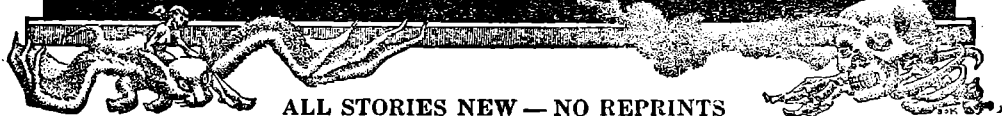


Weird Tales



JANUARY, 1950

Cover by Matt Fox

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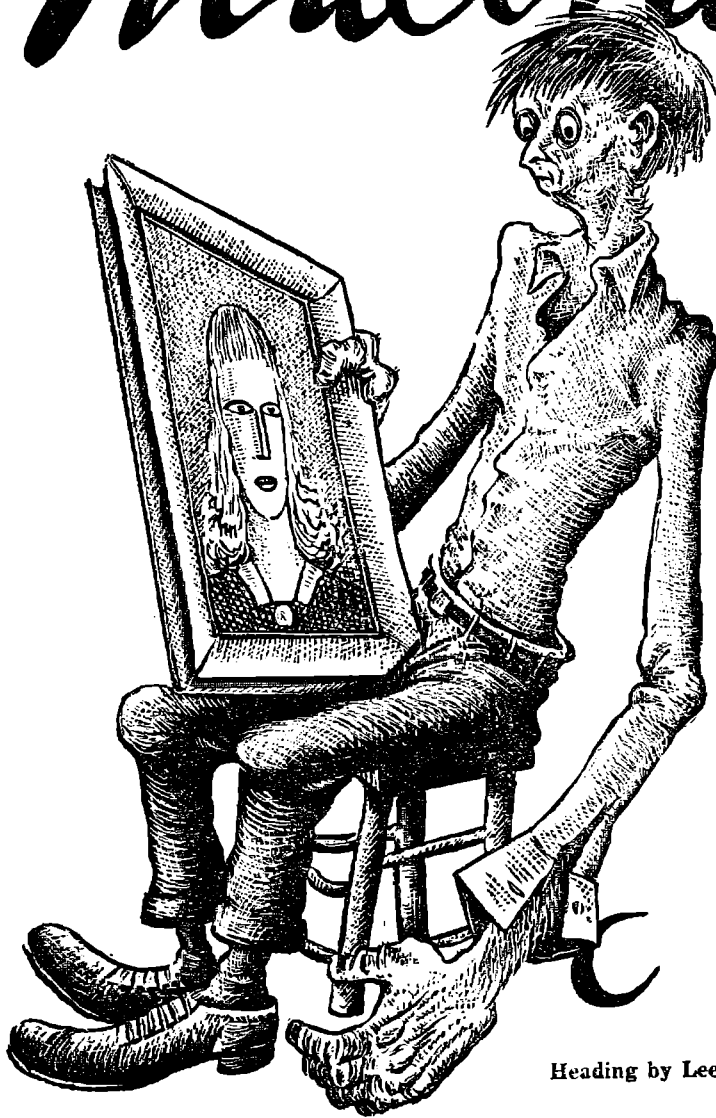
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the MYSTERIOUS miss *Maltra*



By
Stanton
A.
Coblentz

*All a lover's
fervor in a
glance at a pic-
ture bought at
an auction sale.*

Heading by Lee Brown Coye

IF DONNY and I hadn't chanced to drop in at Scruggs' Auction Parlors, the whole damnable adventure never would have occurred. And if Donny hadn't let those mild blue poet's eyes of his fall on the one object out of all the hundreds which it was his accursed destiny to see—

But first let me explain. Don Maclaren was my especial chum. He was as sweet a lad as you'd want to meet—tall, slim, sandy-haired, with eyes that were always laughing out at you from under their overhanging bushy brows. Some folks thought him a little queer because he dashed off sentimental verses now and then; but actually his feet were solidly enough on the earth; otherwise, he couldn't have made his living as a salesman for Tower Home Appliances, Inc.

We had been sauntering together down Central Avenue one fine Saturday afternoon when we saw the sign: "BIG AUCTION SALE TODAY. All the Treasures of the Curley Mansion Going—at a Sacrifice!" Now an auction is one of my weaknesses, and it wasn't a minute before I had shepherded Donny into the place. There really were some fascinating objects there, for the Curley Mansion had been one of the city's oldest and richest. I managed to pick up some handsome bits of bric-a-brac at bargain prices; while Donny, chaffing in the crowded, overstuffed atmosphere, kept tugging at me to leave. But when I actually did turn to go, it was he that couldn't be dragged away.

He had pulled a dusty painting from a corner behind some vases and books, and I saw how the blue veins stood out on his blond forehead and how his eyes bulged from their sockets as he held it up and gazed.

"My God!" he muttered, so absorbed that he seemed not to see the milling crowds that nudged his elbows. "Just look at that! Boy, isn't she simply wonderful!"

But all that I could see was an ordinary young woman's features—at least, she didn't particularly strike me at first with her small face with the undersized mouth and little up-tilted nose; and her pointed, elfish chin. Yet I'll have to confess that, as I stared, something about the eyes did hold me. They were gray-green, and dispropor-

tionately large in the tiny face, so that they stood out a little like fawn-eyes; and as I peered at them I had an uncanny sensation—yes, a sort of unearthly, shivery feeling, as if actual living eyes were scrutinizing me from that canvas.

"I've got to have her, Carl," Donny whispered into my ear. "I've got to have her, no matter what the price!"

I don't know why, but a chill passed along my spine.

"But who is she?" I demanded. "Who's the artist?"

Then for the first time, I noticed the title: "Self-portrait. By Maltra."

"And who the devil is Maltra?" I prided myself on more than the average knowledge of art, but the name was strange to me.

"All I know," Donny startled me by whispering, while his eyes still devoured the painted features, "is that she's the girl I'm going to marry."

I'D KNOWN Donny to do things before on sudden crazy impulses, as once when he'd tossed a twenty-dollar bill to a beggar who just happened to take his fancy; and I knew that you couldn't do anything about his whims. And so I said nothing when, an hour or two later, he emerged from the Galleries with the "Self-Portrait" firmly in hand. From the ecstatic look in his sparklit eyes, you'd have thought that, at the least, he'd picked up a new Venus de Milo.

"Invite me to the wedding, old pal," I gibed, as we stepped into the street.

He stared at me with the most serious intentness.

"Don't you try to make fun of me, Carl," he protested. "From the very first second, I knew it—I heard it thundering all about me—she and I are meant for each other! It's one of those weird things—one of those inevitable things you can't explain. I'll never rest till I find her."

"But the auctioneer couldn't say who she was," I reminded him.

"Those auctioneers are a lot of old rummies. Suppose we step round to the art dealers."

But it turned out that not an art dealer in town had ever heard of Maltra. None of their catalogues, not even those dating back many years, had listed her name. They all admitted, on seeing the painting, that it was

an accomplished piece of work, but couldn't be sure how recent a performance it was.

"Oh, it's quite recent, never fear," Donny assured me, still with that other-worldly look in his eyes. "I tell you, I just feel her—I feel her as if she were walking right here with us now. She's waiting for me, I'm as positive of that as I could be of my own soul—and *I'm going to find her*"

There was something in his manner that you just couldn't argue with. Beneath those mild blue eyes and that smooth placid skin I felt all the fervor of the fanatic—yes, and a fanatic who was also wildly, desperately in love. Then suddenly, I don't know why, fear gripped at the pit of my stomach—a fear for Donny as fierce and deep as if I'd seen him being wrapped in the coils of an invisible web.

II

FOR nearly a month I didn't see Donny again. Somehow, whenever I stepped around to his rooming house, he happened to be out. But I did get words a-plenty from old Mrs. Blodgett the landlady.

"Don't know what's getting into Mr. Maclaren of late," she confided, as she wiped a tear from the corner of one of her watery blurs of eyes. "He's not himself at all any more, he's gotten so absent-minded he don't even seem to see you—just looks right through you, like there was somebody in the empty air on the other side. Or maybe stands looking out into space, and don't hardly hear you when you talk to him. Why, last Wednesday evening, poor dear, he was going to pay the rent, and seemed surprised when I told him he'd paid on Tuesday."

This had me worried; for Donny had never been so forgetful before. I was all the more troubled since he did not seek me out, in his usual way; and when at last one night I did find him in, I fully expected to call him to account for his neglect.

One glance at him, however, and I changed my mind. He was looking worn and thin—shockingly so. The expression in his gentle blue eyes was a haunted one—yes, haunted is the only word I can give it; and a sort of invisible shadow seemed to lie across his firm-cut, Byronic features.

"Oh, it's you, Carl?" he greeted me, in a

dull, indifferent way, as if we'd scarcely been parted for five minutes. And after I'd flung myself into a chair and tossed out some quips that fell flat, he sat across from me on the bed, trying to make conversation; but his words had a toneless, spiritless quality, as if he wasn't there at all and it was merely a robot speaking.

All the while, his eyes were not on me but on the opposite wall, which held them with a charmed fascination. It gave me a shock to see Maltra hanging there above the desk, in a new frame all glaring with gilt. Maybe it was only some trick of the light; but her large gray-green eyes shone in the tiny face as if there were a lamp behind them. I could almost have sworn some fire was burning inside—yes, once more I could almost have sworn she was alive.

Noticing my interest in the painting, Donny at last warmed to life.

"Doesn't she look fine in her new frame?" he enthused, in the dulcet tones and doting manner of a man praising a sweetheart or a bride. "Don't you think she's just marvelous?"

"Been able to trace who she was?" I parried the question.

The sparkle left his eyes. He shook his head sadly.

"No, and it's not for lack of trying, either. I've written or wired every art critic and museum in the whole damned country. I've pored over art books and catalogues till my eyes were sore. But it's the queerest thing, Carl, I haven't found one reference to her name—no, not one!—nor come across one of those jackasses of critics who'll say he's ever heard of her."

"Well there's still another possibility," I pointed out. "Have you thought of consulting the original owner of the Curley Collection?"

Donny sighed. His head drooped. "Of course, I haven't overlooked that bet. All that I could find out was that old Bryce Curley died last year. His only heir was his son, Bryce, Jr. But what did that damned fool do, after selling the mansion and everything in it, but go and join some crazy scientific expedition just a few weeks ago!"

"Where to?"

"Headwaters of the Putomayo, or some such infernal stream, down in those cursed

South American jungles. One of the most inaccessible spots on earth, they say. No possible way to get in touch with him down there—not for many months at least.”

“Well, it’s doubtful if he could help you anyway,” I surmised.

I was astonished at the vehemence with which Donny leapt up from the bed and began ranging the eight-by-ten room.

“But somebody’s got to help me. Somebody’s got to, I tell you! I’ve got to find out about her. I’ve simply got to! Lord in Heaven, Carl! I haven’t been sleeping nights! I’ve been seeing her face floating before me, like the dear sweet features of someone I’ve known and loved. In the daytime, too, it’s just the same—I see her then too, with that clear, fairy-like face of hers, till I can hardly attend to business any more!”

Remembering Mrs. Blodgett’s complaints about Donny’s absent-mindedness, I was becoming more concerned minute by minute.

“Listen here, old fellow,” I appealed, rising and putting one hand about him, yet not all reassured when I found how he was trembling, “listen here, you’ve got to shake yourself out of this obsession! You can’t let it prey upon you—turn your life upside down!”

Almost savagely, he flung himself out of my grip. There was an ecstatic glitter in his face as he gazed up at the painting, whose gray-green eyes stared back at his with a glitter that, oddly, seemed nearly as ecstatic as his own.

“But it’s not an obsession!” he raged. “Can’t you understand, Carl—it’s real! Real! Maltra is real—I know it! I still feel her presence! She’s somewhere waiting for me, Carl! I must—I must find her!”

There was all a lover’s fervor in the glance which he cast at the picture on the wall.

“But how in thunder you going to find her?”

He stared at me imploringly, as if silently begging me not to throw dust on his hopes.

“Oh, never fear, I’ll find ways. Why, you don’t know, Carl, how many hours I’ve passed roaming the streets downtown, looking into every woman’s face, hoping the next one will be her. Once or twice, for a

moment, I even thought I’d found her—and would you believe it, my heart almost stopped beating. But when I looked again, somehow she’d always disappeared.”

“I predict you’ll never find her that way.”

IN THE glance which he threw back at me there was something I had never seen in Donny before—a zealot’s light, remote, beyond argument, almost fierce in its intensity, such as I had once observed in the eyes of an old gardener about my father’s place, who, after reciting scraps of doggerel, confided to me that he was the reincarnation of Shakespeare.

“Well, old boy, I wish you luck,” I tossed out, as I made my discomfited retreat. But Donny did not even see me go. His gaze was fastened adoringly upon Maltra, whose gray-green eyes stared back at him with a glow that surely I only imagined to be as tender as his own.

III

KNOWING that ordinarily none of the boys were more congenial than Donny, or quicker to go off gallantly on the trail of any young charmer, I naturally got the idea of interesting him in some fair damsel who would take his mind off Maltra.

But no, a very devil of perversity possessed him. He wouldn’t look twice at Adele La Rue, the dancer, who was about the daintiest thing I knew; and he showed no more than a bored politeness to Annie McCloud and Roberta Bloomington, either of whom would have been a runner-up in a beauty contest. And as for meeting other girls—you’d have thought I wanted to introduce him to man-eating tigers. “I’m busy, Carl!” he snapped, when I mentioned a certain delectable night-club singer. “Can’t you see, I haven’t time to play around!” But the far-away light in his eyes showed clearly who he was thinking of.

Finally, in desperation, along in the late spring, I suggested taking him down for a day or two to my week-end cottage at Honeywood, about twenty miles out of town. I don’t know what fatality was in me, that I always made the moves which wound themselves about him like a dragnet. First I’d led him to that damnable auction; and

now I was the means of getting him to Honeywood! If I could only have foreseen!

At first, however, he resisted the invitation like seven fiends; and I don't know what it was that weakened him in the end—some mystical element inside him, I'd say, something I couldn't ever quite penetrate. "I've just got a feeling, Carl, maybe I'd better go," he finally yielded, a glow of anticipation in those soft ingratiating eyes of his, after he'd sworn by God and the Holy Ghost he couldn't possibly make it.

At Honeywood, I thought, there would be enough to keep his mind on wholesome things: a pool, a tennis court, and miles and miles of good clean forest trails to roam. Just the same, I did have my misgivings as we set off together in my car. In addition to his tennis togs and an overnight bag, he was carrying a huge flat package neatly packed in wrapping paper.

"What the devil d'ye think you're taking?" I grumbled. "We're not going on a Grand Tour of Europe."

"I know," he answered, simply and sweetly. "I've got something here I couldn't let myself be parted from, not even for a night."

I cannot say why, but a chilling premonition shot over me at the knowledge that Maltra was to make an uninvited third in our party.

IV

IT WASN'T till the next morning that my forebodings found any confirmation. We'd enjoyed a good enough afternoon, Donny beating me in three sets of tennis, 6-4, 7-5, 9-7; and after that we'd had a delicious plunge, and in the evening he seemed jovial enough as a group of us sat spinning yarns around a campfire. But in the morning, awakening at five thirty, I was surprised to see that Donny wasn't in the cot beside mine. He was nowhere about the cabin, either; and in the dim light of dawn I couldn't make out any sign of him in the surrounding woods.

"The damn fool evidently likes early-morning strolls," I growled to myself. "Guess I'll get another snooze."

But at seven, when I awoke again, he still

wasn't anywhere in sight; and as I potted around preparing the bacon and eggs I began to get really annoyed, as a man will when he's hungry and breakfast is needlessly delayed.

But he wasn't to have breakfast with me that day. By mid-morning I had become seriously alarmed; for Donny was usually the soul of consideration, and it was most unlike him to be gone without notifying me. And so, along with some of the boys from neighboring cabins, I'd been combing the woods for a mile around, in the belief that my friend had met with some accident. But still no sign of Donny.

It was just before noon, when I'd returned to the cabin half exhausted, that I saw him sauntering along the trail out of the pines. Or maybe "sauntering" isn't the word; he was gliding ahead so lightly he almost seemed to be floating; for a moment, I thought of a bodiless spirit. My first glance showed what a change had come over him. His face was literally blazing, illuminated, yes, glorified with a splendor as of one who'd looked upon heaven. His eyes seemed to gaze not so much at me as at the sky above my head. His whole being was transfigured with joy.

As he moved swiftly toward me, I didn't notice at first the leaves, twigs and burrs that clung to his sweater and slacks; the blackberry scratches on his sleeveless arms; the sweat-stains on his face; and the mud on his shoes. I even forgot my indignation at all the anxiety he'd caused me, for I saw at once how completely unaware he was that he'd done anything at all out of the way.

"Carl! Carl!" he panted, coming up and grasping my shoulders in the manner of one who has some great, some unbelievable truth to impart. "What do you think? What on earth do you think has happened?"

"Nothing except that you've driven us all half wild—" I was about to say.

But his rapturous look cut me short.

"I saw her!" he burst out. "I saw her! Yes, I saw her! With my own eyes, I saw her!"

"Saw who?" I demanded, in a startled, automatic way. But, of course, I already knew.

"Saw *her*! I recognized her at once!

Couldn't help recognizing her! I'd know her anywhere!"

"Come on in out of the sun, old chap," I urged. "Better tell me quietly inside the cabin."

But he continued to range excitedly about in the open.

"I saw her, with her straw-yellow hair, her elf's face, her wonderful big burning eyes! Oh, Carl, what a thrill! It was early in the morning; I couldn't sleep and something told me to get up, and I slipped out quietly so as not to wake you. There in the twilight I saw her, just beckoning at the edge of the trees—"

"If it was still twilight, how could you be sure?"

Ignoring my interruption, he rushed on. "I could see her beckoning, so I followed. I followed through the woods—I don't know how far, I didn't care, it was such joy to see her. We went on for miles and miles, and I could never quite catch up. Sometimes she disappeared, then I'd see her again, still gliding ahead. From the way she beckoned, I knew there was something she wanted me to see, so I wasn't surprised when at last we came to a wonderful old chateau in the woods, all ivy-covered, with turrets in the Medieval style, and fountains in the garden, and a little green lake with swans swimming on it, and peacocks on the bank. There she paused, and I could hear her voice for the first time. Such a delicate tinkling voice, almost like a fairy's! 'You'll have to go back now, but you must come again. You must come again.' Then in a flash she had slipped around the side of the chateau, and was gone."

"Where did you say that chateau was?" I asked. For I had scoured the district for all of ten years, and had never come across any place like he'd mentioned.

"Over that way," he answered, pointing vaguely to the west. And then, with a passionate joy, "Oh, isn't it wonderful, Carl? Isn't it wonderful, I've found her after all! Now I'll see her often, often! Now at last I'll make her mine!"

"But what sort of girl is this," I asked, "that goes leading you off for miles on a mad chase through the woods—"

"It wasn't mad—it was divine! Divine!" he swore. And then, with a naive pleading

innocence in his warm boyish eyes, "Won't you let me stay here all week, Carl? I've got to stay! I can't go back now! Tell them at the office—tell them I'm sick! Tell them I'm in no condition to work!"

As I saw the fervid light that shone from his whole face, I knew that he really was sick, that he really was in no condition to work. But I too felt sick—sick at heart—when I re-entered the cabin and saw Maltra staring out of her canvas, staring as if with a live and sardonic and somehow blissfully triumphant look in those gray-green witch's eyes of hers.

V

DURING the next few months, I could hardly pry Donny away from Honeywood. He not only stayed there week-ends; he insisted on staying all week—though the result before long was an indignant letter of dismissal from Tower Home Appliances, Inc. Not that Donny seemed to care; he had a sort of remote beatific light in his eyes when he read the news, as if it didn't concern him at all. "Oh, well," he shrugged, "I'm still not broke." And it didn't even seem to occur to him to look for another job.

However, he did have a full-time job now, though not a very paying one. I don't think a day passed but that he set off at dawn through the woods to westward. I'd followed him once or twice, and knew his invariable route through the pine groves, past the old mill, then along Fern Creek, then over a ridge heavily overgrown with oak, then down into a valley of hemlock and larch, then along Corkscrew River, which wound with snaky twists through a twenty or thirty-foot ravine. It was here that I always lost sight of him; I wasn't quite so slim or nimble as he, nor too agile about threading my way along those cliff-edges, where a misstep would send you plunging to the rocks beneath.

When Donny came back, there would always be a starry shining in his eyes.

"I've seen her, Carl, I've seen her again!" he would confide. "Oh, but she's exquisite!" Week after week he would report his progress. First it was, "She turned and smiled at me—and I tell you her face was like the

concentrated sweetness of all the flowers in the world." And then, a week later, "She spoke with me, in that elfin tinkling voice of hers, and said I was the one she's always been waiting for!" And again, "She led me into the chateau. Oh, what a place, with its huge halls and deep stained windows, and its tapestries showing armored knights in combat!

"She took me into a little nook all her own, with an arched ceiling of dark fretted woodwork; leather-bound books in a case at one side; and paintings covering the walls; also, an easel with a half-finished picture standing at one side."

Donny mentioned all this in a voice that sounded rational enough. But the gleam in his eyes was like that of a poet lost in a vision.

"Oh, but I wanted to hold her—take her to my heart!" he went on, so absently that I hardly knew if he were talking to me, or merely soliloquizing in my presence. "Wouldn't that be heaven! But when I almost put my arms about her, she always slips away. I can never quite reach her—never quite touch her. I ask, 'When can I take you in my arms, Maltra?' But she smiles in that gnome-like lovable way she has, and answers, 'When we're betrothed, my dearest, when we're betrothed. Then we'll never be parted.' 'But when shall we be betrothed?' I ask. And she smiles again, and says, 'Not yet for a while, beloved. Not yet for a while.' And she flits down the aisle and out of sight, sometimes hand in hand with a white-haired bent old man who bows courteously but somehow never speaks. Oh, how happy I'll be when Maltra and I are betrothed!"

There was no use talking when Donny was in one of these moods; I doubt if he even heard me. But as the weeks and months went by I was becoming more and more concerned. He was growing thinner; the hollows stood out under his eyes and on his cheeks, which were taking a hectic coloration. Meanwhile the exaltation on his face was such as, I knew, no human being could long sustain. It was getting so that he couldn't be lured from Honeywood even for a day. When I was away, he occupied my cabin by himself, and absently prepared his own meals—or more likely, so far as

I could gather, ate them half cooked or uncooked. And when I was present it was much the same; he could do little but stare at that accursed painting, which he had hung on my cabin wall; he could talk of nothing but Maltra; and even in a rainstorm he would plunge into the woods for his daily rendezvous with her, to return dripping but radiant.

It was my hope that the biting autumn days, for which my cabin wasn't equipped, would drive him back to the city. Failing that, I would bring a psychiatrist from town to examine him. But the season hadn't advanced beyond mid-October, the nights chilly but not yet too chilly to endure, when affairs rushed to a climax.

VI

I COULD hardly have missed the double-columned item in the *Daily Banner*:

"LOCAL ORNITHOLOGIST RETURNS FROM AMAZON

"Bryce Curley, Jr., Flies Home from Para

"After spending six months with the Thorpe University Expedition that penetrated to the headwaters of the Putumayo River in South America, Bryce Curley, Jr., is back in town, where he is temporarily installed at the Plaza Hotel . . ."

I had scarcely finished the article when I reached for the telephone. And five minutes later I had an appointment with Bryce Curley, Jr.

Not that I expected much of the interview. But if only I could find out who Maltra was, and bring the news to Donny while there was still time to put some flicker of reason back into his bemused mind—

Curley was a distinguished-looking, hawk-eyed gentleman of about thirty-eight, who received me courteously but seemed surprised at my question, and at first unable to help me.

"Maltra? Maltra?" he slowly repeated after me. "Well, I do seem to have a faint recollection—but no, I can't quite place it. Dad made his house into such a museum of curios, you know, I never could follow half

what he collected. I suppose it was something he picked up cheap at some exhibition."

"Try to think hard. Please! It's dreadfully important," I urged.

Curley furrowed his brows, but to no effect.

Then, just as I was leaving in a hangdog way that may have fanned some spark of sympathy within him, he called me back sharply.

"Mind telling me about that painting again?"

Once more I described the picture of Maltra.

"By Jove," he declared, "it's just flashed over me. That must have been the painting Dad used to have in his study, just over the desk!"

"So you really do know something about it!"

"It was the large gray-green eyes that gave the clue. They used to sort of bewitch me when I was a kid."

"When you were a kid? Good Lord! Is the picture that old?"

"Anything from twenty-five to thirty years, I'd say. I remember how Dad used to tell me of some eccentric old English lord he knew—name might have been Maltra, for all I can say—who got into disgrace and left his native land. Built himself a chateau near here somewhere in the woods—a strange place with baronial halls, stained-glass windows, fretted ceilings, tapestries of men-at-arms, and that sort of thing.

"He lived there all alone, except for a servant or two and his daughter—a queer creature, they say, as wild and shy as a wood-thing, but a talented painter. As far as I know, however, this is her only painting that survived the fire."

"What fire?"

"Why, the one that destroyed the chateau. I remember the time exactly, because it was on my thirteenth birthday. Nobody knows how it started, but when it was all over there wasn't a thing left of the chateau, and not a trace was ever found of the old man or his daughter. They say the site is so overgrown with trees and brush nowadays you couldn't locate it if you tried."

VII

AS SOON as I could stumble away, I made a bee-line for my car, which I pointed straight toward Honeywood. By sheer force, if necessary, I would drag Donny away from that devil's spot and his damnable hallucinations.

But as I shot into the car, a presentiment brooded in my mind; a gloom that grew deeper moment by moment as the miles between me and Honeywood were reeled away.

It was a sparkling autumn day, with the oaks and maples all a glory of scarlet, tan and golden. But somehow the very loveliness of the scene added to my forebodings, which rose to the point of an obsession when I had leapt out of the car and found that—just as I'd expected—Donny wasn't anywhere about the cabin.

I knew well enough which way he'd have gone, and I think some demon within me spurred me on as I took the foot-trail through the pine woods, past the old mill, then along Fern Creek, over the ridge of oak, down into the valley of hemlock and larch, and off toward Corkscrew River.

"Donny! Donny!" I kept calling. But, of course, there was no response.

"Guess you're plumb daffy, Carl old boy!" I tried to laugh at myself. "Looks like your nerves are going back on you. Why, there can't be any reason to be worse scared today than any time!"

Then, just to reassure myself, I called again, "Donny! Donny!" But only the ribald cawing of a crow came back, as if in mockery.

All the while, there was a goading voice within me, "Hurry! Hurry!" And my anxiety had grown until it was a nagging, gnawing thing that wouldn't leave me in peace for a minute.

Along Corkscrew River, my progress was slow. The stream, swollen by recent rains, foamed and plunged thunderously over its boulders many feet below; and I made my way cautiously along the razor-thin ledge at the top of the cliffs, particularly slippery today because of the rains.

Then once more I called, "Donny! Donny!" But how he heard above the roaring of the rapids?

Yet I knew that this was the way Donny ordinarily came. Besides, I could see man-sized footprints here and there in the wet earth. And so I pressed around turn after turn. The stream, growing wilder and more tumultuous as it was joined by tributaries, seemed like some frenzied, demented thing that shouted at me with crazy warnings.

I may have pushed a mile through that hideous ravine, and at last, all but exhausted, I could go no further. I paused, and stared about me. The footprints had suddenly ended, as if their maker had disappeared into the air. Baffled, I leaned against a tree, my uneasiness rising almost to terror. "Donny! Donny!" I screamed again and again at the emptiness. "Donny! Donny! Donny!" And then, all at once, I saw.

Down by the brink of the stream, forty feet below, a prone figure was stretched.

VIII

WITH perilous difficulty, I let myself down the steep slope. Donny was lying on a pebbly bank, the waters just lapping his feet; the crushed bushes and vines above him showed which way he had fallen. A single glance, and I knew the frightful truth. There was blood on his lips, and on his face a pallor that could have but one meaning. But he was still breathing faintly.

As I came down to him, he turned those mild blue eyes toward me with an expression I shall never forget. It was an expression of wonder, joy, thanksgiving—more than that, sheer bliss. He looked like a man gazing his first on heaven.

"Ah, it's you!" he cried, in tones that, by bending low, I could just make out above the droning of the torrent. "It's you! Maltra, it's you!"

And then his arms reached up, and closed on air. "Ah, beloved, I knew you'd come! Beloved, fold me close! Fold me in your arms—like that—yes, like that! Fold me in your arms! Now at last, beloved, we're betrothed! Now, now we'll never be parted!"

His voice trailed away in a long delighted sigh. His eyes, still beaming with the radiance of some divine happiness, stared their last at the blue sky above the treetops, and slowly closed.

As I flung myself upon him, unable to keep back the racking sobs, my gaze chanced to fall upon the rocks beyond the stream: And there—it may have been only imagination, or perhaps the stress of the moment—I seemed to see two gray-green eyes staring just above a boulder's mossy shoulder. A pixie-face smiled at me, and drifted away. And I thought I saw a slender form, like a deer's, gliding without a sound into the brush.

