

JUNE

Strange

STORIES

15¢

13

COMPLETE
STORIES
IN THIS
ISSUE!

THE PANTING BEAST

A Novelet of
Hellhound Terror

By **JOHN CLEMONS**

FEATURING

**THE HUNCHBACK
OF HANOVER**

A Modern Miracle Novelet

By **DON ALVISO**

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



« « « 13 Gripping Tales in Every Issue » » »

Strange STORIES

VOL. III, NO. 3

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STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc. 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, Editor. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1933, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1940, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$1.50; foreign and Canadian \$2.00. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are held at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.





THE PANTING BEAST

By JOHN CLEMONS

Author of "Chameleon Eyes," "Death Bridge," etc.

CHAPTER I

The Dregs of Passion

NOT for the world could Stanton have told you when it was that he first came to hate Tom Arden. Why, yes; but not when. The transition from strong affection to virulent hatred had not been noticeable on the surface, not even to Stanton himself.

The corrosive inroads had been slow, imperceptible, cankerous. Until that day when, watching Arden in his kennels, Stanton realized the shocking truth—that his heart had been systematically fed on hatred and was filled, now, to overflowing.

The trouble had not started with the dogs, but it ended there. Stanton found it impossible to reconcile himself to the fact that Arden's passion-

A COMPLETE WEIRD NOVELET

*When Man Dares to Trifle with
the Soul of a Woman in Love,
Human Throats Await the Fangs
of the Greedy Hounds of Hell*



The brute grasped Arden by the throat

ate fondness for dogs had grown to an obsession of such enormous sweep, as to exclude human affection as an undesirable encroachment on his time.

Arden had not always been so unsociable. There was a time when he had been jolly and sought feminine company. Then a beautiful Irish girl, fresh from the old sod, had gone to work for him. A strange girl of quiet reserve, with a queer, old-world name as intriguing as her rare, brooding beauty: Deidre Cuilinn.

Both men had immediately fallen in love with her. But it was Stanton who had won her, with his oft-repeated promises of marriage. Stanton had quickly forgot his promises, when he had had his fill of the girl. And when she saw that he meant to desert her, the girl fell ill. She began to fade, uncomplainingly, still clinging to her shreds of dignity.

It was now that Stanton came to Tom Arden for advice. There was something about Deidre's quiet, accusing eyes that put strange fear in his heart. So he left the matter up to Arden. If his friend advised it, Stanton was willing to marry the girl.

But Arden was still simmering from his defeat; his pride had been touched when his heart had been wounded. He advised Stanton against marriage. And the girl had died soon afterward.

It was after the death of Deidre that the two friends began to feel a strain in their relations. Stanton had continued much as before, for he found this made it easier to forget. But Arden had become sullen and moody. Somewhere he had learned that Deidre was the name of a goddess of dazzling beauty, in a myth handed down from the druids. To ease his mind he sought a new interest, and so became engrossed in dogs.

So Tom Arden had moved to the country and built a house. Or rather, he built a kennel and added a house as an afterthought. Stanton was now deprived of his friend's company of an evening, but resented this less than the bitterly humiliating knowledge that a lot of slavering, yapping, eternally hungry canines had come

between them. Theirs had been a rare friendship, dating back to childhood, further back even than either could remember.

They had been partners in everything, and still were. Everything but the dogs. Much as he disliked to take the time, Arden commuted each day from the country to the modest investment business the two men had established together in the city.

But Arden's conversation began to be so filled with the marvelous exploits of his dogs, whose remarkable improvement he attributed to the country air, that Stanton's objections became more and more perfunctory when Arden found excuses to take an early train for home.

BETWEEN ordinary business partners this sort of conduct must soon lead to a breach. But Stanton fought down his resentment, keeping ever before his mind's eye a picture of Tom Arden as a faultless youth, companion of his boyhood days, chum of his younger years, sharer of youthful ambitions and fancies, fellow-traveler on romantic flights into shadowy dream-worlds. . . .

Inevitably, Arden began to take whole days off. First the wolfhound was sick. Then the champion blue-ribbon winner of the most recent dog show, a mighty Bernard, was going to have pups. Not a week went by but Tom Arden must manage to squeeze an extra day or two out of the business calendar. Still Stanton voiced only mild resentment, preferring really to run the business himself, since Arden's mind patently was not on it.

Then came a day when Arden announced he would convert a room of his house into an office and handle most of his accounts at home. Stanton was so thoroughly disgusted by now that he raised no objections at all. He closed his heart to feeling and mentally checked off his lifelong friend as dead.

For a time the new arrangement proved happier. A direct line was installed from the office in the city to Arden's country home. The dog fancier's active interest in the business

spurred, and the partners were well pleased with the results. Occasionally Stanton visited with Arden, but the unearthly noises from the kennels invariably got on his nerves. The incessant snarling, the blatant barking and yapping, always sent him home sooner than he had intended, usually with a sick headache and an upset stomach.

For some months matters went on in this manner, not wholly satisfactory to Stanton but tolerable enough, until an argument over a silver mine in Canada abruptly brought things to a head. Stanton had instituted a private investigation, and the report he received proved the mine to be one of those rare investments a man happens across perhaps once in a lifetime.

Overjoyed, Stanton had immediately driven out to the country to consult with his partner. But to his utter consternation he found that Arden was personally not interested in making investments, no matter how fabulously promising—except in his dog kennels.

"Come on out to the kennels," Arden had proudly told him. "I want to show you my latest acquisition."

Stanton had followed simply because he was still bent on arguing. He mentally stuffed his ears as they approached the clamoring dogs, which increased their howls with every step the two men took. The din was deafening when the two partners finally stopped. They had to shout to make themselves heard.

Arden gave Stanton a stout club and picked one up for himself.

"She's a killer!" he shouted.

Stanton gave a sudden start at that and Arden grasped his sleeve.

"She knows what the club is for," Arden assured him. "She'll behave."

He opened a wire cage and before Stanton realized it, he was in the cage with Arden and the door was closed.

Stanton took one look at the tawny brute in the corner, and the hair on his head began to hurt his scalp—he felt he could count each hair by its separate stab of pain. The dog was at least six feet from the tip of her wet muzzle to the beginning of her tail. Stanton had never seen a dog so

big. Her coat was shaggy; she was quiet, but in her yellow eyes shone an almost human intelligence.

"Irish wolfhound," Tom Arden explained. "They grow pretty big. This one is an exceptionally fine specimen. She's just had pups."

"How are the pups doing?" Stanton asked, just to be pleasant.

A crooked smile crossed Arden's face. His eyes narrowed. He looked directly into the big brute's eyes, but Stanton fancied that the quiet dog was unafraid, was in fact challenging her supposed master.

"What about the pups?" Stanton said again.

"They're dead. She killed them."

"Eh—"

"She ate them."

"Oh!"

STANTON fell back until he felt the solid wire mesh behind him. He gripped his club hard. He felt sweat warming his body. On his face was a look of unutterable loathing.

"Lucky I kept her separated from the others," Arden went on. "She'd have eaten them. Once in a while we run across cannibal dogs — not often. I should shoot her—it will likely save a lot of trouble. But she's such a fine specimen— Well, I'll take the next litter away from her."

All this time the dog hadn't moved a muscle, hadn't by even the flicker of a cold yellow eye admitted she was cowed by sight of the clubs. Privately Stanton doubted if the threat of those clubs worried the dog at all. He wondered why she didn't bark like the rest. There was something — something not *normal* about it!

"She's that way all the time," Arden said. "Never barks, never restless; always quiet. A strange animal. But then, she'd have to be to eat her own litter!"

Stanton gurgled and choked and finally exploded.

"Let's get out of here!"

The great dog's almost human eyes fixed both the partners as they backed out of the big cage. Stanton would have sworn there was contempt in that gaze.

The moment the door shut behind

them the big dog relaxed. When Stanton looked back, she was stretched full length on the dirt floor, panting, her jaws wide, her tongue hanging out. She didn't bother to watch them out of sight. Stanton had a horrible fancy that she was laughing at them.

"Confound it, man!" he exclaimed. "You must be mad! Wasting your life on a pack of beasts who smell to high heaven, and would as soon eat you as any of your fancy dog foods! Sooner or later you'll bankrupt yourself with your confounded kennels. You'll need a mint of money behind you, like this silver mine in Canada—"

Arden stubbornly refused to listen.

"If it's such a good thing," he said, reasonably enough, "you should have no trouble getting some of our clients to go in with you."

And there the matter rested.

Stanton could not swing the deal by himself. But he could, as Tom Arden pointed out, get the extra cash that he needed without difficulty. Perversely, since it meant no extra profit to himself, it made Stanton unreasonably angry to think that his friend would let this marvelous opportunity slip by — in favor of his dumb brutes. Thinking to melt his friend's resistance for Arden's own good, Stanton stayed over night for the first time.

All night long the dogs howled. The dismal discord was almost more than Stanton could bear. Sleep was out of the question for him. From time to time he dozed fitfully, but was always up after a few moments, usually with a bound that carried him half out of his bed.

Then he would pace the floor like a lunatic, praying for morning. If he shut the windows, the air was stifling, and the horrible animal cries came through anyway, only little subdued.

Every single moment of this torture was making Stanton madder and madder. He came at last to the not unlikely conclusion that he had made a mistake in trying to force the issue with his friend; decided, in fact, that he would not have Arden in on the deal in any circumstances. No, not even if Tom Arden were to get down on his knees and beg to get in.

The damn fool would only spend the money on more dogs, anyway! Why, Arden had changed so, he was like a different man. He was crazy! He couldn't be trusted with money any more than a child could be left alone with matches.

Just before dawn a ground mist made a lake of milk around the house. It was like a shock absorber to the awful animal cries. The brutes made only faint baying echoes which the exhausted Stanton could afford to ignore after the nerve-racking, night-long cacophony. He fell asleep, cursing Arden and his dogs and the obligations prescribed by long friendship.

CHAPTER II.

Greed's Naked Fangs

STANTON'S sleep was not restful, it was too troubled with bad dreams. He dreamed that Arden was standing in the middle of his kennels with a baton in his hand, leading the awful animal chorus like a mad music master. The sleeping man tried to rouse, but an overpowering terror took possession of him.

He felt that his mind was subjugated to a greater will than his own. He felt he must be an agent for someone else's thoughts, someone able to think, but incapable of expression—*some animal?* He continued to dream. The horrible feeling that this was less a dream than an awful projection of thought-pictures persisted. But Stanton could not rouse himself, though he continued to struggle.

Then in his dreams he saw the monstrous Irish wolfhound. She was still stretched in the dirt, still panting; not barking, not crying, apparently too proud or too dignified to join in with the rest. And as he watched, Stanton saw a terrible thing happen.

The great beast rose slowly, with unconscious dignity. For a moment her cold yellow eyes that seemed so almost human regarded the strange procedure of the master leading the soul-jarring chorus with critical con-

tempt. Stanton became suddenly filled with a frightful prescience of evil, and ceased his somnolent struggles. Then the massive beast opened her jaws—and began to sing!

Never in his life had Stanton heard such ringing resonance of tone, such silvery sweetness of scale, such measured, melodious music — though the song itself was wild, utterly of another world. The other dogs stopped their meaningless yowling and Arden, the mad music master, stopped too, fascinated.

Then, as she sang, the great dog subtly began to change. Little by little her shaggy coat dropped away. Little by little, yet with forceful purpose, all animalism left her.

Stanton screamed in his sleep. He floundered in an awful sea of emotion. He tried to fight the turbulent tide of terror that swept over and engulfed him. But to no avail. He had to watch while the great shaggy dog turned into an incredibly beautiful woman before his very eyes. Into—*Deidre!*

Undraped she was, with a body almost impossibly perfect. And hair like her eyes, the color of sunned seaweed. Tall she was, of a height suited to a goddess in a wild Irish myth. Her skin was of an alabaster whiteness, yet not cold, not forbidding, but alive-looking, tempting, like the skin of a sentient human being.

She opened her cage and stepped out in the dawn, still singing. With a smile like the Lorelei she held Arden, the music master, immobile. And as she walked she opened the cages. Yelping, snarling, ever-hungry brutes leaped out, but not at her—at Arden.

"Arden! Arden! They're going to eat you!" Stanton cried out frantically.

Tom Arden tried to fight off the beasts with his little baton. It was like stopping the wind with a straw. The slaving dogs bore him to the ground with one concerted rush. Tom Arden screamed for help while they ravished his flesh. They crowded round the mangled man and tore and tore, and ripped and ripped—and still Arden kept screaming.

Then at last the pack was glutted. All but the exquisitely radiant dream-

woman slunk back to their cages. A picked white skeleton, all that remained of Arden, shone gleaming wet where the pack had feasted. And the foul skeletal thing that had been a man screamed, screamed, screamed.

Stanton awoke in a sea of sweat. He sat up quickly, shaking, dazed, filled with tremendous terror. But no one screamed; no one called for help. A shining sun had dispelled the white mist of dawning. A peaceful pastoral scene greeted him through the open window.

The dogs, creatures of nocturnal habit, were quiet in the bright blaze of day. Stanton shook his head in furious self-condemnation, mouthing low, bitter curses.

"Of all the damned, impossible, absurd, inconceivable nightmares—"

And then he heard the horrible scream.

He did not at once leap out of bed. He spent precious long seconds telling himself he had heard nothing. But the scream came again. Stanton jumped out of bed in his borrowed pajamas. He started to pull on his trousers, but the scream came again. Extreme urgency was in each tremulous tone.

THE air was laden with unspeakable horror, saturated with dread beyond human understanding. Stanton kicked his trousers aside and then dashed out of the room. He sped through the house but stopped at the front door.

Arden was essentially an outdoors man, his living room filled with trophies of the hunt, of the race, of dog shows and horse shows. The walls were loaded with animal heads, blue ribbons, yellow and white ribbons. But more important, they were overburdened with guns. Guns, rifles, and knives of all nations.

The dreadful dream still fresh in his mind, Stanton's heart pounded with fearful foreboding. He snatched a six-gun off the wall and made sure it was loaded. The thing was of great caliber and could blast a man in two. Then Stanton ran from the house, down the runway to the kennels, not daring to think what he would find,

holding his thoughts in check for the benefit of sheer sanity.

But the exercise of running seemed to modify Stanton's fears. As his bare feet padded, his wild heart beat less with weird and portentous apprehension than with the unaccustomed physical exertion. He began to think that it might be some tramp who had wandered into the kennels and was now being worried by one of the animals Arden had let out of its cage.

Surely it could not be Arden who was screaming! Tom Arden had been around dogs too long to be frightened by them now. The impossible dream Stanton dismissed, and rightly, in the revealing light of day as utterly incompatible with reason. That the wretched screams continued simply proved to him that Arden was not about.

He seemed to remember now that Arden had mentioned having to go into the village in the morning. But why hadn't Arden awakened him? And why were the dogs so ominously quiet?

Stanton pulled up short before the kennels, strangling a little, for he wanted to pant but couldn't. The sudden sweat that laved his face now was not from the labor of running. It was from fear, from dismay, from petrified amazement. One shocking certainty was that Arden had definitely not gone into town.

For it was Arden who was screaming. Not the moist bones of the man, as Stanton had dreamed, but Arden in the flesh, which was almost as improbable. Stanton was afraid to think what fantastic thing had happened that could change the manly and resolute Arden into a screaming mockery of a man. He dreaded the thought; because, remembering the dream, it occurred to him that he *knew*.

Arden was in the big she-dog's cage. He had a club in his hand, but was obviously too terrified to realize it. Nor did it appear on the surface that there was undue cause for alarm. The giant wolfhound seemed meek, docile, quiet as usual. Why, then, was Tom Arden screaming?

Then Stanton saw the glaze in his friend's eyes, felt more fearfully cer-

tain than ever that *it was something Arden had seen!*

Stanton had never given the brutes much credit for intelligence. Yet instead of the mournful accompaniment normally expected of them in these circumstances, they now huddled in the farthest corners of their cages, whimpering, shivering and terrified. What had the animals seen?

He was afraid to answer that question. Yet on the surface there was certainly no harm in the big dog. Stanton felt that to shoot her was to admit—he hated the thought—of witchery, necromancy, all the black arts. To give credence to that foul incubus of terror that had visited him in the night.

So, instead, he tried to reason with Arden. He soothed him with low, normal tones, and after considerable effort calmed the man sufficiently to make himself understood.

"Back out of the cage," Stanton told him. "The dog won't harm you. You have a club in your hand; and anyway, I have a gun here."

Arden's whimpering acquiescence sounded strangely animal-like. He backed up a step—and the big dog moved a step forward, began to pant, lightly. Arden backed up again—and again the dog moved forward. In a new access of base and utter panic, Arden turned and bolted for the door.

BUT though he moved with incredible swiftness, the wolfhound glided by and intercepted his headlong flight at the barrier. The dog alternately panted and paused, panted and paused, eyeing the man in her cage gently, disarmingly. To Stanton outside with the gun, she paid no attention whatever.

Tom Arden began to back away, making pitiful mewling sounds, again oddly animal, tremendously terrifying, coming from a human throat. Stanton noted, too, that his eyes rolled wildly, distorted, showing the whites. Tom Arden's sweat-soaked face was drained of all color; a hundred new lines poured the years on him.

It flashed through Stanton's mind then that whatever Arden had seen, it had probably unhinged his brain

forever. It came over Stanton, too, that the dog was afraid that Arden would talk.

For one magical moment Stanton thought of rationalizing with the dog! Of *talking* to her as to a sentient human being! Of explaining to her that Arden was mad, that no one would believe him now!

The spell passed, but it left Stanton shivering, fearful for his own sanity.

Arden began to back away again, the dog taking each measured step with him. Stanton suddenly remembered that Arden had called her a killer dog, a cannibal. This relentless pursuit could end in only one way, then—if it was allowed to continue. Stanton knew what he should do to put an end to the grim game. He raised the gun and took careful aim at the back of the giant dog's head.

But still they circled, and still Stanton refrained from squeezing the trigger. Now the dog was facing him, so that he aimed between her eyes. A perfect shot, he couldn't miss—but he did not pull the trigger.

Oddly, the dog still paid him no heed.

What evil influence was at work in him, Stanton could never afterward fathom. But this was the moment, it came over him, that he hated Arden with more than fleeting anger. It came over him now that his friend had been the curse of his existence.

Reason did not attempt to explain this false association of thought. Instead, little mystic maggots breathed blasphemies in Stanton's brain. Suddenly, the image of Deidre flashed unbidden into his brain, then flashed out again, pursued by thoughts more violent.

"The dogs, the dogs, he prefers the dogs to you." "The mine, the mine, you can have the mine for yourself, you fool, you can have the mine for yourself."

What? But how?

"There are your mutually beneficial wills."

Say no more, Voice! Go!

But Stanton did not pull the trigger. There were, in fact, those mutually beneficial partnership wills, each

leaving his estate to the other. And Arden was quite mad; what good was all that money to a madman?

It was a cannibal dog. It would not be long now. Stanton couldn't turn his flushed, fascinated gaze away.

He was watching, tensely alert, when Tom Arden made the fatal gesture. The dog fancier brought his club down on the big dog's head. Rather, he brought the club down where the big dog's head had been.

For with a lightning move of a tawny paw, the brute knocked the club aside and leaped for the doomed man's throat. Dumb no longer, the she-dog was snarling now in a way to freeze the blood. But what was even more revolting, Tom Arden was snarling, too! Making depraved, brutal, *animal* sounds!

Fierce as was the great dog in her ferment of flaming fever, Arden in his madness was a momentary match for her. Stanton could see this. He could see that if he shot the dog now—even now—But he did not shoot. There was the will—there was the mine—there were riches in store for him! If—if he did not—pull that trigger—Then the dog's saber teeth raked the throat of Thomas Arden and it was—*too late!*

Arden reared himself erect and with a mighty effort threw the dog off. He stared at his friend, and his accusing eyes were wholly sane. He started to talk but no words came. Only blood gushed forth from his mutilated throat in a thin dark geyser. He reeled then, sprang for the door in a last desperate effort, but the dog leaped on him from behind.

She brought him down. She, a cannibal dog—

STANTON shook his head violently, as if that could dispel the horrible sight his bulging eyes were seeing. Arden's last look, beseeching, bewildered, unbelieving—*accusing*—seemed to have shocked some semblance of sense into Stanton's benumbed brain. He crashed out of his trance with almost physical force.

"What have I done!" he shouted. "God forgive me! Tom! Forgive me!"

And then he shot. The great dog

bounded up with a cry that was startlingly human — a high, womanish screech of terror and mortal agony. Stanton fired again and caught her in mid-air, blasting half her head away. She dropped without another outcry. A lake of blood quickly formed around her.

Another moment Stanton stared at the two dead bodies. Then he threw the gun away. He covered his face with his hands and wept for the friend of his youth. He would have given up the silver mine in that moment if that could undo this great wrong he had committed. He would have given all he possessed, all he was ever likely to possess, in this fit of remorse that gripped him.

In his heart, in his mind, in his very soul he knew he was a murderer, with the brand of Cain forever upon him—nay, upon him *twice!*

In the end Stanton dragged his friend out and called the police, who in turn sent for the coroner. No guilt attached to Stanton, in the eyes of the law. A vicious dog had attacked his friend, and Stanton had arrived too late to save him.

Only Stanton himself knew better. His remorse, genuine enough though it was, did not take a morbid turn. What was the use? Confession could not bring Tom Arden back again. It could serve no special purpose, as far as he could see.

On the other hand, there was Tom Arden's will; there was the mine, there were riches. Arden had ignored some distant relatives in his will—in favor of his best friend. Stanton promised himself to attend to them handsomely. It was one way of stifling the terrible beating of his heart.

investment business he had built up with his late friend. In his heart he knew that this was only partly true. What troubled him more was the memory of Tom Arden; the way he had looked when the madness had left him just as the grim reaper snapped close his jaws.

Nor could Stanton erase from his inward eye the picture of that monstrous cannibal dog, ripping, tearing at the flesh of his dearest friend—

Everything about his office reminded Stanton constantly of Tom Arden. Even after he had removed the sporting prints from the walls, the animal-head desk set and similar evidences of Arden's late avocations, old-time clients, in the course of conversation, often brought back vivid visions of his friend and the tragic manner of his passing.

On occasion even, when Stanton was in a particularly responsive mood, he felt that the very walls whispered ghostly echoes of old conversations. The whole thing, to say the least, was very disconcerting. Stanton was having trouble enough with his conscience without these constant reminders. He fervently wished the dead to stay buried.

Stanton soon discovered what any of his retired clients could have told him—that when he liquidated the investment business, time became a terror to annihilate. With nothing to crowd his waking moments but his own dread thoughts, he was more than ever in the grip of despondency.

It was no longer necessary to spend hours at an office. It was no longer necessary to entertain in the evening. Nor was Stanton's company so sought after with his finger off the stock market's pulse. People had nothing to gain from him, and for the doubtful pleasure of his company alone he was no great bargain.

For he had become moody, unresponsive to dinner stories or the ribald jests of club affairs. Behind his back he was called a wet blanket by people who formerly had liked him around. He was losing his grip, they said; he was growing old before his time.

So Stanton sought to kill time with

CHAPTER III

Terror Incarnate

LESS than a year after the acquisition of the rich mining property, Stanton found himself becoming too wealthy to be annoyed with the

travel. Here again he could have learned in a moment of talk with an experienced traveler what it took him six months of trotting around the United States and South America to find out—that one place on earth was much like another. People loved and fought, died or had children. Life, somehow, had a changeless habit about it.

It was six months of strange sights that puzzled and annoyed and finally wore Stanton out, for he was no adventurer at heart. Wherever he went, he felt like a stranger, instead of experiencing the pleasurable thrills of excitement common to his voluble fellow-travelers.

Strange foods upset him, train rides tired him, boats made him sick just to think about. So it was with a glad heart that he ended his distasteful wanderings and bought a boat ticket for home.

Stanton remained in his stateroom most of the way to New York, having discovered earlier that for him, rest and quiet was one way to avoid the distressingly nauseous qualms of seasickness. That gave him more time than ever to think.

But the change of air and scene must have done him some good after all, for his thoughts were not purely constructive. His conscience bothered him less than at any time since the unfortunate occurrence at the kennels. It was only when he looked in the mirror and saw himself at only forty-five a rapidly aging man, that he felt any concern whatever, any of the old tremors of remorse.

He knew that it was not time that had put the gray in his hair, or the new lines in his face, or had sunk the tired eyes so far back in his head, or given such a decided stoop to the once enviably smart lines of his shoulders.

A certain fierce pride Stanton retained still, and this came to his rescue when his despair was at its most desolate. But on the trip from South America, on the way back home, his spirits soared. Definitely he had made up his mind about the future. He did not like travel. Very well—he would quit traveling, he would settle down!

Since he had found no place that suited his rather simple tastes more than the city of his first choice, why, back to the city he would go. Of one thing he felt certain. This time he would live a little; this time he would entertain; this time he would laugh and be merry.

Stanton remembered an old saying he had not heard since boyhood about laughter being good for the soul. His soul needed something like that. All at once he commenced laughing. He repeated the saying over and over to himself as that most religious of humans, the Tibetan, endlessly repeats his "*Om Mani Padme Hum*" on the swiftly spinning prayer wheel.

Stanton came out of his cabin on the last day of the voyage as a bear comes out of his cave in the spring—lean, hungry and exceedingly active. He dropped down on the other passengers like a pleasant, prankful angel from heaven. They'd all been bored stiff with each other's company by now and Stanton was a new diversion. Also a quite happy one.

For the millionth time he repeated that thing about laughter and the soul—to himself, of course, for he did not fancy being considered odd—and fell in with his shipmates' games and their trifling shipboard pleasures. The weather was fine, the boat was steady, and Stanton enjoyed himself hugely. Decidedly, company was the thing to dispel unpleasant thoughts. Company and, of course, laughter.

When people asked him where he had been all their lives, or some other insipid cliché so peculiar to shipboard acquaintances, Stanton replied with a knowing wink that implied he was a devil of a fellow and had been drunk, if the questioner was young and peppy.

To the older heads or the pious-appearing he only smiled, and talked vaguely about the market. In general he gave the impression that he was a man of affairs, much too busy to spend all his time at play. But able to play, by golly! with the liveliest, when he wanted to.

So in the end his wanderings served their purpose. For Stanton they ushered in a new life. The pangs of con-

science ceased to trouble him. He went to shows and operas and blatantly pretentious motion picture premiers. His big new house in the city became the meeting place for the conceited, sprightly "smart set," the type of people who consider the evening a failure if nothing is broken or no one is injured in tipsy combat.

Stanton had gone, it will be observed, to the opposite extreme. In his heart he did not like it. His orderly, prosaic nature shrank from this sham, this pretense of happiness. Still, it was better so, he decided. He could well afford the expense, and the almost constant clamor kept his mind off—other things.

It was now two years since the tragic demise of Tom Arden and the shooting of the cannibal dog. If in that time Stanton had aged ten years, he had prospered accordingly. If he was not really happy, he was at least moderately content. Financially, he had not a worry in the world. The silver mine was everything he had expected it to be. He was practically rolling in wealth from it. No affairs of moment took his time, and he was pathetically trying to cram his days full of fun.

His health had improved a great deal since his return from the trip and his adoption of this new life. But he would never feel as sound as he had prior to that ugly affair at the kennels.

At least the *thoughts* had ceased to trouble him, and that was the paramount thing.

Only one detail was necessary, Stanton felt, to wipe the whole depressing business from his mind forever. That was to get rid of the place in the country. Tom Arden's place. The place of the terrible deed. To that end, Stanton had some time since hired a real estate agent, and today the agent had made an appointment to meet a prospective customer on the grounds.

Stanton did not like the idea of going back, but he felt he could stand it for the few hours necessary to show the place and point out its many advantages. The dogs, valuable though he knew them to be, Stanton had

turned over to the S.P.C.A. the day his friend had died.

HE supposed they had found homes for the brutes, though he didn't know and he didn't care. Just the same, he meant not to approach the kennels. He would let the agent show that part himself.

Stanton tried to keep wholesome thoughts in his mind as he pulled up to the house in his big new roadster and hailed the real estate man who had already arrived with the customer. There were introductions and general handshaking, and Stanton was thankful when the agent produced a flask that went the rounds. He felt he needed a drink. It was after all a nippy day.

"I've been showing Mr. Dinsmore the house," said the agent, "and he's well pleased with it. I explained the price is low simply because you want to be rid of it on account of—er—the sad memory attached to it. I was just going to show Mr. Dinsmore the kennels when you arrived. Now we can all go together."

Stanton felt a funny clutching at his heart.

"If you don't mind," he begged, "I'll wait in the house. You show it to him."

"I understand," the agent said sagely. "You bet, Mr. Stanton. Well, it's this way, Mr. Dinsmore. Right down this runaway here—"

Stanton went inside the house and sat down, because for no accountable reason he was beginning to feel jittery in such close proximity to the kennels. For the fortieth time he told himself that he had done a wise thing in coming back—and he knew that he was wrong.

He kept telling himself that the only way to definitely kill the distasteful memory that hovered like an evil shade was to come and look and conquer it. This was a house in the country. It had grounds and kennels. What harm was there in that?

True, something terrible had happened here. But that was long ago. Two years? It seemed like ten!

Stanton felt suddenly stronger, braver than at any time since the

death of Tom Arden. Two years had passed and nothing had happened. In sudden panic, he realized that all this time he had been *expecting* something to happen! Well, what? Sweat broke out on his face.

Then he gave a short laugh. He was being silly, emotional. He shouldn't have accepted that drink. Nothing *had* happened, and nothing ever would! To prove his faith in this mental assertion, he decided to get up and walk over to the kennels. He would even look at the cage—the cage!—without finching. What was done, was done.

Arden would not have been better off in a madhouse, would he?

Filled with fresh strength Stanton started to get up—and found that he couldn't. His feet seemed pinned to the floor by some heavy object that was not manifest, yet held him down, though with oddly incorporeal force.

He sweated anew in dreadful bewilderment. Something, something that was not there, was holding him down as if it were! It made no sense at all. Stanton forced out a quavering laugh and tried again. But he couldn't get up.

The mystic panic within him that had been lurking close to the surface ever since he arrived, now sprang to tempestuous life. With his eyes bulging from his head, his rich clothes damply sweat-soaked, Stanton presented a picture of fear incarnate.

He grabbed the table and heaved erect with a tremendous jerk and leap. The invisible thing that held him lost its grip. Stanton went catapulting backward, lost his balance and then crashed to the floor.

Before he could rise again it was on him. He could see nothing, but he could *feel* a soft weight upon him. He could feel it moving, squirming. It was moving upward on his body. *It was reaching for his throat!*

With this dreadful realization Stanton somehow found fresh strength. His hands flew up in an instinctive gesture of self-protection—and encountered shaggy fur! The thing was an impalpable impression to the eye—yet real enough to the touch! Stanton screamed once in incredible terror. Then he fainted dead away.

CHAPTER IV

Desertion

IT WAS a fortunate thing that the real estate man and his customer were through with their inspection tour and were on the way back to the house. They heard the scream and ran inside.

Stanton lay sprawled in a disheveled, inanimate heap. He was uninjured, but quite insensible. Nor could they get a coherent word out of him for some time after they brought him to.

With the first glimmer of sanity in his mind, Stanton made up an excuse about a weak heart. He was still quite shaky when he finally got in his car and drove off. He never did find out if Dinsmore liked the estate, or whether he bought it or not. Stanton would never come near the place again.

His encounter with the shaggy specter changed his mode of living entirely. The first thing he did when he reached home was to throw outdoors a gang of startled parasites who had been sponging on him for months. He denied entrance to all comers. Of his large staff of servants, he retained only a cook and a maid. With derelict egocentrics no longer welcome, Stanton could manage well enough.

He sat down to a quiet dinner that night—the first quiet dinner he had had since his homecoming. He was the lone diner at the table. He was good and hungry now, having forgot to eat in the day's terror.

The dinner started with a mixed seafood cocktail that Stanton knew from experience was a remarkable appetizer. He raised the little fork—and stopped with the delectable food halfway to his mouth. An icy blast of air had all at once usurped the cheery warmth of the room. It surprised and puzzled him. The doors were closed, no breeze stirred the heavy drapes and the thin veil of curtain at the slightly open windows.

Stanton lifted the fork again, and

again he stopped without swallowing a bite. He froze in that position like a statue. His body grew cold as fear; he felt his whole scalp crawl. *There was something at his feet!*

It seemed to Stanton that his heart stopped beating. He couldn't move, he couldn't scream, he could only sit and stare like a somnambulist. Then the thing at his feet began to rub his legs like a cat—or a dog.

He fought to overcome his revulsion, even the full frenzy of his terror. Perhaps the thing was trying to be friendly, he thought—and prayed that it was so. He reached down, felt fur—and stroked it. And then the beast began to pant—but not to snarl!

Stanton felt his blood begin to flow again. He was right, the animal was friendly. He petted it again and whispered to it, as one would to a friendly dog. He grew bolder, drained strength from his vast fear. He began to eat again, as if the thing was real, as if it was a live dog at his feet, a pet—a household pet.

But before the food reached his mouth, Stanton felt the thing stiffen, heard a low growl that could only be interpreted as a warning. Again he paused. He summoned every last vestige of flagged-out courage and tried to think calmly. He heard the growl again, came to a quick decision. He decided that the beast was hungry. Nervously he set the food by his feet, under the table.

When he picked up the dish, it had been licked clean.

The same thing happened with the soup. The same thing happened with the salad. The same thing happened with his steak and the dessert as well. The maid, who had been pressed into service at table, looked at him oddly when she picked up each plate, licked uncommonly clean.

Stanton was permitted to drink his coffee unmolested. He was allowed an after-dinner cigarette and felt thankful for that small favor. Then he got up from the table, hungrier than when he had sat down, and so thoroughly frightened that he shook.

He finally gained enough courage to move about. Nothing happened. He did not hear the beast or feel it about.

It had been hungry, he decided; nothing more. He waited till the maid and the cook were through with their work and had gone off to bed.

Then Stanton went into the kitchen and raided the big refrigerator. He piled his plate with cold meat and took it to the kitchen table. Half famished by now — more from the moral effect upon his mind than from actual hunger—he dived in with a will. But with the first mouthful poised to eat, he heard the low growl again!

STANTON stopped with a resigned sigh. He put the food on the floor and waited, but nothing happened. Apparently the beast was not hungry, but still would not allow him to eat. Shaking, he went to bed hungry, the hunger gnawing at his mind as well as his vitals.

He slept fitfully, for he tried to keep awake. He was afraid of what might happen to him in the night. He remembered what the brute had done to its litter. He remembered what it had done to his friend. Then he remembered what *he* had done to *it!* And the beast was a cannibal dog—

Stanton was afraid, too, that he might dream again. It added greatly to his discomfort, for he remembered vividly what that dream had been like. He knew now that he had never actually forgot it, had subconsciously dreaded its return. He cursed himself thoroughly for having gone back to the place in the country, the place where Tom Arden and the dog—had died. Why—the dog had been waiting for him to come back!

And Arden, what about Tom Arden? A thought occurred to Stanton now that lifted him out of his bed. Suppose *this* was Arden! Suppose his partner had come back in this guise! Arden had been quite under the spell of the giant dog just prior to the end. He had fought with it, snarling like a dog, not shouting, not screaming, not evincing any other human traits in the throes of the death struggle.

The hair-raising thought was an effective antidote for sleep. It was the end of Stanton's rest for the night.

He sneaked down very early in the morning, before the cook was up, bent on stealing his breakfast. It was in his mind to foil the beast. Never for a moment did he think it was gone to stay.

Stanton made no sound as he stealthily took things out of the well-stocked pantry and put them on a plate. He didn't sit down with it. He stood holding it in his hand, listening.

He heard nothing. He permitted himself no optimistic smile but slowly, very slowly, he raised some food to his mouth; he was very hungry. Slowly, very slowly—and now he heard the growl!

Stanton quickly crammed some food in his mouth and set the plate down. Then he hurried from the kitchen, not waiting to see what would happen to the rest he had not been allowed to swallow.

When the cook came out with a steaming breakfast, she had a complaint to make,

"It's like as if there was a dog in the house, Mr. Stanton," she said with a little shiver. "There's plates in the pantry as is wiped clean. And some-one's been stealin' food."

Stanton blamed it all on mice and told her not to bother her head.

"Mice?" the cook indignantly said. "In *my* kitchen?"

She stopped suddenly and looked closer at her master. Perhaps she was thinking of the clean-licked dishes the maid had brought back from the table the night before, because she gave a quick start and a little gasp, caught at her ample bosom and backed out of the room. Her eyes were wide with something that could be interpreted as horror. She did not come back.

Stanton's mouth was drooling; he was starved. He went slowly about his breakfast. He felt that the beast had been gorging itself, would allow him to have breakfast in peace. In this, he was very extravagantly mistaken. The brute did not even permit him his coffee.

That one mouthful of food he had snatched earlier constituted the extent of his breakfast. It constituted,

in fact, the extent of his luncheon, also. And of his supper as well. The beast was starving him to death!

In the evening, a little after the supper dishes had been cleared away, the maid came into the living room, where Stanton was moodily staring into the big warming fire on the hearth. She was dressed in her Sunday best, had a big battered suitcase in one hand and an assortment of paper-wrapped bundles in the other.

WITHOUT preamble the maid spoke in a frightened sort of whisper.

"I'm leaving, sir. If you want to pay me, it's all right. But I'm leaving, sir—anyways."

Stanton remonstrated with her. "Aren't you happy here? Don't I pay you enough? You said yourself you liked it here!"

He knew very well what was wrong. It was those dishes, licked clean, that she had been taking back from the table since the night before. It was what the cook had said about stolen food, obviously eaten off plates licked clean, "like as if there was a dog in the house."

Stanton was afraid the cook would leave him, too, and then he would be alone in the house. Alone—with the panting beast!

The maid wouldn't answer his questions. She was vague in her reasons for leaving.

"I couldn't just say, sir, really. It's like as if you'd changed, sir. Since yesterday, sir."

"You mean in my appearance, Hilda? You mean my face has changed?" he demanded frantically.

But he could not get the maid to enlarge on her statement.

"She meant the dishes," he said to himself. "She thinks *I* licked them clean— Good God, she *must* mean that! She cannot mean I'm—*changing*—"

"At least Ella isn't going to leave me," he said with a sigh as he paid the maid. "At least Ella hasn't got such silly notions in her head."

"Excuse me, sir," said the maid, backing away. "Ella left an hour ago."

CHAPTER V

The Inexorable Way

THE fire was dying down. It was getting late. Stanton was ravenously hungry. He was worried enough about his stomach, but he had another concern, one perhaps even more important—he wondered if he was altering in appearance, if he was beginning to resemble a *beast!*

He could not bring himself to look in a mirror. He felt of his face. It *seemed* all right, except that he had neglected to shave. Shaving would of course necessitate looking in a mirror. This he could not bring himself to do.

Stanton was quietly thinking, when the simplest plan came to him: he would go out. He would leave the beast at home and go out to dine. How simple! Were not the most important inventions of man and science derived from simple thoughts? Simple things?

He felt almost gay as he slipped into a coat and put on a hat. The panting beast would not dare make its presence manifest outside, among strangers. More especially, where there were bright lights and music, where there were merry voices and wine. Ghosts seemed to have a working agreement in regard to the proper conditions; a Ghosts' Union, he thought with a grin.

Stanton wanted to say a few jolly words out loud, in case the brute could understand him, but thought better of it. Thus far, except for the initial attack in Tom Arden's house, it showed no killer instinct. Wickedness, yes; but no attempt at deliberate murder. There would be no point in antagonizing it now.

Stanton went through the rooms, walked down the short passage into the long hall, down the hall to the foyer. The foyer was not large; it was not more than half a dozen steps to the front door. The front door and freedom—for Stanton had no intention of ever coming back again.

It was only half a dozen steps. But he couldn't make it. The way was barred. It was barred by the panting beast.

Stanton stood there like a stricken man, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, listening to the even, measured panting. He was a prisoner in his own home, doomed to slow starvation. The realization struck him with something akin to physical force. He sobbed hoarsely, hysterically, and crumpled to the richly carpeted floor, half unconscious. . . .

He came to his full senses with a moist breath in his face — a moist breathing, a *panting!* His paroxysm of terror had spent itself. He was like a man doomed to die by the last court of appeal; he was resigned. He knew that the brute was bringing him awake in order to torture him, but still he got up.

Stanton went to bed presently; to bed, but not to sleep. Waking visions of the dream kept recurring to him. That was bad enough. But he was afraid it would visit him in his sleep. And that would have disastrous results, he knew. So he kept away as much as he could, dozing and nodding and waking himself up.

The next day was even a worse one for him. It was an unholy terror. Thinking to foil the beast, perhaps starve it first, he made himself no breakfast. Rather, he made no pretense of getting breakfast. He lit a roaring fire and mentally let the brute go to hell.

HE WAS not accustomed to hunger: he could never remember having missed a meal in his life before. For that reason he took the lack of the food hard. He was weak, light in the head. He knew he wasn't dying, he knew actual starvation was a long drawn out process.

It worried him; he thought of killing himself. He was doomed, anyway, and death was preferable to torture. He didn't commit suicide, felt that he hadn't the courage — yet. But the thought kept recurring.

It was going on noon, and Stanton hadn't stirred from his place by the fire. It was at least a reasonably com-

fortable way to die. Several times he had thought of sneaking into the pantry for something to eat, but each time he rejected the idea. He was weak now; it would take an effort to get up. And what was the use? This way, he at least had the satisfaction of knowing that the beast went hungry, too.

BUT apparently the brute had other ideas. Stanton was in a half doze when he felt a wet nuzzling in his hand. He came wide awake at once. Something gripped the hem of his dressing gown and jerked, gently.

He thought to himself: "It's hungry, but the hell with it. Let it starve, too."

The tugging grew less gentle, became quite fierce. Ordinarily Stanton would have been frightened out of his wits long before, but he was weak now, giddy. Besides, he was steeped in self-pity.

He paid no attention to the tugging, which was now violent. Then the tugging stopped, and he relaxed in his big wing chair. But not for long. He felt something snuggle up close to his chest. He felt warm breath on his face, on his throat—then strong teeth gripped his throat—gently.

It was evidently a warning, and Stanton took it in the proper spirit. He fairly bounded out of the chair, practically flew into the kitchen. His weakness was forgot altogether, buried in the memory of Tom Arden's being ripped apart by a savage, man-eating dog.

Stanton heaped plates with food and set them on the floor. He heard low warning growls then, and quickly went away.

He was by now quite used to having the thing around. It had almost ceased to worry him. The dream, too, was becoming less fearful. Besides, he was tired out by the ordeal. He did not even try to keep awake that night; he needed the rest. His sleep was the dreamless semi-coma of exhaustion. That is, of course, until the dream came back.

There were certain salient changes in the visitation, however. Tom Arden did not appear in it, the dogs did

not appear in it, there were no yowling or other jarring discord. There was only the giant she-dog, and she was singing.

And as she sang, she changed, as before. She became Deidre. She became a woman of such dazzling beauty that even in his sleep, Stanton shut his eyes tighter. It hurt him to look at her, made his sleeping brain reel.

The interior eye of his mind feasted upon Deidre's bizarre loveliness—and desired her greatly. The inward ear reveled in her singing, which entranced the inner man entirely. The stillness of the dream was shattered by chimerical chimes.

Siren strains swelled, filled the room with music as with a vast organ. It burst upon the sleeping brain, tingled, stung, thrilled with pale phantasmal fingers. It was not music so much as a song incarnate, a living, breathing thing of seraphic fabrication, sired by delirium, mothered by deranged fancy.

The scene, the stage, the entire setting, at first provokingly vague, became now full-blown. It was all as familiar to Stanton as his own house. With a miserable tremor of his sleeping body, he realized that it was his own house, was in fact this very bed-chamber!

In the dream he saw his sleeping self in rigid repose on the bed. His body appeared to him more like a lifeless corpse, lying in state before the last rites, than as the inert frame of breathing flesh. He struggled, and though he knew even in his sleep that he must be moving a little, in the dream his body remained perfectly rigid.

And now *she*, Deidre, the *living song*, was coming toward the sleeping self of the dream. There was no mistaking the wanton passion in each slow, sinuous step. There was no mistaking the longing in this serpentine torment of perfection.

To the sleeping man, it was exquisitely painful torture. But he did not give in. He knew instinctively what the penalty must be. With pangs like shot arrows, he recalled the fate of the she-dog's whelp. Whelp? He writhed and fought in an agony of

nightmarish panic. He knew if he could awaken, he could dispel this anomalous illusion.

If not—Stanton pictured the occult end of his sleeping self, and with it of course his actual soul. He should forever afterward wander in a half-world, a weird changeling, a thing no more dead than alive—

WITH the diabolically exquisite creature not ten steps away from him, Stanton forced himself awake. He sat up in bed, nerves taut as a bowstring, muscles so tense that they hurt. He held his sweat-soaked head in his hands and moaned weakly, for the monstrously marvelous song still dinned in his ears, still filled the room with unholy gladness. He lifted his head, and stared in incredulous horror.

She was still there, Deidre, still singing, still slowly coming toward him. Waking, then, had failed to dispel the illusion. It was no illusion!

Stanton knew in that moment that he was doomed, for instinct told him it was this horror which Tom Arden had seen, this vision of unearthly terror which had unhinged his mind and finally killed him.

She was no more than three feet away when Stanton broke the banshee bonds of Titan terror that held him. Rather, his terror soared till it owned his body and took possession of his soul. He let out a shriek like a mindless madman, leaped out of bed.

"Deidre!" he shrieked. "Forgive me, Deidre, forgive me!"

But the dream-woman, music still pouring from her throat, advanced relentlessly with slow, funereal tread.

Stanton backed into a corner in twisted terror.

"Deidre!" he screamed. "Forgive Arden! Forgive me!"

She opened her arms to him then. And with the first touch of her phantasmal fingers, Stanton crumpled like a limp rag. . . .

They found him there three days later, when a tradesman became suspicious at the continued quiet.

"It's odd," said the man, in recounting the tale. "The coroner said that he died from a heart attack, brought on by malnutrition. He was starving himself—with enough grub in the house to feed the whole Chinese army!"

"And there was kind of a smell, like a dog in the house. That's funny. Stanton didn't like dogs."

