



Weird Tales

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Volume 24 CONTENTS FOR OCTOBER, 1934 Number 4

Cover Design	M. Brundage	
<i>Illustrating a scene in "The Black God's Kiss"</i>		
The Black God's Kiss	C. L. Moore	402
<i>A striking story by the author of "Shambleau" and "Black Thirst"</i>		
The Seven Geases	Clark Ashton Smith	422
<i>A saga as unusual as it is interest-gripping, by a master of weird fiction</i>		
Old Sledge	Paul Ernst	436
<i>A strange and eerie piece of science-fiction</i>		
The Sleeper	H. Bedford-Jones	445
<i>The story of Ranjit Singh, who was dead and buried—so they said</i>		
The Pistol	S. Gordon Gurwit	451
<i>An appealing story of a love so strong that it broke through the barriers of Death</i>		
The Hill Woman	Frances Elliott	462
<i>Verse</i>		
The Trail of the Cloven Hoof (part 4)	Arlton Eadie	463
<i>An astounding weird mystery novel by a British master of thrilling fiction</i>		
Children of the Moon	A. Leslie	482
<i>Verse</i>		
Supper for Thirteen	Julius Long	483
<i>A brief tale of a ghastly jest</i>		
Old House	Marvin Luter Hill	487
<i>Verse</i>		
The People of the Black Circle (part 2)	Robert E. Howard	488
<i>A weird novel about Conan the barbarian adventurer and Yasmina of the golden throne</i>		
At the Bend of the Trail	Manly Wade Wellman	505
<i>A story of Africa and a vegetable monstrosity that fought the explorers in the jungle</i>		
The White Prince	Ronal Kayser	508
<i>A weird story of the World War and a heroic exploit</i>		
Weird Story Reprint:		
Fioraccio	Giovanni Magherini-Graziani	512
<i>A ghost story by an Italian writer</i>		
The Eyrie		522
<i>An informal chat with the readers</i>		

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Pistol

By S. GORDON GURWIT



"Nebulous forms swirled before her gaze."

An appealing story of a love so strong that it was able to break through the barriers of Death

IT WAS a beautiful, sinister thing, with its blue, engraved Troxado Damascus steel barrel, its ivory stocks and gold inlay. And it was small, as ancient pistols go.

And there was a curious legend about it: that it killed whenever the life or honor of a Drummond was in peril; and sometimes the circumstances had been very perplexing—according to the stories.

Originally, it was a flintlock, and the first Drummond to own it had bought it

from Manton, the London gunsmith, in 1759, and had used it as a saddle-bag arm.

It followed the Drummond fortunes to the Western Hemisphere in 1763; and when the great Elizabethan home was built in Colfax, Georgia, in 1799, it hung between the crossed swords over the fireplace. It had played its part in the Revolutionary War as a side-arm for a Drummond who served the Colonies under Washington.

Just before the Civil War, Vane Drummond had it remodeled to shoot the then popular pin-fire cartridges; and when he joined Lee's staff, he carried it in his belt. In 1864, the pistol was again hung on the wall and remained undisturbed until the fall of 1932. As I have said, it was a beautiful, sinister thing.

And it played a cogent part in this drama of a great love that transcended death; a love as imperishable as the storied attachment of an Abelard and a Heloise; as deathless as the passion of a Tasso and a Leonora; as divine as the flame that burned in Dante for a Beatrice.

2

DIANE DRUMMOND loved the stately Elizabethan home her father had left her in heritage; loved its great halls, its stained windows, the huge rafters; the old, haunting fragrance of lavender and dried rose leaves that clung to the rooms where Drummond girls and brides and wives had lived. She loved the old trees, older than the house itself, that shaded it; the sunny lawns, the old-fashioned rose gardens with the tiny fountain and sundial.

Here, generation after generation of Drummonds had lived; here, the blessings of the dead had rested and the memory of perfect faiths and lofty passions still abided.

And Diane Drummond was a fit occupant of the stately home. There was something vital, something sovereign about the beauty of this young girl, who moved with the grace of a Semiramis, and had the innocence and fawn-like shyness of a girl in her early spring.

An only child, she had been brought up by a father who had been a student, and who had left behind him a library full of every provocation to literary gourmandism. The girl, led by habit and in-

clination, became an omnivorous reader.

She lost herself in the words of dead and forgotten poets, in the immeasurable majesties of thought. Isolated as she was in her home, the pure mirror of her soul had never been darkened by the breath of passing love fancies—and a girl can far more readily lose herself in the abstract loves of books than a youth, beset by the fires of impending manhood.

After her father's death, she lived alone, with an old negress as housekeeper. Her heritage was sufficient to let her live in comfort in her backwater of the world.

It is true that Frank Dean, who lived in another ancient home in Colfax, had loved her for years; but the secret of sex was still a closed book to her. She admired him, and listened, fascinated, as he talked to her of a thousand things, with a rich and graphic eloquence.

He was a brilliant geologist and was fast making his way in his profession. She knew and loved the kingdom of his thoughts, the treasuries of his mind. And Frank Dean was a comely young giant; yet she had never visioned him as a husband.

Frank Dean, who was seven years older than she, worshipped her, for he found in her a finer metal, a purer fiber than is usually associated with such youth and beauty.

Then Fate, with her fondness for mischief, tangled the threads of their lives. Frank Dean was offered an opportunity to join an important scientific expedition that was leaving for the headwaters of the Amazon. It meant fame, success, distinction. He accepted.

It also meant a year or more in a wild and savage country, and Dean knew that he couldn't take a wife with him.

He discussed his offer with her, and she recognized how important it was for

him to go. And it was then, in the dusk of the Southern evening, that she suddenly realized what he meant to her. He took her in his arms and poured out his heart, with all the fire of his temper, with every imploring eagerness, every impassioned pleading that could warm or shake the heart of the girl.

The warm springs of her affections gushed forth in answer, and they agreed that they would be married when he returned.

A month went by. For them, a month of Paradise; a lover's month in a magnolia-scented wonderland; an idyl of dewy mornings, amber noons and velvet, gem-studded nights; a poet's dream of Arcadia.

Her serious young eyes, worshipping him, would darken when she asked the eternal feminine question:

"Frank—will you always love me?"

"*Toujours!*" he would say. "Always, while I live—and for all eternity!"

Then, one night, he left to join the expedition which was leaving from New York. At that time, Diane was twenty.

She sat the next evening and thought of Frank Dean, and the prescience came to her that she had always loved him; that she would always love him, and with a depth of tenderness as profound and inexhaustible as the deep seas. She sat, mute, her eyes lustrous with the weight of new-born thoughts.

Letters came from Frank Dean as long as the expedition was in touch with civilization; then the letters grew far between as the party advanced into the wilderness, and, at length, stopped. Frank Dean sank as utterly from human ken as if he was dead. And finally, several months later, she read in the newspapers that the entire expedition—with the exception of one porter—had been wiped out by savages. The porter told a story of a night attack, a brave defense and a ruthless slaughter.

Frank Dean was mentioned as one who had died.

The shock stunned her. She became seriously ill, and it was several months before she ventured forth again in the open, under the eyes of a professional nurse.

Then, the little income that she had always taken for granted as perfectly secure, wavered in the readjustments of a difficult economic period, and she was informed that it had been substantially decreased. It meant that she would have to do something to supplement it in order to live. Unhesitatingly—because her own nurse had interested her—she decided that she, too, would become a nurse.

Physically, she recovered fully, only to suffer all the tortures which wring the inmost soul of a woman who loves and knows that all the charms and senses of her lover are for ever beyond her touch or sight or prayer.

But in her heart, Frank Dean lived. Death, to her, was a cruel wall built up between them, forbidding them the touch of each other's hands, denying them the smile of each other's eyes; but none the less to her was he near, unseen, hidden behind that inexorable, invisible barrier which one day would fall and let her pass to join him.

IT WAS during this period of her convalescence that she first became aware of a strange, disquieting phenomenon: there were times, especially when she was alone, when she intuitively *sensed* that there was some unseen presence in the room with her.

However, she saw nothing. Imagination—call it what you will—discerned a rustling silence; some unsuspected sixth sense detected an incorporeal presence. Strangely, she was not frightened.

As time went on, the manifestations be-

came stronger. One night, while she sat in that state of lulled, listless meditation between waking and sleeping, induced by fatigue, she fancied she saw Frank Dean standing in one corner of the room—a luminous, wavering figure, who regarded her with grave eyes, in which there was a love so tense, so illimitable, that it brought a catch in her breath. And she saw a puckered, jagged wound in his neck.

"Frank!" she cried out, startled—and the specter vanished instantly.

Gradually, the conviction grew upon her that death was but a barrier—that Frank Dean was struggling to cross it.

Seated in the little church on Sundays, with the grand diapason of the organ rolling its rich music upward, and during the hush of prayer, it seemed to her that she heard another and more divine chorus take up a chant that whispered high up through the arches—beautiful, terrible in its majesty, awful in its measured serenity, appalling, yet god-like in its calm; while through the hush that followed swept a whispered name—her own—coming from some limitless immensity; and, like a sob, one unearthly, ethereal *Kyrie Eleison*.

Did she fancy it—or was Frank Dean standing there watching her? Was she the only one who saw him? she wondered. And a perfect peace filled her. She felt—she *knew*—that he was near—so near that her heart drummed to the proximity. And a great content settled upon her spirits. She knew! Call it self-hypnosis, if you will, induced by a woman's fathomless love. You might be right—and you might be wrong.

After that, he materialized often. She would look up with a start and see him standing there, and she would smile through her tears; but after her probationary period of training was over and

she went north to take up her work in earnest, the phenomenon ceased entirely. Some subtle contact had snapped.

She was more than ordinarily gentle with the sufferers who came under her domain in the New York hospital where she found employment; and it was here that she met Jack Baily. He lay, in his brown, brigand-like handsomeness, near a large window, his eyes glazed with a film, gasping his life away.

3

DIANE DRUMMOND recoiled at first mentally, physically and spiritually from the sickening scenes, the odors, the nauseating nakedness of the hospital. Her experience as a nurse had revealed passions and sins, though all evil was written in a dead tongue for her. The world hardly credits or comprehends that the awakening of the intelligence and the sleep of the senses can be long co-existent. They can in women. Shakespeare knew this truth. Goethe did not. She was not ignorant of evil, but innocent of it.

Jack Baily's case was assigned to her. She was told that he was beyond medical help.

She glanced at the chart, noted the glaze in his eyes, and, in involuntary compassion, smoothed the tumbled hair away from the wide, feverish forehead.

He shook his head with a slight impatience, and turned, for the first time, to look at her. The vision of loveliness that met his eyes had power to send a flicker into them, even though the dews of a mortal agony were thick upon his forehead.

"Is—is it the end, nurse?" he whispered.

"I hope not," she replied, in her intensely musical voice.

She eased his position, adjusted his pillow and smiled at him. She was to

stay until the end. His case was hopeless. The chart told the ominous story and the doctor had told her that any minute might be the last.

"Don't—don't go, nurse," he whispered, his lack-luster eyes riveted to hers. "Please stay—till it's over——"

She smiled through a sudden mist of tears, although death was an old story to her now.

"I'll stay," she promised, and seated herself near the bed.

A darker flush than the fire of his fever crossed his cheeks, and the bold, hard eyes looked at her gratefully.

Jack Baily was the unique product of the New York underworld, a graduate from the ranks of the lesser Free Lances into the realms of big game. First conscious of life as a gutter foundling of the slums, he became a poolroom habitu ; later, a bouncer, and he began to read, for he was ambitious; a race-track tout; an opium-seller in Chatham Square; then to the point, by slow stages, where he commanded an underworld gang. A gang leader. A "big shot." A bullet wound in the lungs had induced the pneumonia that now ravaged him.

He was as foul and rank a growth as a great slum can produce, and not fit to be in the same room with the little nurse; but death is the greatest of all socialists.

"It's—the end, isn't it?" he asked.

She could not lie in answer, so she turned her head away.

"Thanks," he whispered. "I'd rather know, nurse. I don't think I'm afraid." His feverish eyes searched the room as if to seek an answer to the one question that humanity has never solved. Deity was but a phrase to him; faith and a future life were but empty syllables. To him the end was the "end" of all things. It meant cruel corruption, hideous putridity, blank nothingness, eternal silence. A

keen remorse and humility urged his better instincts now, in the face of certain death.

"So this is—the end?" he repeated. "Well, if that's so, life's not worth the effort! I never thought it would be like this." His fever mounted and he clutched her hand like a child lost in the dark.

"Do you want me to send for any one?"

He shook his head negatively, while a convulsive agony twisted his body.

"No!" he gasped. "There isn't—anybody. You—stay——"

"I will. Wouldn't you like to talk to Father Von Geyso?"

"A priest? Is—it—that near? No, I don't want him—you stay."

She sat immovable, touched to the heart. Occasionally, she held a cooling drink to his fevered lips. He dozed intermittently, waking each time with a start, and smiling slightly when he saw her still in the room.

Night came, and the physician stopped in, glanced over the chart and shook his head at her questioning regard.

"He'll go before morning," he whispered to her.

"Is there no hope?"

"None!"

She dismissed the idea of dinner. She couldn't eat anything. As the evening wore on, the fever rushed over him strongly. In a tense delirium he muttered vague, unintelligible snatches and uttered vivid, prurient oaths that caused the girl to cover her face with her hands.

NEAR midnight, he grew calmer and the fever subsided. He opened rational eyes and looked at her.

"Nurse," he whispered, "I hate to go like this. I've been a pretty bad egg all my life. I've got money, nurse—a lot of money. I'd like it to do some good—after I'm gone——"

She nodded, mute.

His eyes devoured her with a thirsty admiration and a shrewd worldliness.

"You're the kind that can be trusted, nurse," he continued. "I've got—an idea. Will you marry me right away—before——"

Bewildered amazement entered her eyes. She put it all down to the fever and patted his hand. He couldn't know what he was saying.

"It's—it's—only for an hour or two," he whispered, rapidly. "Please—be a sport—it can't hurt you—I'll be—out—before morning. It'll give you control of my money—and you'll be able to do some good with it. It's only for an hour or so, nurse. That bunch of money will fall into crooked hands if you don't. I'd like you to have it—to do some good with it——"

"Please—be quiet!" she said, gently. She knew the futility and hopelessness of reasoning against the delusions of a sick bed.

"No!" He was vehement. "You think it's fever—it's not! I want you to have it. I'd like you to carry my name when you do good things with it—if only for a little while. Take the money and do something for poor kids with it—in my name—and take the name, too, nurse—it's only for a few hours—will you?"

She was startled out of her professional calm and a great pity welled up in her breast.

The doctor looked in again and shook his head after a brief examination.

"No use," he said, low. "He'll go soon. No hope. He can't last till morning. I think I'll wake Father Van and send him in."

She inclined her head and went back to the bedside.

"You see?" whispered Baily. "I heard him! Will you, nurse? It's only for an

hour or two—and you'll do some good with the money—I can trust you—but I can't trust any one else. It'll all get into dirty hands if I die without——"

A violent fit of coughing choked his utterance for a moment; it became a hemorrhage, and she held him up and helped him, gave him water and changed his blanket. He lay quiet now, his chest rising and falling spasmodically, his breath wheezing, and a gray pallor crept over his face.

The priest came in and sat down by the bedside. The sick man correctly interpreted the import of his presence.

"Nurse," he pleaded; "it's almost—over—will you—please?"

Her face grew troubled with a great vexation. She struggled with the complex intricacies of a woman's impulses and motives. Naturally repelled by the suggestion, a great compassion flooded her heart at the same time.

His eyes sought her own with a timid yet feverish supplication. He knew his own unworthiness; he saw himself, for the first time, as he was—yet, life was slipping. He felt like one who slides down a mountain crevasse and has just time and consciousness enough to see the treacherous ice go by him, the black, impenetrable abyss yawning below, the cold, dark death awaiting him beyond, while on the heights the sun is shining. To him, love had always been a thing of the senses. This nurse had given him a glimpse of a different affection. Vague, dreamy, half-soft, half-stormy thoughts swept over him, despite his nearness to the zero hour.

The priest was puzzled. He inquired of the nurse what it was the man begged for; but it was Baily who explained.

"The money will get into crooked hands unless I leave it to her—unless it's legally hers—tied tight! She could do a lot of good with it—and I trust her—it's

only for an hour—it's only a matter of form so it'll be legal for her to have it. If she wants to marry any one—you can tell him all about this—no man would object if he understood—please—please!"

The priest frowned, while the girl, sorely troubled, involuntarily recoiled. Marriage, to her, was a sacred thing, not a vehicle of convenience; still, what harm could it do to assuage the terrors of a dying man and fulfill his requests—laudable, charitable requests?

"It is really a trust," said Father Von Geyso, finally. "It can not harm you, surely, and your wifehood would be confined to a name and a charitable duty. Unless there is one near to you who would object——"

She glanced at the hard, fever-brightened eyes of the dying man.

"Let me think a moment," she replied, and walked from the room.

In the silent corridor, she passed up and down, torn between compassion for the dying man and her own instinctive revulsion against the act.

"Frank!" she whispered, standing in a dark corner. "Help me, Frank—tell me!" But there was no answer. Silence, vast, dim, lay upon the midnight corridor.

The doctor came through the hallway, adjusting his coat. She stopped him.

"Baily," she said. "Are you sure?"

He smiled slightly and wondered at her agitation; still, young and good-looking patients sometimes pierced a nurse's professional calm.

"Not a chance in a million," he replied. "His lungs will fill before morning. Sorry. I'm going home. Doctor Lenz will see you through. Good-night!"

For several seconds she stood looking blankly at space. She had seen death closely and often. She comprehended the fears, the bitterness of this man who was alone in the valley of shadows, with dark-

ness closing in, with no ray of light to guide, no gleam of hope to aid. He clung to the world he knew, praying a tie to leave behind.

In her clean, unselfish heart there was the power of sacrifice of a Viriathus or an Arminius. Still, what of Frank Dean, whom she loved with every fiber of her being, and who, she believed, had crossed the unknown frontiers and whose love for her had transcended death? How could she now, even as a matter of form, take the name of wife from any man? Would Frank understand? And yet, to let Baily's life flicker out and his intended charity be frustrated by a—scruple! Surely, it couldn't harm her or her love for Frank Dean in any way. Baily was a stranger, of course, and she knew something of his history, but he asked nothing of her but to give his wealth to the needy. It was a kingly, generous impulse. And, by morning, he would be—dead.

She entered the room and walked to the bedside. Both the priest and Baily eyed her. Tears stood on the silk of her lashes.

"I will do it," she said.

The priest summoned two witnesses, another nurse and Doctor Lenz, both on night duty; and in the hush of the death room, he married them, using a seal ring that Baily wore.

When the ceremony was over, and the names had been signed to the acknowledgment of marriage, Baily lay back with a long sigh, his eyes brilliant.

"Now," he whispered, "I'll sign that will you wrote, Father, and all of you please sign as witnesses. Doctor, you can testify as to my sanity. Now—let them send on the fireworks! I don't care—I'm ready—when they are!"

He kept his eyes fixed upon the nurse, but gradually they closed and his face grew pale. Doctor Lenz bent over him.

"Come," he pronounced, turning. "Probably never come out of it."

All through the night Diane and the priest sat by the bedside. Baily was sleeping at dawn, his forehead cool and moist.

Doctor Lenz looked in, examined him, took his temperature and straightened out with an astonished snort.

"Why," he began, "why, he's—why—he'll live! This is a miracle! I must call the staff!"

Diane's eyes silvered. She was genuinely glad; then her face blanched terribly. It was her husband who lay there—who would live!

4

BAILY'S convalescence was rapid and a matter of marvel to the entire staff. Diane nursed him throughout with a complex mixture of feelings: a sudden loathing for this stranger whose name she bore repelled her with a morbid potency, which, in turn, gave birth to a vague fascination.

He urged no claim, except that his eyes pleaded incessantly. He once tried to hold her hand. He never received another opportunity.

Winter settled upon the northland and the snow came. Coincidental with Baily's recovery, Diane's term at the hospital expired and she determined to return home for a rest. What she had seen of New York, and what passed muster there as "life," did not appeal to her. She classed it all as a brilliant, perpetual carnival and a permanent yawn.

She was fatigued and needed a rest. The thought of going back again to live in quiet, sleepy Colfax stole over her senses like a healing narcotic. Her inherited income had improved slightly, and as it grew, Colfax became the Elysium of her desires.

The day before she planned to go, she

came to Baily's room, dressed for the street.

He sat by the window, and his eyes, as he surveyed her, burned darkly. She had been lovely in her white uniform; now she was bewildering.

"I am leaving for home," she told him, calmly. "Of course, I shall have the marriage annulled. I am glad that you have recovered, and that there is now no need for a—beneficiary. You can now, in person, perform any charitable acts you desire."

"You—can have the money, if you want it," he answered. A strange, novel embarrassment was upon him. "I—wish you might—give me a chance before you—annul the marriage."

A flush of anger heated the delicacy of her face.

"Surely, you understand why I consented to the ceremony at all?" she said. "Why—you are a stranger to me!"

He was rarely to be daunted; still less rarely to be shamed; yet he was both now. He strove to overcome the feeling.

"Well, I care about you," he said. "Why can't we try to go on? I'd do everything in the world to make you happy—I'd give you everything that money could buy. Won't you consider?"

"It's out of the question," she answered, coldly. "It's—unthinkable!"

"Wait—listen to me first!" he pleaded.

She heard him without interruption.

"I'm sorry," she answered, at length, "if you feel like that, but what you suggest is utterly impossible. Frankly, I'd rather die!" Her calm contempt cut him like a knife.

In his desperation, he lost all his keen and subtle tact, the fine inscrutable ability that had never failed him. The old, barbaric leaven of jealousy broke out despite all intelligence that should have crushed it into silence.

"I suppose there's some one else," he growled. "If there is—remember that you're my wife——"

"What right have you to question me?" Her glance swept him with a biting contempt. "I shall have the marriage annulled and I don't ever want to see you again!" She walked out of the room.

For a few moments he really suffered; for a few moments his ironic philosophy was dead—a corpse that lay cold and powerless before him, incapable of rallying to his rescue; a thing of clay without a shadow's value; but he was too much the underworld gangster to be long under the dominion of a woman.

He suddenly cursed her with a terrible bitterness and a hatred as great as his baffled passions; for love and hate are passions that lie close together. Now convinced that he was out of the shadows and would live, he reverted to type.

"She's my wife," he muttered, a savage glitter in his shrewd, worldly eyes. "We'll see about this annulment business!"

5

DIANE took up again the pleasant, even thread of her life at home with a sense of keenest pleasure. There were black threads in the golden rosary of her joyance, however. The great, silent grief was Frank Dean's death; the other was her marriage to Baily.

She took immediate steps to have it annulled, but was informed that the legal tape would take some time. She urged haste, for, with Baily living, it seemed a desecration upon the memory of her sacred dead.

The wells of her affection had closed with Frank's death. For her there was no compensation, no consolation. In her heart, he would live for ever.

Then, a week after her return to Col-

fax, she again became conscious, at times, of a curious feeling that she was not alone. Was this hallucination, she wondered, some dream that haunted her and which she could not sever from reality? But some subconscious sense whispered "Frank!"

"Can it be," she questioned of herself, "that those who have gone on across the border of death have ways of communicating with the living?"

What lay across the mortal frontiers?—beyond the sunlight, the noise, the color, of life? Another existence? Sentience? Knowledge? Voiceless, brainless, mute wandering in an illimitable, Stygian void?

In the brooding, fragrant hush of the Southern night, it seemed to her that Frank stood near, regarding her with fathomless eyes. Did she fancy it, or did she actually see the ghostly lips form the word "*Toujours!*"—the little word that had meant so much between them; the little French word he had been so fond of saying to her, and which meant "Always!"

Always!

The word was in her own heart, graven deeply. A chastened solemnity, having no affinity with the fevered dreams, the sensuous sweetness of mortal desires, wrapped her about. Always. Through eternity. In the moth-haunted dusk she saw the luminous eyes of Frank Dean, grave, sweet, bringing her a quiet ecstasy.

THEN, one late afternoon, she sat dreaming by the window of her library. The sun was near his setting, and all the earth was brilliant with the imperial glories that attend the gorgeous burial of a Southern, sunny day. She heard the door open, heard Mandy speak to some one, and Jack Baily walked into the room.

Diane's heart stopped for the moment and her face grew colorless.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Why—I came to see you," he answered.

Contempt swept her face. "I don't care to see you," she answered, with a chilly tranquillity. "I believe I made myself clear. You have no claim upon me or my friendship."

His glance, licentious and ruthless under the velvet gentleness of his long-studied regard, devoured her loveliness with a thirsty admiration. A tiger-glitter began to dance darkly in the veiled eyes.

"I asked you not to be too hasty and consider——"

"There is nothing to consider!" she interrupted, a fiery scorn on her lips.

A breathless, pregnant silence fell in the room. Her nearness flooded Baily with a blind insanity, so that he forgot his danger—and he was in danger.

Upon leaving the hospital, he had returned to his haunts. A rival had been shot dead. It was in reprisal for his own wound. He had escaped from New York by a very narrow margin. Apprehended, it meant death or prison.

He had meant to get into Mexico, but a tangent of memory began to catalog the charms of the girl who was his wife in the eyes of the law, and he diverted his flight to Colfax.

Now, his danger slipped from his mind and his sudden passion was controlled only with difficulty beneath his suave, mellow demeanor, which by long usage had become to him as second nature.

"You're my wife before the law," he said. "I have every right to be here—and I'm going to stay awhile, too!"

She gave him a look of repugnance.

"Since you see fit to transgress all the laws of courtesy and decency," she an-

swered, "you will allow me to transgress those of hospitality and show you the door!"

She walked past him into the hall, but he followed close, attempting to take her arm. To avoid his touch, she slipped into the drawing-room and switched on all the lights in passing. He followed directly after her.

An insane light came into his face as a faint perfume met his nostrils when she swept past him. He paused before her with the nerves of his cheeks quivering.

"Will you go?" she asked; "or will you force me to call help and put you out?"

"You won't put me out!" he whispered. "You're my wife! I have a right to be here!" A cunning flicker contracted his blazing eyes. "You haven't told any of these home folks that you're married," he went on. "I know! I asked when I got into town. You don't want it known. Well, if you insist, I'll have to tell your little secret, and so help me, I'll add and invent enough of certain things that will make you miserable as long as you live—unless you behave!"

The girl's face blanched, but her bearing did not alter.

"Get out!" she ordered, tensely.

"What would you say," he went on, "if I took off my hat and coat and made myself comfortable on the veranda—make myself at home—as I have every right to do?"

Sheer rage made her unable to reply.

"Better behave," he went on. "If you don't, I'll fight that annulment suit, too—unless—well, *unless!* Now, let's behave like grown-ups—and talk about our plans. You might try—bribing me!"

The blood suddenly flashed back into her colorless face and she shrank from him as from a dread pollution.

He stepped forward suddenly, reckless of consequences, but she avoided him with a rapid movement. Then she sprang to the fireplace and took the ancient pistol down, but before she could pull back the old-fashioned hammer, he had wrenched it from her hands and taken her in his arms.

She struggled like a fury, like a little, velvet leopard, and her waist tore under his efforts to reach her lips, exposing one snowy shoulder.

Then, as she cried out in pain, the sound of heavy feet came from the veranda and two men stood in the doorway.

One look was enough for Jack Baily. There is no instinct so rapid and so unerring as the instinct of a foe, and there was no mistaking the character and the object of the two men. It meant that detectives had managed to track him.

Baily snatched up the ancient pistol from the table, pointed it and pulled the trigger. A metallic "click" answered him. With an oath, he cocked it again, but threw it down on the table and snatched at his own weapon.

But Diane's attention was frozen now upon a tremulous disturbance near the fireplace. Nebulous forms swirled to her terror-stricken gaze and froze her throat into dry constriction. Then—her heart leaped with one mad throb—and stopped. Frank Dean stood there, ghastly pale, with the puckered wound in his throat, and his eyes sought hers gravely. He stepped to the table, his hand reaching out for the cocked, ancient pistol.

Jack Baily's hand had stopped and he, too, seemed to see the ghostly apparition. An insane scream came from his throat.

Frank Dean's hand touched the pistol and a thunderous report sounded suddenly. Baily dropped to the floor and lay immovable.

The two detectives, weapons now

drawn, stared at the dead man in bewilderment. They did not see what Diane saw, and were puzzled; but her eyes followed the figure of Frank Dean.

She saw him step back to the fireplace—and beheld a strange company who stood there, spectral, every one of them, for she easily discerned the bricks of the fireplace back of them; yet some species of sentient life and animation shone in their grave eyes.

Her father stood there with Frank Dean, and others stood there, too, silently watching the sprawled figure of Baily; men in strange uniforms and the quaint fashions of bygone years; a tall wraith in buckskin seemed to be carrying a long rifle—a ghostly company, summoned across the unknown and answering the call of one of their own blood when danger threatened.

The smoke fumes of the black-powder discharge of the old pistol swirled indistinguishably with the faint nebula of the vision, and faded slowly, leaving nothing to her sight but the old, stone fireplace.

She collapsed softly, on her lips the murmured name of the man whose spectral touch had fired the old pistol as it lay upon the table.

WHEN she regained consciousness, she was on the couch, with Mandy murmuring over her, and the two detectives watching.

The taller of the two men held the ancient pistol and was looking at it curiously.

"Sorry this had to happen here, M'am," he said. "Baily was wanted in New York for murder. We found out about his marriage and had a hunch he'd come here." He fingered the pistol. "'Lucky," he went on, "the cartridge was so old it missed fire the first time—or I guess I'd have got mine! She shoots a big

bullet! It's funny, too, that there's no empty shell in it. I guess it was so old it crumbled and fell apart at the discharge. Curious how it went off all by itself on the table—and was pointing right at Baily!"

She did not answer. Evidently, they had not seen what she had seen.

"Guess the trigger was worn so much," offered the other detective, "it let the hammer slip down. Well, we'll take him away now, M'am. Sorry. I don't think you need worry any more—if what we saw happenin' in here was how you felt about him. We should have pumped a slug into him when we saw him grabbin' you, but we wanted him alive. Bad actor! But that old pistol beat him to the draw!"

LATER, the girl sat by the window in the monastic half-light of the old room, illumined only by a great, theatrical

Southern moon. Mandy had hung the pistol in its place under the crossed swords. A vast peace held the girl mute. Across the garden she stared with eyes that saw nothing but the loved features of the man whose guardianship had transcended death.

"*Toujours!*" she murmured, to herself.

Mandy came to give her a wrap and lingered, intrigued, excited. She knew something of the curious history of the pistol, and she sniffed.

"Funny 'bout that ol' gun, Miz Diane," she said. "It's kinda like a haunt, I say!"

Diane Drummond nodded. "It's uncanny, Mandy! You saw it wouldn't shoot—well, the first time; but it shot—when it should have! Mandy—I know—*positively*—that it hasn't been loaded since the Civil War!"

As I said in the beginning—it was a beautiful, sinister thing.