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THE MAN WHO WAS PALE

By
JACK
SHARKEY

ILLUSTRATED by SUMMERS

MRS. Tibbets was a worrier. When it rained, she worried about people caught outside without umbrellas. When the sun shone, she worried about the corn crop that might need water. At band concerts, she worried about the deaf people who were missing the music. If it thundered, she worried for the hearing of people with good ears. No matter what happened, she found something to get worried about. As long as she was worried, she was content.

Her husband had been dead ten years when Mrs. Tibbets realized that she had a twelve-bedroom house for just herself alone, and began to worry about people who had no place to live. So she put an ad into the papers offering

She was just a sweet, kind-hearted old landlady who couldn't keep her nose out of other people's business. This was very unfortunate for Mr. Thobal.

her home as lodging for any who could afford the modest price she asked for the rooms (her husband had left her very little money, and this worried her, too).

After eleven of the rooms were filled—leaving the remaining room for herself—the price of the ad in the paper began to worry her, so she called and had it taken out. Then she settled herself comfortably in the living room, and, in her new role as landlady, began to worry about collecting the weekly rent.

The sun had just set, and Mrs. Tibbets had just turned on the lights in the living room—and begun to worry about the electric bill—when the door-chimes sounded.

“It could be a telegram with

bad news," thought Mrs. Tibbets, worrying herself toward the door. "Or the police are here to arrest one of the tenants. Or some desperate criminal has come here to murder us all. Or—"

At this juncture, she opened the door.

She found herself looking up into the sad-eyed, pale face of a man who stood at least six-feet-six inches tall, couldn't have weighed less than two hundred pounds, and was rather startlingly garbed in an ankle-length opera cloak with a flame-colored silk lining.

"I've come about a room," he said, in an enthralling baritone voice, with just the smallest hint of a foreign accent bending the syllables. "My name," he added, with a toothy smile, "is Thobal. Vandor Thobal."

Mrs. Tibbets found herself smiling back, despite the queer goosefleshy feeling she got all over when she saw the length and sharpness of his canines. There was a numbing sort of heat in his deep-set, burning eyes that made her feel rather weak and helpless.

"I'm afraid—" she said, and almost left those two words as her complete state-



ment, "—I'm afraid that I've rented all the rooms. I just had the ad taken out of the paper today."

"Surely you have something . . ." he insisted, coming inside her hall and closing the door behind him. He made no move to remove his cloak. "All I require is a place to sleep . . ."

"I'm so terribly sorry, but I—" Mrs. Tibbets began to worry about Mister Thobal, all at once. What if she turned him away, and he were found in the morning, huddled frozen in an alley somewhere. The fact that it was mid-July didn't stop her mental image of frosty death. Then she brightened. "Perhaps . . . I wouldn't show this to anybody, ordinarily, because it's really a terrible sort of place, but I *do* have a very small room. However, I should warn you: It's down in the cellar."

"Ah!" said Vandor Thobal, his eyes flashing scarlet. "Does it have mice? Cobwebs? Mold?"

Mrs. Tibbets sighed, and nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid it does."

"Wonderful!" said the pale man. "I'll take it."

"You will?" she said, with considerable surprise.

"Yes. I'm—I'm a sort of nature-lover. We're all broth-

ers, really. The cat, the bat, the rat, the spider, the maggot . . ."

"Well," said Mrs. Tibbets, with a sniff, "it'll be like Old Home Week for you in my cellar, then. It's this way," she said, leading him out into the kitchen.

She had to fumble with a ring of keys before she found the one that opened the stiff metal padlock on the cellar door. "Haven't been down here in months," she said with a little laugh, flicking on the lightswitch, and preceding him down the stairs. He followed wordlessly past the heaped cartons of odd bits of junk, past the furnace—unused during the summer months—and to a small room (really hardly more than a bin) at the rear of the cellar.

Mrs. Tibbets reddened in embarrassment as she opened the crooked door of plain, unsanded boards. "Used to be used for coal, before I had oil heat put in," she said, apologetically, hoping he wouldn't mind the crust of grime that covered the tiny cellar window near the top of the flaking brick wall. The place had a rather repulsive wet, yeasty smell to it.

Her new tenant, however, seemed very content. Almost

ecstatic. "And what is this?" he said, indicating a short flight of stairs just outside the door of his room.

"Oh, that leads to the backyard," said Mrs. Tibbets. "Hasn't been unlocked in years," she said, indicating the slope of the sturdy cellar doors at the head of the stone stairway.

"It will do nicely, thank you," said Vandor, rubbing his white hands briskly together. "Yes, it will be ideal. I shall move my things in tonight."

"Through there?" she asked. "I'm not even sure what I've done with the key . . ."

"Do not worry. I have a way with locks," he smiled.

That *smile*, she thought, it makes me all queasy inside.

"Well," she said, trying to brush off the mildewed folding cot in the corner of the room and raising a cloud of fleas from the damp dust on the mattress, "all right. It'll be ten dollars a week."

Vandor Thobal made a short, snappy bow, and clicked his heels slightly. "Of course," he said, reaching inside his cloak, and coming out with a crisp new bill. "This should take care of it for awhile."

Mrs. Tibbets adjusted her

glasses in the dim cellar and looked at the bill. "Five hundred dollars?" she said, with a little squeak in her voice. "Why, that's almost a year's rent!"

"Am I to understand there is a limit to my stay?" asked Vandor.

"Why, no," she said, quickly. "It's just that—I mean—Nobody gives a year's— No, of course not. No limit at all. Stay as long as you like."

A little giddy at her good fortune, she rushed upstairs, and had automatically almost locked the cellar door when she remembered that her new tenant was still downstairs. "You don't have anything of value down there, do you?" she called, leaning over the stairs from the kitchen door. "I mean, you have no way of locking your room . . ."

There was no answer.

"Mister Thobal?" she called, a little less heartily.

Still no answer.

Finally, cautiously, she made her way back down to the tiny room at the back of the cellar. It was empty.

"Mister Tho-bal!" she sing-songed, peering around in the semi-gloom of the shadowy cellar. She went to the short flight of stone stairs and looked up at the slanting cellar doors. Hesitantly, she reached

up a hand toward them and gave a tiny shove.

The doors flew outward with a loud slamming noise, and she gasped and drew back. Vandor was standing there above her, silhouetted against the night sky, his eyes glowing redly and nostrils flaring as he saw her there. He was carrying a large, ugly wooden box in his arms.

"Oh!" she said. "Is that your luggage?"

". . . Yes. My—er—trunk," he said, starting slowly downstairs, with his burden, nearly as wide as the stone steps. Mrs. Tibbets stepped aside to let him pass, and as he did so, entering through the door to his room, a tiny trickle of dirt sprinkled on the floor from under the edge of the box's lid.

"Goodness gracious!" she said, following him into his room curiously, "Whatever have you got in there? It seems so odd."

Vandor set the box against the cellar wall and turned to her, his face white and angry. "Madam, that is my own personal business, if you don't mind!"

Mrs. Tibbets shrugged. "Well, I just saw a dribble of dirt coming out of it, and

thought perhaps I could sweep it out for you—"

Vandor's face went—if anything—whiter. "No!" he roared, in an almost terrified voice. "I— I mean, that won't be necessary. "It's *supposed* to be full of earth. I—I'm a sort of—of botanist. I grow things."

"Hmmp," Mrs. Tibbets sniffed. "You won't be able to grow anything but mushrooms, down here!"

"That's just what I *do* grow," he said, with a smile of relief, bringing his long pointed canines into view. "Horticulture . . . Nothing like it."

"I s'pose not," said his landlady, starting out of his room. "I'll come down tomorrow and kind of straighten things up a little for you, while you're at work. The place certainly needs it."

"No!" he said, adding hastily. "I work *nights*. I usually sleep during the day."

"Oh, then I wouldn't want to disturb your sleep," said Mrs. Tibbets, at the foot of the stairs. "I'll wait until you go to work, and *then* I'll—"

"Please!" Vandor approached her, his hands spread wide in supplication. "I like everything *just* as it is!"

"Well, it's your room . . ." she sighed, starting upstairs.

"If there's anything I can do—"

"There is something," said Vandor. "Will you please replace the padlock on the door in your kitchen? I'll be using the cellar door, if you don't mind, as a sort of private entrance . . ."

Mrs. Tibbets hesitated, then thought of the five hundred dollar advance, and smiled. "Certainly. Do as you like, Mister Thobal. Good-night."

"Goodnight," said Vandor.

"Oh," she said, at the top of the stairs, "did I tell you that you have kitchen privileges? Perhaps I should leave the padlock off the door just in case . . ."

"I never *eat*—at the place I live," he said. "I usually dine *out*. Thank you just the same."

"Very well," she said a little tartly, and exited to the kitchen and re-padlocked the door. She was just snapping the padlock shut when Mrs. Leonetti entered the kitchen.

"Something is the matter, Meesus Teebuts?" asked her roomer, setting a bag of groceries on the table.

"Oh, just a new roomer," smiled Mrs. Tibbets. "I'm worried about him. He looks so sickly. I wonder if I should have rented him that room.

Liable to catch his death of pneumonia."

"Pah. Always you worry too much," said Mrs. Leonetti. "If it's not the one thing, it's the other."

"But the cellar . . ." said Mrs. Tibbets, with a little shiver. "It's so *damp*."

"He's-a live in the *cellar*?"

"He— He seemed to *prefer* it."

Mrs. Leonetti shrugged, and began putting away her purchases in the refrigerator. "Well, if he likes, he likes. I'm-a have an uncle once, he likes to live in the attic and fly kites from-a the window."

"It takes all kinds, I guess," said Mrs. Tibbets.

"Sure it does," said Mrs. Leonetti, dismissing the subject. "Say, I'm-a gonna make a big pot spaggett'. Maybe you can-a bring him a plate. Warm him up good."

"That's a wonderful idea!" said Mrs. Tibbets. "But—" her face fell. "He'll probably be going to work. He works nights."

Mrs. Leonetti shrugged. "Is okay. I cook fast. If he's-a there when you go down, you give him. If he's-a *no* there, you eat yourself. Okay?"

"A fine idea," Mrs. Tibbets smiled.

An hour later, Mrs. Tibbets

tiptoed down into the cellar, with a steaming covered dish in her hands. She knocked on the door of Vandor's room, but there was no response.

"Oh, I've missed him," she complained aloud. "But maybe he's just stepped out for cigarettes or something. I can leave it for him."

She set the dish on the closed lid of the wooden box, and went back into the cellar proper, searching in the heaped cartons until she found a blank sheet of paper.

"Dear Mister Thobal," she scribbled, "if this has gotten cold when you return, feel free to use the stove to heat it up. Mrs. Leonetti, one of your fellow roomers, made it. It's really quite good, if you like Italian food. It's got a bit too much *garlic* in it for my taste."

Smiling, she signed the note, and went back upstairs.

She was awakened just before dawn by a hand upon her shoulder, shaking her violently. She sat up in bed, very startled, and flicked on the bedside lamp.

"*Mister Thobal!*" she said in horror, drawing the bedclothes about her, "How *dare* you come into a lady's *bedroom* at—" she consulted her alarm clock "—at four in the *morning*, and—"

"Mrs. Tibbets!" he interrupted in an anguished voice that went straight to her woman's heart, "would you *kindly* come down to my room and remove that *garlic*-stinking thing from my *cof*—my horticulture box?"

"At four in the morning?" she said, testily.

"Look—" he said, quivering with some emotion she could not fathom, "Dawn will be breaking soon, and I'd *like* to be asleep when it does. I can't sleep at all once it's bright out."

"Well," she said, slipping into her flannel robe despite her misgivings, "can't you remove it yourself?"

"No—" he said, miserably, "I'm *allergic* to garlic. I appreciate the thought, but would you please remove that plate from my room. The very redolence of that odor, even when you've taken it away, will make me ill for the rest of the day. *Please* hurry!"

"Oh, *all* right, *all* right," she said, huffily, leading the way downstairs, with Vandor Thobal looming after her like an ominous black cloud.

"Well, I hope you're happier now," she said, holding the plate in her hands as she stood outside the door of Vandor's tiny room. "If the smell is going to bother you, I can

bring you down a bottle of Airwick—”

“No, please,” he protested, his white face tinged with greenish gray. “You’ve done enough already. Just—” he darted an anxious glance behind him, where the grimy windowpane was beginning to glow pink, “Just go upstairs and padlock the door. I’ve got to get to *sleep!*”

“Maybe if I brought you some flowers—” she began.

“No!” he wailed. “No Airwick, no flowers, *nothing!* I’ll be getting along fine, if you’ll just leave!”

“Well . . . If you’re sure—” she said.

“Positive!” he said, though his voice sounded oddly weak. There was a reddish glow in the room from the tiny window. “Now . . . please . . . go . . .” His voice faded.

“All right,” she smiled, closing the door. “Pleasant dreams.”

The only answer was a scuffling of feet and a muffled slamming sound. Mrs. Tibbets cocked her head, shrugged, and went back upstairs.

She was worried about her new roomer.

Two weeks later, she was still worried. She felt it was her responsibility, in a way,

to keep him healthy. After all, if he got sick, might not the local authorities protest her renting out such a damp, germ-breeding place?

She was too worried to even share in Mrs. Leonetti’s misgivings about the mysterious attacks in the neighborhood. Mrs. Leonetti was afraid to go out at night, what with the mounting number of men and women found pale-faced and incoherent in their beds in the mornings, though now and then they’d be found upon the grass in the park, or slumped in a doorway on the main street. The police were calling them “attacks” because the word was ambiguous enough to refer either to a malefactor of some sort or just a poor state of the victims’ health.

It was Mrs. Tibbets’ opinion that it was just “something that was going ’round.” She thought of it hardly at all, unless Mrs. Leonetti brought the topic up. Mostly, she was worried about Mister Thobal. Perhaps *he* was getting whatever was laying these others low. He certainly didn’t *look* very healthy.

“Vitamin deficiency,” said Mrs. Leonetti, in reply to a query of Mrs. Tibbets. “He’s-a no got the right vitamins. I’m-a read in a medical story

in a magazine. It's-a called a vitamin deficiency."

"Don't see how I can help him, then," sighed Mrs. Tibbets. "No way to get vitamins to the man if he doesn't eat his meals here."

She brooded and worried about the state of her roomer's health until she could think of nothing else. She rarely saw him. Only the few times she went down into the cellar to "get something" she "needed" from one of the cartons did she see him. He never, after that first night, came into the upstairs part of the house at all.

"He could be sick, dead, or dying," she said to herself. "And I'd never find out until the five hundred dollars was used up. It's my *duty* to check on him."

So every so often, making some excuse or other, she'd go downstairs and rummage through the dusty cartons there, hoping for a glimpse of him, still alive. But he never came out of the room by day, and at nightfall, she wasn't quite up to facing him in the darkened cellar alone.

When an entire week had passed without her so much as catching a glimpse of him, she couldn't stand it any longer.

"I'll just peep into his

room, quietly, and see if he's all right," she said to herself.

But just to be on the safe side, she waited till almost sunset. "That way," she assured herself, "if I *do* waken him, it'll be about time for him to get up for work anyhow."

Being as silent as she could, she crept down into the cellar, and cautiously opened the door of his room. The cot was still folded, up against the wall.

"How strange," she said, entering the room. There was nothing there to show the room's occupancy except his wooden box against the far wall under the window.

"I wonder—" she said, half-aloud, "where he's gone to?"

At that moment, the sun went down, and the lid of the box opened up.

"Yipe!" said Mrs. Tibbets, as Vandor Thobal sat up in the box. His hands arrested themselves in the process of brushing the soil from his cloak.

"What are you doing in here!?" he demanded.

"What are *you* doing *there*?" she countered, folding her arms.

Vandor swallowed, then seemed to think of something. "The mushrooms," he

explained, rising to his awesome full height before her, the tiny clods of earth rolling off his cloak back into the box. "They— They need heat, you see. It's rather chilly here in the cellar at night, and so, I've taken to sleeping in there, hoping my body heat will suffice to help them grow."

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Mrs. Tibbets.

"Did you never hear of a chicken incubating an egg?" he said smoothly.

Mrs. Tibbets was taken aback at this. "Why— Yes, of course, but—"

"It's the same principle, really," he said, flashing his pointed teeth in a wide smile at her.

"Yes—" she said, with a funny cold feeling inside her. "Yes, I suppose it is."

Suddenly, without another word, she turned about and hurried upstairs. She couldn't get the padlock on the door fast enough to suit her.

"Whew!" she gasped, sinking into a kitchen chair. "I've never been so jittery in my life."

At the rear window of the kitchen, just over the cellar door, she heard something, a kind of beating, flapping sound, but when she turned to

look through the window, there was nothing there.

"Brrr." she shuddered. "Someone must be walking over my grave."

She began to make a pot of tea to warm herself up. She was having her second cup when the bright idea struck her.

"He'll be so grateful," she said, hurrying into the front hall to search through the junk in the closet there. She hadn't liked the look in his eyes when she'd last seen him. Perhaps he'd be so angry with her that he'd leave, and then she'd have to refund what remained of the five hundred dollars. This really gave her something to worry about.

"But," she half-sang to herself, taking out the box from the closet, "this will make him change his mind. *Anyone* would be grateful not to have to sleep in a dirty old box like that another night . . ."

"Hello!" she chirped, as Vandor opened the door to his room. "I got up early to surprise you."

"Mrs. Tibbets . . ." he said, closing the door behind him with an odd, intent stare, "for once, I am very glad to see you."

He approached her slowly, towering over her in his

enormous black cloak, his pallid hands reaching out toward her.

"You— You are?" she said, in a very small voice.

"Yes," he said, eyes and teeth glinting. "I had a rather . . . *unfruitful* . . . night's work. But now I feel that everything will soon be all right."

His gaze shifted from her eyes to her throat, and she suddenly felt chilly.

"Mister Thobal," she said quickly, "I have good news for you."

"You have?" he said, surprised into halting a few paces from her. "For me? You have news for me?"

"Yes," she said, with what she hoped was infectuous delight. "You won't have to

sleep in that dirty box anymore . . . Look!"

She turned to her left and, reaching out a hand, flicked a switch.

Instantly, reflecting from the inner walls and soil of the box, a bright, warm light came alive.

"It'll keep your mushrooms *much* warmer than *you* ever could!" she said, turning back to him. "It's a *sunlamp*!"

But, as she completed her turn, Vandor Thobal was not in evidence. His suit, cloak, and shoes were still there, however, sagging horribly into a viscous brown-and-green puddle on the floor of the room.

"Goodness!" said Mrs. Tibbets, leaping to her feet. "Now I *am* worried!"

THE END

