

fantastic

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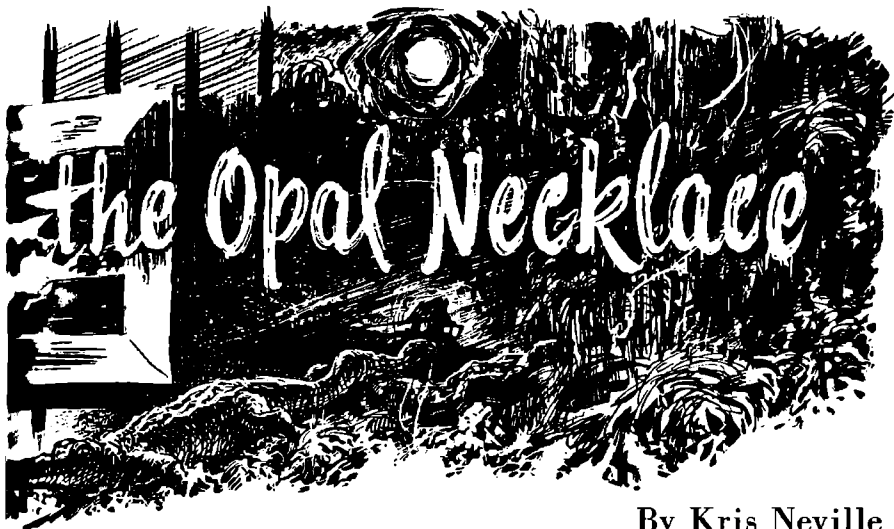


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Illustrator:
L. R. Summers



By Kris Neville

For an effective tale of pure horror, you need far more than writhing spectres in the cold moonlight and eerie screams from the local cemetery. Instead, take a couple of nice normal people, put them at the mercy of some evil force straight from the flaming halls of Hell, stick in an effective mood to carry the load — and you've got the ingredients for a top-grade chiller.

*In *The Opal Necklace*, Kris Neville has done exactly that, and the result is a weird wedding of the practical and the outre, in prose that comes close to being sheer poetry — but poetry with muscle!*

"Yes, Mother."

"Come here, my child."

"Yes, Mother."

"Here. Out the window — the swamp. You see the swamp?"

"Yes, Mother."

The old witch flung open the casement. "Listen!"

Night was coming down. Long shadows fingered their way over the bayous. Water, heavy with vegetation, lapped faintly against the stunted mangroves. Bull frogs opened their bass symphony, echoing and re-echoing from farther

and farther away as others from the far side chimed in. Tiny tree frogs chirped; crickets grated their eerie notes. A loon, laughing mournfully, flapped across the tree tops.

"And you want to leave it? Answer me!"

"Yes, Mother."

The old witch cackled, and her thin, cracked voice drifted out over the swamp. "You can't leave it," she said. "You *can't* leave it. Its water is your blood, and its air is your lungs." She closed the window against the mosquitoes. The air was hot and humid and sour. "It's *you!* You can't leave it, do you hear? Do you hear?"

"Yes, Mother."

The witch sniffed. "You're swamp. If you leave it, you'll leave something of yourself here. You'll have nothing left to hold you together: the wind and the world will tear you to pieces. Love? Love can't hold *you* together, my child; not for long, my child. Only the swamp and the shadows and the darkness can." She flitted across the room to the old, rough-hewn table. She picked up a string of jewels. "Opals. People don't string opals," she cackled, pointing a bony finger at the girl. "They're bad luck. You know that?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You think you want power over him," the witch said. "Don't you?"

"Yes, Mother."

"But you don't *know* what you want, do you? Oh, you may *think* you know. Yes. But you don't. No—you don't. But you'll find it!"

The girl's teeth were chattering.

Chuckling, the old witch bent and lit a yellow tallow candle with a kitchen match. The flame spiraled straight up, giving off a faint, gray smoke and a sharp, greasy odor. She cocked her head listening. "Hear them boys singing?" she rasped. "Hear *them?* That's you, too. Hear them?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Yes Mother, yes Mother, yes Mother," the witch mimicked. "Is that all you can say: yes Mother? Are you afraid of me? Is that it?"

"Yes, Mother."

The witch threw back her head and laughed shrilly; her talon-like fingers pawed the air with mirth. Then, as the laughter sobbed away, she began to chant, "Shelia Larson's afraid! Shelia Larson's afraid! Shelia Larson's afraid!"

She spun to face the girl; her face writhed in delight. Her eyes sparkled. Her wrinkled, grimy cheeks flushed with pleasure. "Did they teach you to be afraid of witches out there?" She waved her hands in a circle to indicate the world beyond the swamp. "No, no, no. No, they taught you to laugh at me out there, didn't they? But when you came back,

and when you wanted something, it was: yes Mother this, and yes Mother that, and you'll be glad enough when I do it. You're swamp, you hear!"

The witch was suddenly in front of her; one of her filthy hands circled Shelia's arm. "Stop shaking, stop shaking, stop shaking," she chuckled, peering up into the girl's face. "Did you bring the money, eh?"

"Yes, Mother."

The old witch let her hand fall away. "Put it on the table. Put it on the table."

Shelia crossed the room and placed the stack of silver coins next to the string of opals. The coins clinked together as she took her hand away. They gleamed dully in the candle light.

The old witch went to the table, and Shelia backed away. The witch picked up the opals, let them flow from one hand to the other. She crooned to them.

"Did you bring his hair, his nail parings?"

"Some dried blood, Mother."

The old witch cackled. "Good, good, good. Give it me!" She extended the bony hand, took the paper, peered at the brownish drops on it.

From the table the old witch selected a long, slender knife. Carefully she scraped the dried blood into a cracked pewter jar. She dipped into another jar,

added something to the blood. Then her hands began to fly, adding, testing, mixing. Finally she stirred.

When the mixture was to her satisfaction, she sprinkled white powder over the opals. "All his joys," she chanted. "All her husband's joys. One, two, three, four. Into the opals, go into the opals. Five, six, seven, eight. . . ." One by one she polished them between her fingers. Then she dropped the string into the pewter jar. The opals made little bubbles in the syrupy, brownish liquid. Her cracked voice rose and fell in a Cajun chant. It whined and whispered and shrieked. She drew out the opals, dried each one carefully. The thin, tough silk cord on which they were strung was blood red. She handed the opals across the table.

"Go, go, go," she chanted softly.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry," the carnie called, his voice flat and monotonous. "Yes sir, step right this way! I'm giving away money at this booth! I'm kee-razy! Yes, over here's the crazy man! . . . What's that, sonny, whatcha say, sonny? You don't believe I'm crazy? Then step right up and I'll show you a picture of my wife. . . . Yes sir, yes sir. Over here's the crazy man, giving away money! Yes, he's giving it away!"

The ground was black, packed

hard by a thousand trampling feet, cluttered over with cigarette butts, gum wrappers, candy sticks, torn paper. There were swirling lights and happy holiday bunting and pink cotton candy. A calliope piped out its shrill notes to blend with the pleased child screams. A rifle cracked over and over in the shooting gallery.

Shelia Larson and her husband Gib, hand in hand, forced their way through the swirling crowd.

"Hootchy-kootchy girls, right this way. See the show that made Pairee. . . ."

"You want to try the roller-coaster again, honey?" Gib said.

Laughing, Shelia pushed the hair out of her face. "Not now," she gasped.

"Let's toss pennies then. Come on." Gib elbowed his way up to the booth. He turned to his wife. "Happy?"

"Yes," she said, her face shining, her eyes sparkling.

"Give me some change," he told the pitch man. The man counted out the pennies, and Gib gave half of them to Shelia. They laughed and tossed the coins at the colored squares. They won nothing, and when the pennies were gone they moved on, she clinging to his elbow possessively.

"Oh, look! They have a snake house!" Shelia cried, tugging at his coat. "Let's go!"

Gib smiled down at her. "Look at snakes after only five days of

being married to me?"

"I want to," she pouted.

He shrugged. "Well . . ."

The weird whine of a snake charmer's pipe called from the snake house. It was from a record, and there was a monotonous tick-tick-tick in it.

Gib bought two red pasteboard tickets and they entered through the tent flap.

There was sawdust on the floor inside. In the center of the tent there was a shallow pit surrounded by a two-foot canvas over which spectators might peer down at the writhing reptiles. Only one man was watching, but he was watching in motionless fascination.

The man in the pit was handling a four-foot black snake. He paid no attention to the spectators. He let the snake coil around his arm and bring its head level with his face. The snake weaved back and forth, its tongue flickering furiously. It ducked its head and snapped it forward a few inches, almost as if it were trying to kiss the man on the lips. The pit man pushed its head away gently.

Shelia leaned forward, her eyes bright, her breath coming sharply.

"Let me see it!" she said to the pit man, holding out her hand.

The pit man turned to stare at her. "These are dangerous, lady."

She narrowed her eyes and glanced around the pit contemptuously. "Snakes like these?" she



asked, her voice low and throaty.

"Don't bother the man, Shelia," Gib suggested.

She turned her jet black eyes to her husband's face. "I want that snake."

Gib smiled indulgently. "I think we'd better go."

She ignored him and turned back to the pit man. Again she held out her hand. Their eyes locked. For a moment, they both stood motionless. Then he wavered.

"Okay, lady," he said, crossing the pit to her. "It's your funeral."

She reached out caressingly for the black snake, and it slithered onto her arm. She petted its scaly, sinuous body, and its tongue darted over her hand. She brought its head up, petting it softly just back of the jaws and laughing into its moving tongue.

"Let's go, Shelia," Gib said nervously. "Let's get out of here."

She pointed the snake at him playfully.

"Don't," he muttered.

"What's the matter? You afraid?" she chided gently.

"Of course not. Don't be silly. I just don't like the things. Give it back and let's go."

"All right," she said. "If you insist."

Once more on the midway, Gib said, "Why in the world did you want to handle that damned snake for?"

She looked up into his face. It was harsh and angular and cold in the vicious electric lights. Her heart was still pounding with the excitement of the swamp symbol, the snake. "You wouldn't understand," she said.

Uncomfortable silence fell between them; neither smiled. He guided her to a booth and bought two candied apples without asking if she wanted one.

Leaning against the booth, his candied apple in his left hand, he said, "Shelia, that snake —"

Her eyes darkened. "Look, Gib. Let's not argue."

He flushed under the tan. For a moment he seemed about to snap something, but instead he said, in

a quiet voice, "Of course not, Shelia."

The hot, southern night was clammy, and the air was stale with sweat and carnival smells.

She reached up and fingered the opals around her neck. If I should ever lose him, she thought, I should hate as a wild thing hates; as the dark savage I am, deep inside of me. Her fingers moved on the opals. It was the same petting gesture she had given the snake. I have these, she thought, if I should ever lose him. All his joys — everything he has — are in these opals. If they are destroyed, he has nothing.

"Honey," he said, "Why don't you let me buy you a string of pearls or something? Whoever heard of opals on a string, and a God-awful red string at that?"

Her hand dropped away from her throat.

"In New York —" he began.

"I'll wear them there, too," she said desperately. "Oh, Gib, Gib, Gib, let's not quarrel!"

"Gib, you shouldn't have brought me up here," Shelia said suddenly.

He pushed back his breakfast coffee, a hurt, puzzled look in his eyes.

Nervously, she stood up and crossed to the window. She stared out, over roof tops, along Park Avenue from the Eighty-fourth Street apartment. The buildings

were bleak and dirty and squalid, and the large flakes of falling snow were soot-blackened as they fell.

"I hate this snow," she said. "I hate the sight of it and the smell of it. I hate this city." She turned from the window.

He was standing by the table now and his hands hung loosely at his sides. "I won't go down today if you don't want me to."

"No," she said. "Go on."

"Look. How's this? I'll get a couple of tickets to *South Pacific*, and —"

"No!" she snapped. "For God's sake, is that all you think about? Theater! Cocktail parties! And that damned Italian restaurant on Fifty-second street you're so fond of!"

The breakfast nook was neat and clean around them. The silver glistened beside alabaster plates. The thin glassware looked pathetically fragile without linen beneath it. The electric toaster popped and purred.

"What's the matter, honey?" he said after a moment.

"You better go," she said. "Please. Get out."

"Are you . . . sick?"

"No. Please leave, Gib. Quickly."

After he was gone she stood staring out the window into the vacant cold. The snow was deadening; it covered the warm streets like a giant vampire, sucking out all the aliveness. The sky choked down, trapping the world in slow

suffocation. It hungered after her body. She ached for the warm, moist world of the swamp.

She whirled savagely from the window. She picked up the orange juice glass and dashed it to the floor. It shivered brightly in all directions.

She went to the bedroom. It still had a warm, masculine odor. She opened the dresser and removed the choke string of opals. They were beautifully matched, tapering in pairs to the single, great, glowing one in the center. She held them in her hands, telling them slowly, as if she were holding a rosary. The opals were milky; they sparkled with rainbow dashes of fire. She held them up to the light, fascinated.

She heard the maid come in, and she dropped the opals guiltily, and they lay in the drawer, no longer a symbol of love; cold with snow, north wind, and strange, city faces. She stared hard at their icy glitter.

She crossed to the mirror and studied her face: her jet black hair, her creamy skin, her almost too large, sensuous mouth, her midnight eyes. Hard, vicious lines tightened in the corners of her mouth, and her hands curled tightly. . . .

When he came home from nine hours in the business world, Gib said, kissing her on the passively-

offered cheek, "Shall we stay home tonight like old married folks?"

"I want to go out," she said.

"Oh?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "I thought you said this morning . . . Well, all right, dear. If you want to. Shall I phone Elmer and Mary, and we'll make it a foursome? How does the Waldorf sound?"

"No," she said, her eyes strange swamp pools. "I hate Mary!"

He took off his heavy top coat. He hung the coat carefully on the hall tree. "What's come over you, darling?"

"Nothing," she lied. "Nothing at all."

"The way you snap at me, it seems like whatever I say is going to be wrong."

Her lips curled too much at the corners.

"Look, Shelia. Now, see here!" But he couldn't think of anything to continue with, so he turned uncertainly to adjust his top coat; he brushed at the sleeves and plucked at the collar. After a moment he said, "Where would you like to go tonight?"

"Out," she said. "Somewhere wild. Harlem. Somewhere where people drink and fight and sing and love and hate. Somewhere *real!*"

He fumbled for a cigarette. "Look, Shelia. Why don't you take a month and run down to your home? I'll make the arrange-

ments for you at —”

“No,” she said very slowly. “No, I think I want to stay near you.” Her voice was husky. “I think I want to stay right here.”

She picked up a man, without ever really looking at his face, in a little bar out somewhere near One-twenty-fifth Street. She took him back in a taxi, and he followed her up after loitering outside the apartment house for a few minutes, smoking restlessly. He pretended to be very skillful in such affairs, and he smelled of some astringent lotion and some cloying hair tonic and shoe polish. When it was over, she had difficulty getting him out of the apartment; and difficulty convincing him not to come back and not to phone.

He was gone, and she sat alone on the disarrayed bed, giggling. She drank again from the nearly empty fifth of gin that she had brought back with her. Benny, their cocker, lying before the bed, beat a ceaseless tattoo on the deep rug with his nervous tail. She laughed a bit hysterically at the sound, and with drink-heavy hands she tried to smooth the bed. The shadows, slipping in with coming night, were alive and pulsing and sad.

She drank again, and the bottle was empty, and she threw it to the silencing carpet where it lay on its flat, etched side, next to the dog.

Her hair was twisted and awry. The choker string of opals was tight on her neck: she had worn them since morning. Her wrinkled, pink slip spilled from the broken strap of her left shoulder.

The shadows muttered.

She heard him at the door. She heard the elevator click shut and fall away, sighing.

She ran from the bedroom, and Benny padded silently after her. She ran to her husband, barefoot, and simpering with eagerness.

Gig saw at a glance and, disgusted, brushed past her.

She followed him from the outer door down the short hallway, but at the doorway opening on the two steps down into the living room, she stopped. “Why’n’cha say somethin’?” she lisped.

Staring not at her, but at the trunk from Ceylon that rested on a squat stand against the far wall beside the flexible lamp, he said, “You’re drunk, Shelia.”

“Why’n’cha tell me I’m no good?” she demanded, screwing her face savagely in fury.

Still without looking at her, pity in his eyes now, he said, “You better go take a cold shower, Shelia.”

“Why’n’cha tell me I’m no good?” she insisted. “Why’n’cha say you wish I was dead?”

Muscles jumped in his lean jaw. “Anyone can get drunk one time.”

"There was a . . . man here. . . ." she said.

His face changed and, for the first time since his initial inspection, he turned to look at her. His eyes were suddenly understanding. "Is it about your parents?" he asked quietly. "Did something happen to your parents? What is it?"

She hiccupped. "Nothin' happen' to my parents. There was a man here's all."

"You're drunk, Shelia."

"I slep' with him!" she cried in drunken glee. "There was a man here, an' I slep' with him!"

There was a shocked instant of silence, during which even the shadows were still.

"You brought me up here," she shrieked, "and you made me come up here, and now you've trapped me here, an' I'm caught in th' walls an' a li'le bit of me is in the skies an' I've got to get all of me back! You made me do it. You made me sleep with him, an' I won' forget. . . . Why'n'cha tell me I'm no good!"

His head bowed. He turned toward the bedroom. His lips were a thin line.

"Ain't'cha gonna call me a bitch!" she screamed. "Why'n'cha tell me I'm a nogood bitch?"

He left the room.

"I guess I showed you you couldn't treat me like — like — like . . . I guess I showed you!" she screamed after him.

He was packing. After a while she heard a suitcase lid slam and the lock catch. He came out of the bedroom and she stood waiting, and he brushed her aside angrily, calling, "Here, Benny! Here, Benny! Here, Benny!"

She weaved after him. "You think it's my fault, a'm'fault, don' ya?"

He knelt to take the dog.

"Don' ya, don' ya!"

"No," he said. "I blame myself, too." He held out his hand. "Here, Benny, come on, old boy."

"You should!" she crowed. "You should. It is your fault, all your ownswee'li'le fault, an' I'm gonna remember it!"

Gib put the squirming dog under his right arm and seized the suitcase viciously in his left hand. He stood up. "I'll send for the rest of my stuff."

"I'm gonna go home," she said drunkenly. "I'm all apart, an' I can't leave anything." She began to sob. "When I get myself back, I'm gonna go home."

He stared at her.

"Get *out!*" she cried hysterically.

After the door closed behind him and the dog, she stood dazed and unmoving. Finally, in a dream-like stupor, she reached up and freed her neck of the opals, breaking the string, spilling the gems loose into her hand. She selected a small one, placed the rest in a careful pile on the mantel-

piece. She looked at the small opal, and her eyes were feverish. Hypnotized by it, she walked leadenly to the kitchen. She put the opal on the floor. She took the electric iron, seldom used, from its dusty shelf. She pounded the opal with the base of the iron, and when it splintered into tiny fragments, she pounded them, and then she began to cry.

Downstairs, Benny squirmed out of Gib's arms and dashed in front of a hurrying Checkered Cab. There was a squeal of brakes, an excited snarl, a simultaneous thump and yip, and Benny lay dead and mangled in the slush.

"Hello," Elmer said nervously, avoiding Shelia's eyes. He hesitated a moment, his upper lip twitching angrily. "May I come in?"

She stepped back from the door.

She did not offer to take his coat, and he stood awkwardly beside her in the narrow hall. She did not look at him. She studied the Japanese print of a dove on a twisted branch that was hanging beside the hall mirror: The week-old flowers on the table were withered and dead.

"We better go in and sit down," he said.

Silently, she led the way.

When they were seated, he hunted beneath his top coat for his cigarette case, and without asking permission, he lit a cig-

arette. "I've just come from Gib," he said. "He was getting drunk again. He's never tried to drink much; I guess you know that. He gets drunk and keeps on drinking. See here, now, Shelia, he's had a very bad week."

Shelia crossed to the mantelpiece, rising from her chair as if in a dream. The opals were there in a box of white cotton, and four of them were missing. She fingered the box. "He phoned me to say Benny was dead," she said. "I told him not to phone me anymore. But I think he was trying to call today. I didn't answer the phone."

Elmer jerked the cigarette nervously. "He's actually physically sick, Shelia. He'll ruin his health. I think you should see him."

"No."

"He lost the wedding band you gave him. He's almost hysterical about it. He wants to know if he lost it while he was packing here?"

She fingered a spot where an opal had lain. "No," she said. "He didn't lose it here."

Elmer put the cigarette in the ash tray; his face was frozen in harsh lines. "He got a telegram this morning. His mother is very ill. He was too drunk when it came to make much sense out of it. And now he's getting drunk all over again. If you'd see him, maybe you could straighten him out enough to go up to see her."

She smiled faintly, rubbing the

spot where the opal she had shattered last night had lain. "I can't go back to him," she said. The remaining deadly opals were dark fire.

"Look here, damn it!" Elmer snapped, his face reddening with anger. "By God, after what he's done for you, I think you could show a little concern! He brought you up here and gave you a beautiful home and beautiful clothes and did everything he could in God's green earth to make you

happy! I don't know what kind of a person you are, but I can't imagine anyone asking for better treatment than you got! I think at least for that, if not for anything else, you could see him! I think you owe him that much! You owe him at least that!"

She stared at the box in silence.

"My God, woman, what are you after!"

She whirled on him. "Myself!" she cried. "I'm after myself! He took *me!* Don't you see, I've got



"Yes?"

to get myself back! There's some of me in this hideous cold room, and there's some of me in his mother. There was some of me in Benny and the ring. I've got to get it all back so I can be whole again! He brought me up here and little by little I lost pieces of myself because he couldn't hold me together, and little by little I've got to get them back, and then I can go away. He brought me here to this hungry city, and I want to hurt him like he hurt me, but most of all I've got to be whole again!" She was sobbing. "I hate him! I hate him!"

"What are you trying to *do* to him!"

"Shut up! Shut up!"

"You crazy, sadistic *bitch!*"

"I hate him," she cried.

Then the door slammed, and Elmer was gone. Shelia went to a chair and sat unmoving, her lips parted, her breathing shallow. Seconds fell like the dust of Caesar. And then she stirred. Her hand, like a dying bird, fluttered weakly.

The day after Elmer called, she went out and slipped her address — in a note that she put beneath the saucer along with a twenty-dollar bill — to a soda jerk. He came as soon as he could, as she had known he would.

She made him sit down. He twisted nervously in the chair, staring around at the expensive

apartment. He smiled nervously.

"It's all in these opals," she said. "They were put in the opals."

In the corner, although the soda jerk would not see her, the witch chuckled dryly, like dead, burning leaves.

"That's all my husband's joys, don't you see?" she said intently. "I have to punish him for what he did to me. But that's not all. No. I'm not *whole* any more, not until I get all of myself back! Until I get all our night whispers and love words and caresses and laughter and hot sweat and moans and tears and everything!"

The soda jerk squirmed, twisting his head on his skinny neck.

She leaned toward him, smelling of perfume. "I wish you were a garbage collector," she said thickly. "I wanna find a garbage collector, so me and him can go to the Stork Club."

The soda jerk massaged his bony Adam's apple, and Shelia frowned drunkenly. "That'll show him," she said. "I want to *hurt* him." She held out her arms. "Come here. I want you to . . . Come here!"

"Gosh, Miss . . . I . . . I don't understand you at all, not at all."

She bit her lip. She hesitated. Then she crossed nervously to the phonograph, put on a stack of records.

"Let's dance," she said, breath-

ing heavily. "You can understand me. I'm easy to understand."

The soda jerk refused to look into her eyes.

The witch fell silent in the corner when the music came, but the shadows beyond the lamp waited restlessly, and the opal fire on the mantelpiece pulsed uneasily.

The soda jerk was gone. He had fled, and she sat by herself on the sofa for some time. The telephone began ringing. She walked the apartment without answering it.

She took another drink, and the old witch said, "Shelia Larson's afraid!"

The opals pulsed hate. Her breathing was shallow. She picked up an opal, replaced it. It lay glittering. Repelling and attracting, and all the room focused waiting on the opal, and the witch said, "Shelia Larson's afraid!" And the opal fire twisted sinuously.

She went to the bath and turned on the shower, and flowing through routine movements undressed and got beneath it.

The water was spring rain upon white lilies, and her body trembled, and dripping down the drain the water said, "One, two, three, four . . ."

She stood, drying, before the mirror. She studied her sweaty

face. Quickly she turned away and slipped into the robe. She knotted the belt with trembling fingers.

Back in the living room, the phonograph was still playing. She poured herself a drink when she came out of the bathroom.

"Go on," the old witch said.

Outside the window the night trembled, waiting.

The shadows came out to dance and chant, and Shelia went to the opals and took one down, and the old witch cackled and lit the tallow candle with a kitchen match, and the smoke had a greasy smell.

And the sour swamp air came in, and the distant call of a loon, and the hungry lap of water, and the slither of movement.

Outside the moon topped the buildings and shone down, a cold, barren, passionless, knowledgeable jewel of infinity.

Shelia drank again, and then she stumbled over a shadow.

The shadow led her, and she was in the kitchen with the electric iron in her hand, and reverently she lay the largest opal of all on the linoleum and raised the electric iron, and the witch rent the air with hysterical laughter, and the electric iron came savagely down.

And Gib wept at her funeral.

A SUPERSTITION is a theory which has been abandoned; a theory is a superstition which is still accepted as true.

— Forest Ray Moulton