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Strange STORIES


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THE ROOM OF SOULS

By KEITH HAMMOND

Author of "The Invaders," "The Seventh Coffin," etc



Caught in the Satanic Net He Has Himself Woven, Forsythe Learns the Terrible Power of Evil Forces!

ELDON FORSYTHE drank Amontillado and looked at the New York skyline through his window. He was a tall, strongly built man who looked younger than his fifty years, with a thin, handsome face that showed remarkable self-control behind it.

"Satanism?" he repeated, his level gray eyes inscrutable. "In New York? Some ridiculous cult, Morley, I'm sure."

Tom Morley shrugged and stuffed tobacco, heavy with perique, into his briar pipe.

"I don't know. I ran across the chap by accident, and his place looks like a temple of devil-worship, all right. But you know more about that

than I. You went to the Orient to study demonology, didn't you?"

Forsythe turned, the hint of a smile on his thin lips.

"Er—something of the sort. Primitive religions and anthropology. But as for Satanism, the Himalayas worship older gods than Lucifer. Nevertheless, this Shackleton fellow interests me. He hasn't run afoul of the law, eh?"

Morley's rugged, tanned face broadened into a grin.

"Oh, he hasn't been sacrificing any children, if that's what you mean. He's no Gilles de Rais. But he puts on a good show, and he's got a lot of adherents to his cult. Wealthy men, some of them—and that may be significant."

"Blackmail?" Forsythe suggested.

"I doubt it. Shackleton strikes me as a pretty naïve fellow. A bluffer, though he's got some good tricks."

"I think I'd like to meet him," Forsythe said thoughtfully. "He sounds like a stage magician, but there may be something in it."

"Good," Morley said. "Tomorrow night? He's putting on a show—a Black Mass, he says."

"Tomorrow night," Forsythe assented, and the conversation turned to lighter subjects. In a short while Morley left, and his host was alone.

Eldon Forsythe smiled. He shook a few drops of bitters into a glass, filled it with dry sherry, and relaxed in a chair, slowly sipping the wine. It had been pleasant to see Morley again, the first familiar face he had seen in three years. Almost, for a second, those years of mystery and strangeness and wonder were briefly forgotten, and Forsythe was again the avid, wide-eyed student of the occult who had left New York to acquire knowledge.

WELL, he had captured that knowledge. And, as yet, the price was not too heavy. Never wealthy, he was now beggared, but hidden in his brain were keys that would unlock treasure houses.

Purposely he had told Morley little of his experiences. He had not mentioned the old Arab in Baghdad who had, for a large sum, given him the name of a Damascene named Said al Zarif. And he had not spoken of the dark cult in Damascus, or of the quest

that had taken him from the marge to the inner mysteries of the dark lore.

Yes, that trip had been well worthwhile. But even now Forsythe shuddered slightly as he recalled his initiation, and the Blood Seal that had been marked indelibly upon his breast.

Before Forsythe had crossed the Atlantic, he had known little indeed of demonology. Now he knew it too well. Before his eyes floated visions of an exotic paradise, thronged with sloe-eyed houris and great *afrits*, drug-begotten phantasms he had seen in Eastern lands. And he remembered other things. . . .

However, it was necessary to be practical now. Money was required. Forsythe's bank balance was dangerously low, and his investments had been neglected for three years. This "devil-worshiper," Shackleton, sounded promising, and Forsythe smiled again as he sipped his favorite wine.

Tomorrow night he would know.

Time passed, slowly enough, but eventually the hour came. Morley called, and the two taxied down to an apartment house overlooking Central Park. Morley was gleeful.

"Think you can show him up?" he asked. "The chap has an entire penthouse. Fixed it up like a surrealist's nightmare. You'll see."

"I expect so," Forsythe said enigmatically. His gray eyes were lidded as the elevator slid noiselessly up.

A Negro servant met them. "You are expected?" He glanced at the small card Morley produced. "Yes, sair. And this other gentleman?"

"He's all right. I'll vouch for him."

"Yes, sair. This way."

They were ushered into a large room, and Forsythe could not help grinning. Black velvet drapes hid the walls. A dim red light came from swinging censers, while braziers on metal tripods sent up musky coils of incense. The carpet, into which cabalistic designs had been woven, was of flaming crimson. The mystic pentagram formed the center. At one end of the room was an organ. At the other was a featureless black altar.

A dozen men were seated here and there, looking rather uncomfortable.

Most of them were in formal evening attire. All wore domino masks.

"You are looking through a mirror, sair," the Negro explained. "At least it is a mirror on the other side. The gentlemen cannot see you. Here are your masks."

Forsythe and Morley donned them. The panel was slid aside, and they crossed the threshold. The other men looked up, and then averted their gaze.

"Let's sit here," Morley suggested. "The show ought to start soon."

THERE was a queer, half-furtive anticipation in his manner. Forsythe glanced at him sharply.

The lights in the room darkened. A low, sonorous tone sounded. Abruptly the organ began to play. Its keys were depressed, though no one sat on the bench. Invisible hands seemed to launch into the opening chords of Halvorsen's cery March of the Bo-jaren. Music as mad as Grieg's, Forsythe thought, but the sheer unearthliness of Cristobal Colon would have been more effective.

The piece ended thunderously. Suddenly there was a black-clad figure standing before the altar. A greenish glow illuminated his pudgy face.

"Shackleton," Morley whispered.

Forsythe looked at the man with interest. Shackleton was quite short, almost fat, and his round moon face looked singularly devoid of diabolism. He had cultivated a mustache and goatee, but only in his jet, unwinking eyes was there any hint of—alienage.

Then he spoke, and Forsythe acknowledged that the voice was impressive. Deep, yet strangely soothing, it seemed to fill the room.

"You are here to get your hearts' desire. Only by the powers of the Prince of Air and Darkness can man attain happiness. Open your minds to him. Empty them of scoffing thoughts. Concentrate on the ultimate darkness."

The round, pallid face glowed through the red dimness of the room.

"Satan is the Ape of God," Shackleton said. "Without darkness there can be no light."

Forsythe sensed a change within the room, in the very atmosphere. He

strove to analyze it, concentrating all his senses. Then he had it. The odor of the incense had altered.

Forsythe smiled, but said nothing. Child's play! And Shackleton went on.

"I bring you your hearts' desire. The Lord of All approaches. . . ."

The voice went on, soporific, velvety. The sound of heavy breathing came.

". . . Satan gives you your wish—"

Suddenly Forsythe tensed. He did not move, but the gray eyes lost their casual gaze. Purpose and intentness sprang into them. His lips moved inaudibly.

The voice of Shackleton hesitated, went on, and then halted again. The Satanist paused, motionless. His round face looked vaguely troubled. It changed. A blind, passive expression crept over it. Shackleton stood as if fettered—and again the room's atmosphere changed.

It grew cold, with a dank, unpleasant chill, sensed rather than actually felt. The red lights seemed to grow dimmer. And, in the center of the carpet, above the magic pentagram, a faint luminous mist began to form.

Brighter it grew, and brighter. It whirled like a tiny nebula, assuming form and substance. Then something crouched upon the rug, scarcely opaque, a creature like a giant toad, three feet high at least. The yellow, reptilian eyes watched unblinkingly.

FROM Shackleton broke a cry of fear. Abruptly the phantom grew fainter and vanished in a swirl of mist. The air seemed to become warmer.

Forsythe stood up purposefully. He crossed the room to Shackleton and put his hand on a plump shoulder.

"I'd like to talk with you," he said. "Alone."

The Satanist strove to regain his scattered wits.

"Return to your place. Soon you will—"

"Come, come," Forsythe broke in impatiently. "You've drugged the others soundly with hasheesh, but it doesn't affect me, as you see. Leave them to their dreams and take me where we can talk. Unless—"

He glanced significantly at the pentagram on the rug.

Shackleton hesitated, shrugged, and pushed aside a black drape. He opened a door, standing aside while Forsythe crossed the threshold. Then he joined his uninvited guest.

Forsythe sank into a comfortable chair and looked around. He was in a well appointed living room, tastefully decorated, and containing no suggestion of the occult. Through French windows he could see the yellow sign that crowned Rockefeller Center and, beyond it, the tower of the Empire State. Smiling, he withdrew a case from his pocket and offered Shackleton a cigarette.

The Satanist accepted one, with an obvious effort at self-control. But his fingers shook as he used a lighter.

"First of all," Forsythe said conversationally, "you're a faker. But I have no intention of exposing you, unless you force me to do something."

"You know nothing of the mysteries of the Beyond—" Shackleton began.

"Indeed? Then how do you suppose I materialized that elemental? I know your game quite well. The men in the other room pay you well, and in return you drug them with hasheesh and they dream of various pleasant things. It has been done in the East for ages. As for the other mumbo-jumbo—" Forsythe made a contemptuous gesture. "Curiously enough, however, you created favorable conditions for a true seance. More favorable than you guessed—for you are an unconscious medium."

Now Shackleton looked really frightened. He moistened his lips.

"Who are you?" he murmured.

"Eldon Forsythe, but that means nothing to you as yet. You are a faker. I am not. I have certain—powers—which can be used for more purposes than materializing earth-born spirits. Unfortunately, these powers do not include alchemy or the philosophers' stone. I cannot make gold—"

"You want money?" Shackleton asked. "Blackmail?"

Forsythe's thin, handsome face was amused. "I need more money than you can possibly have. I need your help.

You have no conception of what may be done with a cult of this type. Do you have any wine?"

Startled at the abrupt question, Shackleton brought out a decanter of execrable port from the sideboard. He filled one glass, and had begun to fill another when Forsythe halted him.

"That will be enough. Watch, now."

HE TOOK a crystal vial from his pocket and shook out a pinch of white, glittering powder into the red liquid. It dissolved instantly.

"Drink it," Forsythe said.

Shackleton drew back, his pudgy face frightened.

"It isn't poisoned. You won't be harmed. Drink it."

"No," the Satanist said through dry lips.

In Forsythe's hand was a small glittering prism. He turned it so that a flash of light struck Shackleton between the eyes.

"Drink the wine," Forsythe commanded.

The other obeyed, this time without question. For a time he sat passive, while Forsythe stared fixedly into the black eyes. Then he roused and glanced at the empty glass in his hand. It dropped to shatter on the rug.

"Look at the window," Forsythe said in a soft, commanding voice.

Shackleton obeyed once more.

"What do you see?"

"A room—" The Satanist's voice was thick. "A room beyond the window."

"What is in that room?"

"A throne—and a sceptre."

Forsythe smiled. "That is your heart's desire. Power. Take it."

Shackleton rose and went to the window. He opened it. A chill wind blew through the room, rustling the drapes. The Satanist stepped out.

"Waken!" Forsythe said sharply.

Almost before the words had left his lips Shackleton was back in the room. He headed directly for the sideboard and drank a stiff tot of brandy before he turned to face Forsythe.

"A room—I saw it. It was real."

"The laws of energy and matter are

linked with psychic power." Forsythe nodded. "But velvet drapes and incantations are not necessary in order to bring about certain—changes. I learned that in Tibet. The power of will, aided by a chemical metamorphosis, is sufficient."

"Was that room—real?" Shackleton asked. The man had been shaken to the depths of his being.

"It was not matter, as we know it. Yet it was real enough, on another plane—a spiritual one, if you will. That's beside the point. There was a balcony outside those windows. Suppose there had been none?"

"It's twenty stories down," Shackleton whispered. "You mean—"

"Yes. You would have fallen. At least your body would have. But the essence of you — what Egyptians called the *Ka*—would have remained in that room."

HE LIT another cigarette.

"Your cult must be reorganized. I want you to create several companies; charities, perhaps. Their functions will be purely nominal. You will own them secretly. Members of your cult will be induced to make their wills in the favor of these companies. It should not be too difficult."

"They wouldn't—"

"Not for you, perhaps. But I have certain—powers. I can give to a man an ecstasy for which he would sacrifice his soul. Heart's desire!" Forsythe laughed. "How do you suppose the Assassins were kept in bondage? I shall teach you a great deal, Shackleton. But no one must know my connection with you. You will handle the financial angle, and give me such money as I may need from time to time."

"Murder!" Shackleton said through pallid lips. "It's outright murder. I can't—"

Forsythe said nothing, but his gaze met and locked with the other man's frightened stare. . . .

It had been surprisingly easy, Forsythe thought three months later, as his taxi threaded its way down Fifth Avenue. Not a murmur of suspicion had been aroused. First Charles Masterson had fallen or jumped from an

office building above Broadway, and most of his fortune had gone to the Griggs Charity Foundation, and thence to Shackleton, who secretly owned the organization.

Well, Masterson had had his fun. For weeks he had spent his nights in paradise, in an ecstasy few men ever attained on earth. After him there were two others. And now Forsythe purchased a newspaper from an urchin who thrust it through the cab window. He read:

**SUICIDE WAVE HITS NEW YORK!
SIMON MONDAY FOURTH TO LEAP
TO DEATH!**

Dec. 5 (AP)—Simon Monday, wealthy New York banker, today hurled himself from a window on the twenty-third story of the Root Building. He was instantly killed . . .

Forsythe read on, with interest. Monday's partner had been with him at the time. He had vainly tried to halt the suicidal leap. Monday had seemed almost dazed, he said, and without warning had risen from his desk, walked to the open window, which had a low sill, and stepped out. Chief beneficiary in Monday's will was the Sido Fund, a newly-created charity.

The taxi stopped. Forsythe got out, paid the driver, and entered the restaurant which had been his destination. Tom Morley waved at him from a table.

"Hello," Forsythe said, seating himself. "It's been quite awhile since I've seen you. You sounded excited on the phone. I take it this isn't purely social?"

"Not quite." Morley's rugged face wore an odd expression. "I see you've got the paper."

"Yes. Too bad about Monday. Did you know him?"

"He belonged to Shackleton's cult," Morley said.

"Eh? The Satanist fellow? I thought they were all masked."

"They were," Morley grunted, toying with his cocktail glass. "But I've been doing a bit of investigation lately. Paid a private detective agency."

Forsythe repressed the rage that welled up within him. Meddling fool!

"I only went to Shackleton's once, with you, of course, but did you ever go back?" he asked softly.

The other flushed. "Yes. Pretty often."

YES, Forsythe thought to himself, Morley had gone back. Night after night he had gone to lose himself in dreams of a fantastic paradise. It was not news to Forsythe.

Morley drank his Martini at a gulp and fished for the olive.

"You know — I'd always thought Shackleton was a fake. But he isn't. He's something worse. That man can open the doors to hell and heaven. Anyway, I couldn't stay away from his place. I thought if I could prove to myself he was an imposter, it would help, and I paid detectives to find out. They found out something else. Those four men who have committed suicide lately were members of Shackleton's cult."

"Yes?"

"I wish you'd help me, Forsythe. The detectives couldn't—not in the way I wanted. But you know a good deal about these things, and maybe—maybe—" Morley hesitated, ill at ease. "I want to stop going to Shackleton's, and I can't! That's the whole thing in a nutshell."

"All right," Forsythe said with decision. "Tomorrow night, eh? I can't make it before that. You can keep away tonight. Go to a play. Or get drunk. Use your will power."

Morley's relief was evident. But there was a tiny crease between his eyebrows. Forsythe guessed the reason, and smiled to himself. He knew well enough that Morley would visit the Satanist that evening.

Before sundown, however, Forsythe himself called on Shackleton. He took the precaution of pulling his hat brim over his eyes, and muffling the lower part of his face in a silk scarf. The Negro admitted him, and Forsythe sniffed at an unfamiliar odor. He heard muffled knocking sounds.

"Redecorating?" he asked.

"Yes, sair. But the workmen are nearly finished. If you will wait, Mr. Shackleton will see you immediately."

The Satanist emerged into the outer

hall. His face was shockingly emaciated. In a few months the man had become drained of all nervous energy. Pouches sagged under his dull eyes, and his manner was furtive and constrained.

"Sorry I can't ask you in," he said, with a strained attempt at jocularly. "Redecoration is a bad job."

The Negro had gone. Forsythe came to the point immediately.

"Morley must die tomorrow," he said. "He'll be here tonight. Put the white powder in his liquor and be sure you don't fail."

"Morley? I thought he was an old friend of yours."

"Yes," Forsythe assented, smiling. "But I do not suppose that matters very much to you."

Shackleton rubbed his forehead. "I feel very bad," he complained. "This . . . I don't know how much longer I can keep it up."

"You are a fool," Forsythe observed without rancor. "You have more money than you've ever had, and you're no longer a trickster. I've taught you many things."

The other man laughed bitterly. "That's a reason for gratitude, I suppose. I'm nearly dead. You've managed to strengthen my mediumistic powers so that I've scarcely any control of them. They're drawing my life away. Day and night I can hear them whispering. I saw Monday today."

"What? His ghost?"

"It sounds silly enough. But I've seen Masterson, too, and the others. After they died. I saw them in that room."

"There's nothing I can do," Forsythe said. "You're an involuntary medium, and you can't shut the power on and off like a tap. Take a bromide after Morley goes and try to sleep."

SHACKLETON'S face was a pitiful, tragic ruin.

"When I sleep—I dream," he whispered.

But Forsythe was gone, well satisfied with himself. Morley would have no chance now to blunder onto the truth. It served the fool right, of course. He had had no business to set detectives on Shackleton's trail.

Afternoon papers the next day carried the news of Morley's suicide. His money had been left to the Griggs Foundation. At ease in his apartment, Forsythe smiled and made an entry in his notebook. Then, with genuine pleasure, he examined his bankbook and made a quick estimate.

The trip to the Orient had paid well, after all. What was the old saw—"Those who sup with the devil need a long spoon?" Well, the business was even safer if others held the spoon.

The phone rang. Forsythe heard Shackleton's voice, sharp with urgency.

"Hello? Oh, you saw the papers?"

"Of course. What of it?"

"I've got to see you! Tonight—now! It's vital!"

"I'll meet you—"

"No," Shackleton said, almost hysterically. "I can't leave. I can't tell you over the phone. Come at once! I'm afraid—"

"The dreams?" Forsythe hazarded, lighting a cigarette with one hand.

"Worse. If you don't come, I'll—phone someone else."

"I'll be over immediately," Forsythe said quickly. "Five minutes or less. Good-by." He hung up, realizing that in Shackleton's state of mind the man might easily get in touch with the police. That, obviously, was the meaning of his implied threat.

Forsythe paused for a glass of sherry and, making a wry face, pulled on his gloves and overcoat and left the apartment. A taxi took him to Shackleton's home.

The Satanist himself opened the door. The Negro was nowhere in evidence. Shackleton led the way into the temple room, in which an ordinary light bulb was burning in place of the usual red globes. The sable drapes looked cheap and tawdry in the white glare. One of them was pulled aside to show the door to Shackleton's private room, where Forsythe had first interviewed him.

Shackleton went to that door, pushed it half open and, changing his mind, turned back and went to the black altar. He put his head upon it, cradling his arms, and began to cry, in choked, gasping sobs.

FORSYTHE waited, his agile mind pondering possible solutions to the problem.

"We're wasting time," he finally said. "What is it, Shackleton?"

The Satanist lifted his haggard face. "I was a fool to do what you wanted. Worse than a fool. I'm going to quit, now."

"You can't," Forsythe said. "You can't lose your mediumistic powers now, even if you wanted to. If you never saw me again, you'd still have them. It's dangerous to play with fire."

"Those voices—" Shackleton hammered his pudgy fist on the altar. "Those men! I see them. Now Morley. Not ten minutes after he died I saw him, in that frightful room. With the others."

Forsythe pulled aside a drape and looked out at the New York lights.

"I see," he murmured. "Well, perhaps hypnotism may help you. We can—" He paused, his lean body tense. "Someone is coming."

The annunciator rang.

"You expected someone?" Forsythe asked silkily.

"No. No—not tonight."

Again the summons sounded, peremptorily. Forsythe crossed the room with quick strides. He touched a button, and a panel at his elbow glowed into life. Shadowy forms appeared and grew more distinct.

"The police," Forsythe murmured. "You tried to trap me, eh?"

"Police?" Sudden alarm showed in Shackleton's face. "I swear I didn't!"

The man might not be lying. Morley's detectives might have turned the matter over to the police after their client's curious death. But no—Shackleton had threatened to turn informer. His very pose spoke of guilt.

"They'll break down the door soon," Forsythe remarked, returning to stand before Shackleton.

"The private elevator—we can get down that. We can get away!"

"Of course. Even if the back entrance is guarded, I can protect myself." Forsythe took a vial from his coat. "A pinch of this blown into the air, and the police will not even see me as I go past. They will be

cataleptic for an hour or more. But before I go"—his hand shot out to fasten on Shackleton's throat—"before I go I must make sure you will not betray me again."

The Satanist tried to scream. Vainly he fought. But his flabby strength was useless. Thrashing, struggling, kicking, he was borne down.

It did not take long. Forsythe rose from the prostrate body as the annunciator shrilled again. This time it did not cease.

Something had fallen from Shackleton's pocket. It was a key. Forsythe picked it up, examining it carefully, for the shape was vaguely familiar. Then, as a crashing thud came, he pocketed the key and turned from the contorted, dead face that stared up at him.

THE private elevator would take him safely from the midst of his enemies. Forsythe decided to kill any police who might be waiting below. Unconsciousness wouldn't be enough, for when they awakened they might remember their assailant's features, no matter how well shielded by hat brim and muffler. After that Forsythe would be quite safe from detection. Yet it might be well to travel for a time.

Something made Forsythe glance toward the half-open door of Shackleton's study. What he saw brought him to an abrupt halt. Good Lord! The Satanist had been cleverer than he had ever realized.

For the desk in the other room was piled with currency, tall stacks of it! Certainly that could not be left for the police. Shackleton must have had a fortune hidden in some secret place. Heedless of the jolting shocks on the outer door as the police tried to burst through the metal-lined panel, Forsythe stepped over the threshold of

Shackleton's study in a bound.

His foot seemed to go right through the rug. For a horrible instant Forsythe tottered, and then fell. He slid down an inclined ramp, while the room vanished, and the lights of New York's towers were all about him. And then he was falling through empty air.

His plunge seemed curiously slow. He had time to think, and remember. He recalled the "interior decorating" Shackleton had had done. Even then the Satanist must have planned his trap. The study had been torn out, removed bodily from the penthouse. In its place a polished, inclined slide had been substituted.

But the powder? How had Shackleton tricked him into taking the powder? Forsythe remembered the key that had fallen from the Satanist's pocket, and knew now why it had seemed familiar. It was the key to his own apartment, or a duplicate of it. And for several days his sherry had tasted strangely.

It was clear now, all of it. Shackleton had lured his master into the trap that had been set for so many others. He had not known of the police raid, after all.

Forsythe felt a wrenching jolt, a sickening stab of flaming agony. The world dissolved in darkness. . . .

Light came again, slowly. He was back in the room, in Shackleton's study. So it seemed, but Forsythe knew that his body was lying, crushed and broken, on the pavement far below. It was not Forsythe's body that stood in the room, watching the furnishings, the desk, the piles of currency, fade and vanish like mist.

He stood in a square cubicle, windowless and dim.

And, irrevocably, Forsythe knew that those gray, bare walls would prison him for ever and ever, until the end of eternity.