he opened it the merest crack.

Vida saw his face change. He stood there quite a while, motionless, until at last unbearable curiosity drove her to join him.

"Who is it?" she whispered.

"The Prohaska kid. He went upstairs."

"We better keep quiet and watch until he leaves," Vida said. "If he sees us here, he'll spread it all over the neighborhood."

She remembered Sam had said it was Johnny Prohaska's dog that had been thrown that day from the fourth floor window. She supposed the kid had been crazy about the mutt.

And now he had forgotten his fear of the house enough to come back—perhaps with some idea of revenge.

She and Joe could hear nothing, but they waited fifteen minutes or so. Vida wanted to go up and investigate then, but Joe said, "The punk probably went out the back way. Maybe he's out in front by now."

They closed the door finally, and Vida went to the window and drew back the tattered shade far enough to see out. Johnny was nowhere in sight, but there was a little knot of women across the street, clustered about someone that Vida couldn't see. Their voices were low, but from their violent gestures it could almost be guessed that they were attempting to dissuade someone from rash action of some sort.

Joe came to stand behind Vida. He was tall enough to look over her head. "Who is it?"

"Sh!" Vida said.

The knot of women untied, and they saw Johnny Prohaska's mother at its center.

"He go in there to see what hurt his dog. He ain't come out." Mrs. Prohaska looked threateningly about. "I go to get him. Ain't nobody can stop me."

They all grabbed at her, but she broke free and ran straight for the door of 228. No one followed. No one seemed to dare.

They just stood there and watched, open-mouthed.

Vida held a finger to her lips as Mrs. Prohaska pounded through the hall, but Joe didn't need the warning. They continued to keep an eye on the women outside, but they listened to the sound of Mrs. Prohaska's feet mounting the stairs. They waited for what would happen next.

There were no screams by way of prelude. But suddenly they heard the heavy fall of Mrs. Prohaska's footsteps racing down the uncarpeted wooden stairs of 228. They heard her stumble through the hall, then saw her burst from the door, her hair streaming witchlike behind her, her face working madly.

"Oh, oh, oh!" They could hear her sobbing softly, like the cooing of pigeons from a distant cote. "Oh, oh, oh!"

"What's eating her, anyway?" Joe forgot to whisper.

Vida didn't answer. Puzzled, she watched the wildly gesticulating Mrs. Prohaska. The woman was running about the street now in crazy circles, like a bug tormented by a lighted match held near.

"She's gone crazy," Joe said. "Whatever she saw—"

Two of her friends finally broke free from the paralysis of fear that seemed to hold them, and caught Mrs. Prohaska. She appeared to be sightless. And her lips were uttering only a meaningless gabble. The women who held her stared horrified, then turned aside as though in revulsion.

Mrs. Prohaska, released, stood stupidly for a minute, weaving from side to side. Then she turned and ran, erratically but true, back to the door of 228. The others in the street screamed, but Mrs. Prohaska ran on, almost eagerly, as if to a lovers' meeting.

Again the tenement swallowed her bulky figure. Again Vida and Joe heard her stumble through the hall and up the stairs.

But she didn't come down again. Though they waited for long minutes, she didn't come down again.

There wasn't a sound.

Joe seemed badly shaken, but Vida had an explanation.

"Nuts," she said. "Mrs. Prohaska beat it out the back way, too, after putting on that act. You know what? I bet the Prohaskas

want to buy this dump, and they've started all this talk and stuff to run the price down. You wait and see. They'll be laughing at everybody yet."

Joe didn't appear convinced, but Vida let it go at that. They had to wait a long time before the little crowd of frightened women across the street finally drifted away.

Joe and Vida sneaked out the rear door then, but a block away they looked back at the house. The late afternoon sun shone brilliantly, but the dreary tenement at 228 lay in shadow. Joe pointed this out. Pointed out too, significantly, that there was no other building or anything near to cast the shadow on 228.

As though the darkness emanated from the leaning frame pile itself, like evil mist from a swamp.

Vida only shrugged, annoyed. She supposed she'd have an awful time getting Joe to meet her there after this.

AFTER supper that night, Sam was full of the story of Mrs. Prohaska and her son. He babbled and spat until, Vida thought, he was like to drive her nuts. It wasn't enough that she had seen the thing herself that afternoon. Now she had to *listen* to it, too. God, but she was fed up with Sam. If she didn't think of some way, soon, to get rid of him——!

He finally finished the story at last and waited, bug-eyed, for her comment. She told him the same thing she'd told Joe. The Prohaskas wanted to buy a house, cheap. But for once she couldn't drive Sam into abashed silence.

"Why for the Prohaskas buy a house? They *got* a house," he pointed out with irrefutable logic. "Besides, where are they now? Nobody's seen 'em." He shook his shiny bald head sagely. "Ain't nobody ever gonna live in 228 again. Ain't nobody ever goin' in there again. Not, and come out."

He looked up then nervously, obviously afraid to see what effect this brash contradiction might be having on Vida. But, surprisingly, she was smiling and nodding her tawny head in a pleased sort of way.

"That's right, Sam," she said softly. "Nobody who goes in there is ever coming out again. Everybody knows that now. The whole Valley knows it, don't they?"

"Yeah," Sam said, and looked pleased to see that for once Vida agreed with him.

Vida's eyes were shining. It was perfect! And to think that Sam himself had shown her the way!

Sometimes, Vida thought, she had to laugh.

SHE was afraid maybe she'd have a little trouble persuading Joe. But in its way, indirectly, the house at 228 helped her there, too. For Joe met her there again "only just this once." He was afraid of the house. He'd had enough of it. He wanted her to run away with him.

"Why do we hang around here for, anyway?" he asked. He looked around the dirty room, and seemed to cock a listening ear toward the upper floor. "We stay in the Valley, this is the only place we can meet. Let's blow."

Vida veiled her eyes that he might not see the swift exultation there. This was going to be easier than she'd thought.

"You got the money?" she asked, though she knew what his answer would be.

"No."

She looked at him thoughtfully, then. She waited a minute before she said slowly, "Sam has. Sam has a lot."

"Well?"

She moved closer to Joe. "Something could happen to Sam. He could fall, maybe. Or——or hurt his head, real bad."

Joe said nothing. Wasn't he ever going to get it? Did she have to draw a *picture*?

She kept the irritation out of her voice. "Maybe he'd die. Maybe his body would get into one of those empty freight cars on the siding, back of the house. It might be a long time before they found it, you know. The car might be in Arizona by then, or California, or anywheres."

Joe said, "And by that time they wouldn't know where he'd come from. Or even who he was."

Vida's arms slipped around his neck. "That's right."

Joe had an objection. "But, look. The people around here, they're going to wonder where Sam went all of a sudden."

"Oh, no, they ain't." She had all she could do to keep from laughing. This was the best part. This was the joke. "We'll see

to it that someone tells them Sam came here —*but didn't come out.*"

Under her hands she could feel Joe's body begin to shake. He got it. He was laughing, too. Pretty soon he'd think the whole thing was *his* idea. Well, that was okay with her.

She felt his body stiffen.

"But, look," he said. "Why not *let* Sam come here and go upstairs, instead of me—killing him?"

She wanted to scream at him, "Because, stupid, there *isn't* anything up there!" He believed in the horror on the fourth floor, just like the rest of the saps around here. With an effort she kept her voice honeyed. "Wild horses wouldn't drag Sam up there, and you know it. Besides, even if he went up, we wouldn't know—we couldn't be sure he was dead. But if you come over to my place tonight—"

She had her way, for Joe finally snickered. "Okay, I'd like to meet your husband."

"And he'll be *dying* to meet you," Vida said.

That set them laughing again. But presently they stopped, and Joe's parted lips met hers fiercely.

Even while she strained closer to him, Vida thought, "Dumb slob! You dumb slob, you!" Once Sam was out of the way and she had the money, she'd get rid of Joe. She'd be free. She was smart. There wouldn't be anything she couldn't do.

Joe pulled away from her so suddenly that she was afraid he'd guessed her thoughts. But he was only listening, his head bent.

"Sh!" he whispered. "I heard something, just then—*upstairs.*"

Oh, for God's—! She pulled away from him. Annoyed, she caught his hand. "Come on! Let's go up and see what's there and settle this, once and for all."

He would have hung back, but at the ill-concealed contempt in her eyes he went to the hall with her. Together they mounted the stairs. But they only went to the third floor. There, even Vida halted. They heard a soft slurring sound of motion coming from above them. But it wasn't that that drove them down again.

It was the smell. The horrible stench seeping down from the fourth floor.

Joe's forehead went shiny with sweat.

Joe's hand on her arm forced her down the stairs again.

"Whew!" she said, once again in the front room on the first floor. "Dead rats?"

Joe kept looking over his shoulder into the hall. He didn't say anything.

She laughed at him, after that. He saw the contempt in her eyes, and he resented it. He tried to laugh, too, and conceal his fear. But she knew he was terrified of the house.

Perhaps she remembered that, later on. Perhaps she even had time to think, when it was too late, "But I'm the one who should have been afraid!"

SAM never knew what hit him.

But it was—pretty terrible. Vida hadn't known how horrible it would sound—the hammer crashing down on that shiny defenseless skull. To make it worse, Joe had gone on wielding the hammer long after it had seemed necessary, long after Vida had whispered thickly past the sickness in her throat, "Stop. Stop, Joe, that's enough!"

Joe's lips were drawn back in a grimace like a dreadful laugh. His eyes were absorbed. It seemed hours before he heard her and that uncomprehending look faded from his queer light eyes. It frightened her, that look. For the first time, Joe seemed other than a stupid tool whom she could maneuver as she wished.

"What's the matter?" Joe asked. "You look scared." Plainly it pleased him. He went on, as if he'd made a discovery, "You thought I'd be scared, like I was in 228. Sure, I was afraid there. I'm afraid of anything I can't see, or understand, or put my hands on. You thought it was funny." He weighed the hammer in his hand. "Why aren't you laughing now, Vida?" His eyes lifted to where she was crouching against the opposite wall.

Her narrow red tongue flicked out to wet her lips. But she couldn't say anything.

Joe laughed strangely. "I'm the boss now," he said.

She straightened at that. The queer look was gone from his eyes. She'd tell him where to head in. "Look here—" she began.

But Joe was absorbed in the diamond on Sam's little finger.

"It don't come off," Vida said sullenly, diverted for the moment. "Sam told me,

more than once. Mrs. Ostrowski knew it, too. She thought it was a good joke on me, because she knew how bad I wanted it."

She brought soap and water with which to attempt easing the ring off. But it meant touching Sam. She shuddered and went about it so gingerly that Joe pushed her aside.

"I'll do it. Get out of my way," he ordered.

But the ring defied his every effort. Vida was all for letting it go, however reluctantly. She was nervous. She wanted Sam's body safely out of the house. And quickly. But Joe said, "I'll get it off, by God, if—"

He slammed down the inner stairway to the grocery store beneath the flat. When he came back, he had Sam's black tin cash box under his arm. In his free hand, he held a meat saw.

Vida's eyes widened and her "Oh no, Joel" was a sigh of horror. Still it had to be done. But did Joe have to look like he was *enjoying* it?

She turned away, trying to close her ears to the hideous sounds the saw was making. When the dreadful noise finally stopped, and she could bring herself to look again, the diamond was winking at her from Joe's hand.

And Joe was smiling at her blandly. A smile that only increased her uneasiness.

SHE had never been so glad before to see the sunrise. In the kitchen of the flat above the grocery store, Vida stood at the window overlooking the railroad siding.

That had been the one danger. That the cars might stay for days on the siding, as they sometimes did. But it was empty now, and the cars, including the one that was serving as Sam's temporary tomb, were gone.

During the night, switch engines had panted, and couplings had locked, as men shouted in hoarse voices. Vida had heard them.

For all she remembered, someone else might have helped Joe spirit Sam's body down the stairs and up the embankment to the dark red freight car. There was only this dull ache in her shoulder from Sam's dead weight to remind her it had been she. There were only the cuts and bruises on the soles of her feet from the gravel that had slipped

into her sandals as they struggled up the embankment. She'd never felt the pain until this morning.

Joe came out of the bedroom behind her, and slipped his arms around her. She tried not to let him see how tense she grew under his hands. She was afraid of them, and of him. It would be so easy for those hands to slide around her neck—

She forced herself to turn around and face him. He must have noticed her cringing, for he was smiling in a satisfied way. But his eyes remained cold and mirthless.

"I better beat it out of here while it's still early," he said. "I'll get hold of Elena Ostrowski and tell her to spread it around that she seen Sam going into 228 last night, but she didn't see him come out. She'll do it—for five bucks."

Vida stirred. "One is enough."

"I said five," Joe repeated, too pleasantly. "I've opened Sam's cash box—"

She came to life then, eagerly. "How much was in it?"

"Five thousand."

"Joe, give me—"

"I'm taking care of it. And the ring." He waited a minute, his light eyes daring her to object. "You got any kick to make?"

She wet her lips. "N-no. Well—no."

Joe smiled. "Elena's story will get around today. Tonight we can leave."

She forced herself to slide her arms around his neck, and pressed closer to him. "Joe, let *me* keep the ring and money. You're crazy about me, aren't you, Joe?"

"Sure."

Over his shoulder, where he couldn't see, she smiled. She'd been afraid of him too soon. This was the way to handle Joe.

He pushed her away from him gently, but too quickly for her to erase the smile.

"I'm a fool about you, baby," Joe said easily. "But I'm not a *damn* fool!"

He kissed her once, hard, then he was gone. She paced the flat from front to back. He couldn't get away with this! She'd be damned if she'd let him! Just wait till he came back!

She stopped then in her angry, aimless progress.

Maybe he wasn't coming back!

But he came back all right. He returned late that afternoon with the first wave

of mourners. No matter how little they liked her, the Valley was quick with its sympathy, and sincere.

Vida had been expecting them all day. She was prepared.

"But why would Sam do such a thing?" she asked over and over, careful to look first bewildered, then appropriately stricken. "Why would Sam go in that dreadful place?"

They didn't know. They could only tell her what Elena Ostrowski had said—"and he didn't come out."

"You mean," Vida slowly let it dawn on her, "he's—dead?"

They turned away sadly, not answering. Behind their backs Joe made a long face, mock-tragic. Vida lifted her handkerchief to her eyes, and rocked back and forth, inconsolably.

She was doing fine. She even *felt* like a sorrowing widow, she thought in pleased amazement. She would have convinced them all—if it weren't for the Ostrowski's.

They were there when she looked up at the sudden hush—Big Mike Ostrowski himself, flanked on one side by his wife, on the other by Elena. Elena's wrist was grasped in her father's big hand. She was white. It was that which warned Vida. In the corner behind them, Vida saw Joe's face grow suddenly wary. The other neighbors present fell silent. Big Mike was a leader, of sorts, in the Valley. People listened when he spoke.

His eyes scanned the room. "You there, Joe Ross, why you give my girl five dollars to say she seen Sam go in 228, and not come out, when she didn't see no such a thing?"

There was a gasp from the crowd. Vida fidgeted. From outside, on the rapidly darkening street, she could hear a buzzing as of angry bees. Mike had brought others with him! What did it all mean?

Elena whimpered. "He made me tell, Joe. He caught me hiding the money. I—"

"Shut up, Elena!" her father ordered. He looked at Vida. "We talked it over—the Mrs. and me. We know there was only one reason why Sam would go into 228, when he was so scared of it. You. He was crazy about you." He came and stood over her accusingly. "You sent him a message saying you were a prisoner there, or something,

didn't you? So he'd go in. Didn't you?"

Even then, in all the danger and taut suspense that hovered over the room, Vida almost had to laugh. They thought that was how she'd got rid of Sam! If they only knew! But the freight car was gone. They couldn't prove anything. She looked straight in Mike's eyes.

"You're nuts," she said boldly.

She got away with it. They believed her. The silence was broken by a pent-up sigh from many throats. Big Mike shifted uncertainly on his huge feet.

Vida saw Joe shoot her a quick glance of approval for keeping her head. His face was rigidly calm, falsely innocent, but his forehead was shiny with sweat. He put up a hand to wipe away that betraying evidence before it could be noticed.

Mrs. Ostrowski shrieked, "Lookit! Lookit on his hand! Sam's diamond ring, what wouldn't come off his finger!"

Everything happened so fast then. Vida could hardly see. Big Mike yelled, "Grab him!" The crowd surged forward, muttering. Joe caught up a carving knife and held it, point toward them.

"First guy touches me gets this in the belly, I ain't foolin'!"

They stopped. He edged toward the back door.

"It was her idea, anyway." He nodded at Vida.

Vida's hand went to her mouth. "Joe! Joe, don't leave me here alone!"

"Take care of yourself," he snarled. "That's what I'm doin'."

But he had the money! And the ring! She'd be left with nothing!

"Joe!" she wailed.

But he was gone.

THERE is only a gaping black hole now where the four-story flat building once stood at 228 South Railroad Avenue. But the legend about it has never died.

The dreary tenement burned down that night. Big Mike Ostrowski himself set fire to it with one of the glowing torches he'd caught up from someone in the angry mob. But that was later. Much later.

The people of the Valley have their own laws, and exact their own punishments. The City, just over the railroad embankment, is a

million light-years away. Not for the Valley, its uniformed police, its courts, its penal institutions.

No. Vida should go the way Sam had gone. They sentenced her themselves, there in the none-too-clean kitchen of her own flat.

She couldn't believe it at first. Why, the poor fools! They were setting her free! These dumb slobs didn't know it, but they were setting her free! Sure, she'd go in 228. She'd go up to the fourth floor. She'd *shag* through the fourth floor, if they liked! And when she'd come out again unharmed, they'd let her go. They'd have to let her go. They couldn't prove a thing.

And when she caught up with Joe, as she would if it took her years—!

Her mouth straightened vindictively.

She said not a word as the Valley-ites escorted her down Railroad Avenue.

Opposite 228, Big Mike said, "Don't think you can just walk through the second or third flat and out the back way. There'll be men watching in back. And you're to carry this, so we can see you through the windows of the front stair-hall as you go up. We'll know it if you don't go to the top floor."

He held out a stinking, lighted, coal-oil lantern. She took it, her lips curling disdainfully. They didn't put a hand on her, but the force of their hatred, their stern determination seemed to propel her across the street and up onto the outside stoop of the dark building.

She hesitated there, but not from fear. Just before she entered the door, she turned and faced them all defiantly.

"You dumb slobs!" she spat at them. "You dumb slobs, you!"

THEY only stared at her stonily, implacably. No one said a word. Their very silence seemed to whip her on. When she'd gone in they stood there in a body, watching the hall windows at every landing between floors. They saw her pass the first, the second. The gray oblong of the window would lighten as she approached it, lamp in hand. They could see her as she passed. Then the window dimmed and the one above it grew gradually brighter.

She climbed more slowly as she neared the top floor. Perhaps from weariness. Perhaps, they hoped, from fear. The last time they saw her was at the window on the landing between the third and fourth floors.

She stopped there and held the lighted lantern high, so that they might see her clearly. With her free hand, she made an impudent gesture. The crowd sighed, disappointed. So she wasn't afraid then. They could even see her red lips laughing scornfully as she turned away to climb the last flight of stairs.

The window grew gradually dimmer as she mounted. Then the square of light held one tone of yellowish-gray for seconds, as if she'd reached the top floor at last, and stood there waiting.

It was the smell, again, that made her hesitate—the gradually increasing stench. She stood there, wavering. The lantern threw dim light in a golden fan on the living room floor before her. Fragments of decayed food were there, scattered about; and scraps of stuff—bits of clothing, she guessed, from their color and texture.

She shrank from the task before her. But—there was no going back.

At length she advanced, and the wedge-shaped segment of faint light advanced with her. Into the living room stealthily she moved; breathlessly across the floor to the dingy golden oak colonnade leading to the dining room.

And there she stopped. Frozen.

Her spine was whispering to her atavistically. Bidding her turn around. Warning her of the thing that slithered from the black corner behind her—the hairless, furless, featherless monstrosity, its hideous body gleaming like slimy, wet red rubber, its opalescent shallow eyes, glaring, fixed upon her.

She wheeled. The lantern sent crooked shadows dancing eerily on the walls. Just one vivid glimpse she caught of it—bloated, inhuman, grotesque.

Even the people in the street heard the viscid bubbling, then, of the creature's saliva. And abruptly, as they waited, there was a brittle, spilling crash of sound, and Vida's light went out. . . .

They say her screams were terrible.