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By EARL PEIRCE JR.

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By **ELI COLTER**



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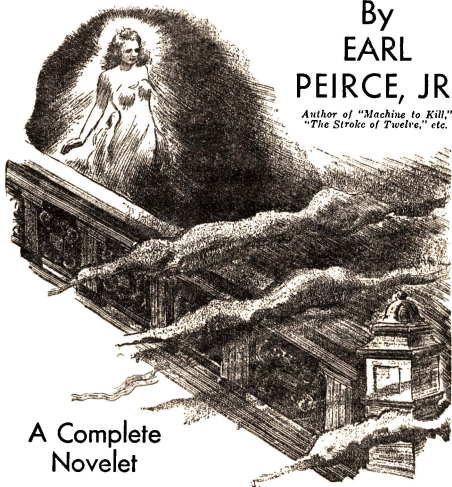
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THE SHADOW

By
EARL
PEIRCE, JR.

*Author of "Machine to Kill,"
"The Stroke of Twelve," etc.*



A Complete Novelet

*Captain Crane Believed His Lost Love Dead—Till He Found Her
Helpless in a Mystic Spell Where Only Death Could Bring Release!*

CHAPTER I *Mysticism and Wine*

I WAS at sea when Corinne and Hayward were married, and I regretted bitterly that I was unable to attend the wedding. But three days later, when my boat docked, I found myself in time for Corinne's funeral.

Her death was the hardest blow I

could have taken. Inexplicably, only three hours after the ceremony, she came down with a chill and complained of sharp pains in the back of her head. Alarmed, Hayward drove to the nearest village and spent frantic minutes routing out a doctor. A country physician, he smilingly diagnosed "emotional mix-up" when he learned that his patient was a bride on

OF NIRVANA



Corinne stood there, her gown a web, her hair a golden halo

her honeymoon. But his provincial medicine was wrong. Within twenty minutes Corinne was dead.

Some of the wedding guests were still at home when Hayward telephoned the news, and it was his father who took the call.

"Corinne has just died!" Hayward

blurted. "I'm in Hanover, just beyond Richmond. No, there hasn't been an accident. Oh, God, father, I don't know! Is Clyde there? Please ask him to come at once. No, Father—just Clyde!"

Clyde was the family physician, the only man Hayward would allow to

touch his wife. When he arrived, however, he could do nothing. His searching examination only confused him more.

"Something obscure she may have picked up in the Orient," he muttered.

Pain-racked, sobbing, Hayward glared about the dingy mortuary.

"Oh God, Clyde," he cried, "sign that certificate and let's take her home."

"But I don't know what killed her. I can't do anything until I've conducted an autopsy."

"Autopsy! Not in a thousand years. Never!"

"I know how you feel, Hayward. But it's a medical question. Her illness might be contagious. It might be a form of plague."

Hayward closed his eyes. "No autopsy! No matter how much you mutilated her, you'd never know what killed her. She just died, Clyde. Can't you understand that? She just died! Often she told me that when people were divinely happy they were closest to death. It was a philosophy she picked up in the Orient."

Clyde winced at the irony. He knew that he could not lift a scalpel to Corinne.

"I'm not relenting," he said suddenly. "She'll have to be buried in a metal casket, hermetically sealed with lead. It's to be done here and now."

"Yes—anything. Only don't destroy her. Oh God, she was so beautiful! You can't destroy her, Clyde. Not her!"

Hayward collapsed, and Clyde took him to a hotel and put him to bed. Returning alone to the mortuary, he signed a certificate attesting that Corinne had died from a heart attack. The coroner was satisfied, for it lessened his own burden in the matter.

He assisted Clyde with the final preparations. Selecting a bronze casket, settling Corinne into its depth, they screwed down the lid and sealed it with molten lead. It was a heart-rending task for Clyde, and he executed it with the most objective callousness he could command. He was one of the many men, including myself, who had loved Corinne above all things on earth.

If it appears abrupt, this story of Corinne's death, the story of her life is even more so. For eighteen years she lived among us, first as a chubby pink-cheeked child in her nurse's perambulator. Then, as a girl who carried dolls and wore blue dresses that always reminded me of a petite ballerina. Then, as a school-girl who rapidly outgrew dolls, who had many beaux and outgrew the beaux to develop into a prematurely thoughtful girl.

She was blonder than Aurora, with beautiful long legs, the shoulders of a boy, and a face as piquant as a yellow jonquil. Her beauty was a myth before she reached seventeen. Afterward, she herself was rather a myth, for she came and went among us like some recurring sylph—to Switzerland, France, Belgium, and England, and latterly to India, Sumatra, and the Islands. She went wherever her father, old Colonel Starling, who died last year, was ordered by the War Department.

Now Corinne was dead. Many times during those first few hectic days I deceived myself into doubting that she had ever really lived. It might be said of her, as of Keats, that she was comet-like, flashing across the horizon of our lives, burned out of our vision by her own brilliance.

These may be maudlin reflections, the despoiled fruit of my own affection for Corinne, but I know they are shared by older and by younger men than I. We all loved her. We could not help ourselves, we young lieutenants fresh from the Point who found this vibrant girl gayly going the rounds of Army posts from Hawaii to Washington.

In France, there might have been duels for her. In England, secret sacrifices of heroic magnitude. But here, where the communal spirit is so strong, our individual love for Corinne was absorbed by the common love for her. The closest we came to possessing her was to be a part of that society to which she returned again and again.

For a short while there was some hope of an individual conquest. When the colonel died, just after Corinne

turned eighteen, it was assumed that one of us would marry her. I believed that she understood that assumption, for she became serious and talked with us of such things as parenthood and child-psychology.

But we should have known—I should have known—that those intimate conversations were only substitutions for the nightly talks she used to have with the colonel.

It was a shock, then, when Corinne married a man outside of the service—a man, worse, who had left the Point as "misfit for military duty."

I knew Hayward's father well, had served under him at Fort Benning during my first two years out of school. He was a veteran warrior.

But the spirit had died after him. On compulsion, Hayward went to the Point, but lasted only a year. Then, after an abortive six years spent traveling about India, he returned with a mad streak of mysticism and an insatiable appetite for wine.

He was twenty-six then, skinny as a Hindu, with pale, oddly luminous skin which contrasted unhealthfully with the damp darkness of his eyes and hair. He was, I suppose, a romantic change from the ramrod-backed youngsters fresh from school, with their military haircuts and dress-parade stiffness.

But that he would snare Corinne from our midst, squire and win her within a week, and marry her in a month, was something which none of us could have believed.

I know little of their brief and hectic courtship, for I was stationed as an observer in a troublesome spot in the Balkans. My only contact with unofficial Washington was by mail.

The letters of friends thinly disguised their disapproval of the impending match. One said that at first Corinne had strongly disliked Hayward. Another hinted that Hayward was hypnotizing Corinne.

No matter how he accomplished it, Hayward definitely won Corinne over. Within a week, they were inseparable. Within a month, engaged.

The wedding was set for the thirtieth and I was to be Hayward's best man. But I was delayed and by the

time I arrived home Corinne was dead.

CHAPTER II

Suspicion of Murder

THE time phase of Corinne's death, rather than its unexplainable nature, horrified us. When I first heard the news I was so stunned that I could not credit it. Later, when that bronze casket was brought home, I stared at its closed lid as though defying it to contain the corpse of the girl I loved.

Hayward took the death with unsuspected stoicism. There was no hysteria, not even a tear. He was white-faced and sober, with a savage intensity to his actions, attesting to the inward course taken by his frustration. It was evident—that he loved Corinne with a passion I could not equal—a semi-fanatical love.

Yet somehow I couldn't help but feel that a perverse streak in his nature derived a peculiar joy from it all. This is difficult to explain, for it was pure impression, with nothing factual to back it up. Yet the impression became stronger each time that I saw Hayward until, at length, subjective as it may have been, I was disgusted by the sight of him.

The bride's body was taken to Cypress House, the home of Hayward's grandfather, which had been deeded to him as a wedding gift. It was a charming, old, but lonely house on the Potomac, not five miles from Mount Vernon. With ivy and clinging mosses, quiet and brown, the sentimental dust of generations enclosed it with an aura of sentient homeliness.

Corinne had romped about the bluegrass lawn as a tot, and I still retain a vision of her as a girl of thirteen, in her first "grown up" dress, sagely playing hostess at one of General Hayward's teas. And then, there was the cool, damp, lichen-covered vault below the garden where Corinne was to be laid away.

She had hidden there once during

a game of hide-and-seek. As though it were only yesterday, I can recall her frightened tears when nobody had come for her until after dark.

The burial took place in mid-afternoon, and then all of us but Hayward returned to Washington. He was to remain, vigil-like, to complete the aborted honeymoon at Cypress House.

After, I understood, he was to sail for India and enter the Buddhist monastery at Benares. His life, he had told us, was ended. The duration of his years must be spent in purification for his eventual reunion with his beloved. Admirable sentiments, perhaps, but too Oriental, too womanish, for either the general or myself.

Corinne was dead—a shocking, “damnable” tragedy, as the general said. But people had died before, and life must go on. And so, leaving Corinne behind, we slid back into the life-streams that would carry us away from her.

Weeks passed, and then months. I heard nothing from Hayward and saw his father only once or twice in the line of official business, until, one day, I had an unexpected visit from Clyde. He had driven to Cypress House a few times at the General's request. Aside from the fact that Hayward was postponing his pilgrimage to India, he had found nothing out of the ordinary. This time, however, he returned with suspicions which disturbed me profoundly.

“For one thing,” Clyde began abruptly, “he's discharged both servants and barricaded himself in the house. For another, he flatly refused to let me in. We stood on the porch a bit talking generalities, then he point-blank told me to leave. He's been drinking heavily and he's thinner than a rail.”

HE PAUSED a moment, then dove into a gist of his suspicion.

“I think he's mad—literally mad, I mean. I hate to say it, knowing how straight the general is, but the facts are staring us in the face. He's a sickly specimen, morbid, and—well, fanatical.

“He's got a woman up there. Oh, I know that for a fact! After dark I

circled back and climbed up on the front porch. There was a woman asleep in one of the beds. There were nightgowns on a hanger, perfumes and combs on the dresser, and a steamer-trunk full of clothes. The hellish part, Steve, is that he's loaned her Corinne's things!”

“My God!” I whispered.

“Yes, it's pretty rank. The General would flay him with a saber if he found out. What's more, he intends to keep her. The larder's packed with food and wine.

“Another thing,” he went on without giving me a chance to speak, “is that he's molested Corinne's casket. I sneaked down to the vault and had a look. It was gloomy and I couldn't see a lot. But the flowers were strewn about the floor. And the casket has been moved!”

I said nothing for a moment. A mad thought had occurred to me, and I despised myself even before uttering it.

“This woman in the bed,” I began. “Did you see her face?”

“No. Her back was toward me, and the blanket covered her completely.” Swallowing, I forced my next words. “Was she *breathing*?”

Clyde stared at me for a second, then exploded.

“God, Steve! What an ideal! Thank God she was breathing. Oh, she's alive! It's not *her*!”

I breathed my thanks. The horror of my own suspicions gave way to repulsed anger.

“In that case, Clyde, this other woman must be some kind of an accomplice. As Corinne's only heir, Hayward should inherit a considerable pile of money. A hellish thought, I admit, but as you said, the facts are staring us in the face. And you'll admit that Corinne's death wasn't according to Hoyle?”

“I know, I know! I should have done an autopsy. But good God, Steve, how could I have suspected? She had eaten nothing, drunk nothing but the wine at the wedding. And Hayward seemed so forsakenly in love with her. Who among us would have dared to imagine that he and another woman were plotting murder?”

"There's only one way to find out. Order an autopsy."

"I can't do that. Not yet. And suppose we're wrong? Think of the scandal."

"If it was murder. . . ."

"I know! But. . . . Oh God, I don't know what to think. I'm a physician, not a psychiatrist."

"I'm neither," I snapped. "But I know what to do. If Corinne was murdered, he's going to pay with his life for it. I'm going up there—now—alone!"

It was after sundown when I arrived at Cypress House. For the last hour, regardless of traffic and intersections, I had kept the speedometer steadily at sixty-five.

It was raining slightly and the private road to the house was an April quagmire. The car spun upward, careened over a hillock, and thrust its headlights upon the rambling porch of the building.

The windows of the lower living room and of one upper bedroom were lighted. Otherwise, the house was obscured by blackness. It looked unfamiliarly large and desolate. The grass was thick and heavy as a carpet. As I crossed the lawn it sprinkled water about my feet.

The place was so run-down that it shocked me, but it was the thought of Corinne that I had in mind as I climbed the steps of the porch. It had been three years since I had seen her—three years culminated by her marriage to another and by her death.

And now I carried up those familiar steps the dread suspicion that she had been murdered.

Before I reached the door, I obtained a glimpse of Hayward through the front window. He sat in a chair facing me, but his eyes were focused on the wine glass which he held loosely in his right hand. To judge from his dishevelled hair and blood-shot eyes, he was in an advanced stage of intoxication. Two empty bottles lay on the rug by his feet, and a third bottle, half empty, stood on a table by his elbow. There was no one else in the room.

CHAPTER III

Never Dead!

STEPPING away from the window, I moved forward and knocked sharply on the door.

I heard the chair creak as Hayward sprang up, and I scarcely had time to brace myself before the door was flung open in my face.

"Get away from here!" Hayward shouted. "What the hell are you doing here?" He stopped when he recognized me. "Crane," he faltered. "Captain Crane!"

"Right, Hayward. Mind if I come in?"

Without waiting his response, I gripped his arm and shoved him back into the house. Still holding him back, I closed the door.

"Your father asked me to drive out," I lied. "He was worried because he hadn't heard from you in some time."

"Oh," he said. "Nice of you." There was a trace of a sneer in his voice. "When you return you may tell the General that I'm in the best of health. I presume that's all he wants to know."

"No, not all," I parried. "He wants you to come back to Washington with me."

This also was a lie, but it had suddenly occurred to me that I could handle Hayward better if he were away from the now malign influence of Cypress House. Moreover, I had a vague plan of taking him to a psychiatrist and, while he was away, of removing Corinne's casket to Walter Reed Hospital for an autopsy. Added to this, Hayward's absence would give me an opportunity to talk with his mysterious woman boarder.

"You'd better get your raincoat," I said. "It's a rotten night."

Hayward glanced at the window. "So it is. That's all the more reason why I should remain here." His eyes met mine defiantly. "Listen here, Crane. You might have had a claim

to come nosing around here at one time, but that claim's gone. The quicker you get out, the better!"

By "claim" I presumed that he meant Corinne, for he knew that I loved her. His words stirred my anger. However, I held myself in check while feeling my ground.

"The General's afraid you're too lonely here," I said after a moment. "The house is certain to bring back unpleasant memories, and this brooding seclusion isn't helping you any. We all understand how you feel, of course, but life can't just stop."

He sneered again. "So that's it. You think I'm planning suicide. Hiding out like this, brooding, as you call it. Well, you can go back, Crane, and tell the General there's no danger of that. I know he thinks I'm crazy, but I'm certainly no coward."

Suicide had not entered my mind. But now it gave me the excuse I needed to remain at Cypress House and keep Hayward under surveillance.

"Frankly," I said, "I disagree with the General's suspicions but inasmuch as he asked me to keep an eye on you, I'm going to do it. He said you'd been alone long enough."

I stressed the alone. At the same time, I studied his face for any indication of irony. I was rewarded. A faint half-amused smile touched his mouth.

"So the General thinks I'm alone, does he?"

A tremor touched me.

"Naturally," I said.

"That's funny. You actually think that Corinne is dead?"

I THOUGHT I misunderstood him.

"Dead!" he shouted. "You think that Corinne is dead!"

"I—"

"I know! An Army doctor—the worst kind—scribbled a death certificate when he didn't even know what he thought had killed her. And an Episcopalian minister quoted words from a Bible over a coffin that contained her alleged corpse. Also, of course, she was buried in a vault. Time-honored rituals, Captain Crane, which mean absolutely nothing.

Christ was buried, too. And so were a few thousand yogis of upper India. But you couldn't call them dead—"

Oddly enough there was no fire in his eyes and his voice was under good control.

"Listen," he said. "You and the whole pack of your smug Army friends have ridiculed me ever since I outgrew short pants. When I left the Point, you all laughed because you thought you were so damned superior with your righteous traditions and your stiff-necked militarism. I was an outcast, a misfit, a round-shouldered introvert who didn't know enough to come out of the rain. Because I preferred a few lines of poetry to a bayonet I was a sissy."

"But get this, Crane. I learned things in India about which the Point or any other service school will never breathe a word. I learned things about life and death and the in-between that so far outshine your cozy American thinking that I can't help laughing my sides out at your sheer stupidity."

"I learned, for example, a few things about love. Yes, Crane—love. You were abroad when I first met Corinne, but if you had been here you'd have seen love as it is made by those who really study it. I was a laughing stock when I came in. Corinne laughed too, damn her! She laughed at the pale, awkward misfit from West Point. But she didn't laugh after she was alone with me."

"It was pretty fast work, wasn't it? Even the big-chinned boys in the brass buttons had to admit that it was pretty fast work. The belle of the ball, mine within a month, snatched from under your noses!"

"How did I do it, you ask? I'll tell you, Crane. I'll tell you that you don't get a woman with big chins and brass buttons, but you get a woman with what's here and here"—striking his chest and forehead—"and you keep a woman with what's here!"

He thrust out his hand, not a fist, but a grappling claw.

"Does that make sense or doesn't it?" he flung at me. "Because if it doesn't, just ask yourself, who has Corinne now?"

I was so stunned by this maniacal

outburst that I could not speak, but Hayward saw what I was thinking, and for the first time his emotion boiled over into anger.

"You think she's dead, do you?" he cried. "You think I won her and lost her, do you? Well, she's not dead. She's alive. Got that, Crane? She's alive, she's here, she's mine!"

Turning about, he cupped his hands about his mouth.

"Corinne! Wake up, Corinne! Put on your negligee and come down here!" he shouted.

There was a moment of dead silence. I shook my head. Then a door opened upstairs. A moment later, there was the sound of a woman's tread at the top of the blackened staircase. . . .

It was Corinne.

I knew that the instant she stood in the doorway. She seemed thinner and taller, more graceful than she had ever been before. Her skin was lustrous white. And her eyes, fixed on me in a look of cold appraisal, were as bright as gems. She wore a cream-colored robe wrapped closely about her silk nightgown. Her blond hair was parted in the middle and combed down to her shoulders. On her feet she wore the fishskin slippers I had sent to her from Paris.

Corinne!

I would have fainted if she had spoken to me. My head was rocking. I could find no words. There was nothing to say, nothing to believe. Was she actually alive? Or was this some zombiesque apparition? Or had she never been dead? I turned to Hayward in a blank stare of bewilderment.

Hayward actually grinned. "Have you ever seen her more beautiful?" he asked.

I passed my hand across my eyes. "You fiend," I breathed. "What have you done to her?"

"My dear Crane, I've done nothing to her. Nothing, that is, which can bring her any harm. You'll admit she looks healthy."

Healthy! I shuddered. Corinne was an animated corpse. Her face was ashen. Her eyes were haunted.

"You think she's pale?" Hayward asked. "True. But paleness becomes

her. Thinner? But not too thin. You see, Crane, this is a woman's natural condition. Too many women are bloated with overeating and discolored by cosmetic poisoning.

"Even Corinne, when I first met her, was a specimen of this decadence. But I've changed that. The poisons are gone, and all of the petty vanities have been excised. I didn't stop with mere physical cleansing. There was, naturally, an essential purging of the mind."

His mockery was wasted on me. I could do nothing but stare awe-stricken at the woman who stood in the doorway. There was no recognition in Corinne's eyes. She was like a sleep-walker. Zombie? What else was she? Clyde himself had pronounced her dead.

"You are thinking of the death certificate?" Hayward asked suddenly. "It's not the first time a cataleptic patient has fooled a doctor. However, we're grateful that Clyde didn't insist upon a post mortem examination."

He looked at Corinne and she returned the glance, much as a hypnotic patient looks at her physician. Again a tremor went over me. Between these two, I could feel a powerful psychic bond, and all at once I realized how distant Corinne and I now were.

"Yes," said Howard, "she's a different Corinne. She's the real Corinne, pure and unspoiled as dew. You see, we of India regard women as flowers. They must be carefully guarded against injury, tended, nurtured, and looked after. Their beauty would perish unless it were protected. For that's all they are, Crane—beautiful flowers. And a flower has no greater purpose than to be cared for by its gardener."

Hayward brought a glass of wine to his lips and began drinking slowly. His eyes flicked across the space which was separating him from Corinne. A horrible transfiguration took place in her. Her body stiffened as though struck by an electric current. Her mouth opened and closed. There was a tetanic tightening of her muscles. The most awful change came in her eyes.

Hayward finished his drink and threw the glass on the floor. Corinne's eyes followed it, and as the untasted dregs of the wine spilled onto the carpet she ran the tip of her tongue across her lips and made a movement to step forward. Hayward grasped her arm. Immediately, she relaxed. Her eyes closed and she began swaying.

I started forward, but Hayward swiftly scooped her into his arms and carried her up the steps. On the landing, he looked back, and his glance told me not to follow.

FOR the three minutes that he was gone, I didn't move. Even my thoughts were paralyzed. I distinctly heard him carrying Corinne into a bedroom and heard the creaking of the bedspring as he laid her down, but my mind did nothing more than to repeat her name over and over:

"Corinne, Corinne, Corinne. . . ."

I was still in a daze when Hayward came downstairs. He gave me an indulgent grin as he crossed the room. Immediately he filled another glass with wine and sank into a chair.

"Help yourself," he invited.

Shaking the suggestion irritably aside, I reached for cigarettes and nervously lighted one. Even then I was at a loss for words. I simply looked at him, and in that glance he understood all of the horror and revulsion and bewilderment I felt.

It amused him.

"You should see yourself, Crane. What would the War Department think? Is that the face which launched a thousand protocols?"

His attempted comic usage of a trite phrase shattered my mood. I came back to earth with a sickening snap of perspective. An urge for action stung me.

"You're insane, Hayward," I cried. "I don't know what you've done and how you did it, but I do know that you're raving mad. And whatever it is, the police will hear of it. Where's your telephone?"

The grin on his flaccid lips didn't change. He lifted his eyebrows over the edge of the glass.

"Police? I don't think so, Crane.

What would you tell them? That I've resurrected my wife? Think how they'd laugh. Even when you proved that Corinne is alive, they'd deny she'd ever been dead. Y'see, Crane, she never was dead. That makes it rather confusing, doesn't it? As for my sanity, that's a matter of viewpoint. What you so glibly mistake for madness is nothing more than superior knowledge."

He finished the rest of his wine with a grandiose toss of his head.

"Summing it up, I don't exactly see how you can lodge any complaint."

His logic was as cold and lucid as crystal. It made me realize that despite the ghastliness of what he had done there were no legal points against him. He hadn't murdered Corinne.

CHAPTER IV

The Spectre of Corinne

BUT what had he done to Corinne and why?

"Catalepsy, you say?" I demanded. "But why, Hayward? Even if you could produce catalepsy, why in God's name have you done this to Corinne? She loved you, Hayward. Trusted you. And you, you . . ."

"I have endowed her with the highest perfection of life—serenity."

"Serenity!" I gasped. The memory of that possessed face swept over me. "Serenity! Oh, God, Hayward!"

Hayward reached for the wine bottle again and, finding it empty, flung it on the floor and settled back in his chair.

"You saw her at the wrong time," he said. "Ordinarily—twenty-three hours out of twenty-four—her face resembles that of the Buddha. It's only during feeding time that the basic emotions dominate."

Feeding time! His words numbed me with horror.

"It's the wine," he explained. "That's all she eats. The nourishment is just sufficient to provide a heart-beat. There is no waste. She is living

at the level of perfect metabolism. As a result there is no decay or degeneration. I can think of no reason why she should grow old.

"In fifty or sixty years, when her flesh dries, there will be a shrinkage, a kind of mummification, but her body will be as clean as a baby's. By that time, of course, I expect she'll be completely immersed in Nirvana."

He was so calm, so undisturbed by these prophecies, and so confident in his knowledge, that it occurred to me that perhaps I was the mad one. Nirvana? Was there such a thing? And was there any truth to the claims of yoga? Passive resistance to life, submission, self-effacement, negation. The whole nullifying panorama of Hindu lore swirled about me like a potent anesthetic. But no! These things belonged to India, not to America, to decrepit age, not to youth! How, then, could I sanely associate Corinne with such matters. They were as apart as poles.

"You have my sympathy," Hayward said. "Having been an unbeliever once myself, I well know the quagmire of confusion in which your mind is wallowing. Like a cow stuck in mire," he added, chuckling.

"Fortunately for me, when I first began the study of yoga I had a teacher, Swami Kanahvira, now dead, who was the most accomplished *guru* since Pantanjali. I learned slowly, and I convinced myself of yogic powers only after the most severe discipline.

"In your case it has come in one indigestible lump. For that I'm sorry. But you must understand one thing—there is nothing malign in my conduct. I am simply putting into objective reality the cherished dream of any man, the gift of serenity for the woman he loves."

He was godlike in his expression, as though he were personally beyond good and evil, and transcendent of all human laws. Hence his words rang as false as a cracked bell. Imagine, if you can, a youth of twenty-six playing the godhead!

Again Hayward's uncanny telepathic sense struck home.

"You wonder what I get out of

this?" he asked. "Surely there is no normal marital life. But as a result, largely due to the proximity of one as beautiful as Corinne, my sublimated energy is superhuman. I am utilizing that energy for the attainment of the same gift which I have synthetically given Corinne, namely, the Eightfold Path to Nirvana."

AS HE talked I got a clearer picture of him than I've ever had. As though, for the first time, I saw his amazing vitality. It was evident in the lustrous pallor of his face, in the oiliness of his hair, and especially in the spirited animation of his eyes. When he talked, I heard him *think* rather than speak, for he talked as much with his eyes as with his tongue. And his voice was under such marvelous control that it was like the cadenced piping of a flute.

"Creative genius," he said, "is largely a matter of energy control. This is especially true in religious mysticism, where intense cerebration alone can bring about results. Unfortunately each individual is endowed with only so much energy, and he must distribute that energy as cautiously as a physician distributes an opiate.

"Normally a man wastes his energy on trivial matters. He is like a sieve which permits its water to escape willy-nilly. This is vegetative existence. Some men, however, have the power to stop the casual flow of energy, thereby permitting it to flow into definite channels. The fewer the channels, the greater the intensity of energy release, and the greater consequent results.

"Such men are rare, for a program of this kind demands infinite self-control. Hence all of the great saints were simple men who lived rigidly abstemious lives. Thus you find celibacy the inflexible rule of all priestcraft.

"So, when you refrain from expending your energy on the superficial pleasures of the flesh, you are in a position to direct it into any chosen field. Eating and a little exercise are enough. All else must be turned in toward the self. When this is done,

Captain Crane, a man taps the reservoir of Universal Mind. He is, virtually, in the power-house of God."

His words were calm. He was musing aloud.

"Unfortunately," he went on, "few men undertake such a devastating program without inspiration. To Christ, humanity was the inspiration. To Spinoza, it was wisdom. And to Pasteur and Mendel, the advancement of man's lot on Earth. And to Hitler, the power of dictatorship provides sufficient drive. I, however, have no illusions of advancing man or the state. I can think of only one ideal pure enough to justify a life of yoga.

"My inspiration is beauty. This alone can keep me adhering to the path; and in all my travels I have never met a woman as beautiful as Corinne—I mean physical, intellectual, moral, and spiritual beauty. To me, Corinne is the incarnation of beauty.

"I CAN see by your expression, Crane, that I am not alone in my opinion of Corinne. Everyone who has met her thinks the same. But let me ask you this—what would happen if Corinne belonged to you? The answer is evident—a few years of adolescent romance, then children, a home, a life of domesticity, and then she would grow old and fat.

"But with me, she will find emancipation from this sordid fate. Already, she is beyond pleasure and pain, and in a few years the superficial flux of emotional disturbances will be quelled. She will be tranquil.

"And eventually her ego will be replaced by the Universal Mind, which is all-knowing. Meanwhile her beauty is the catalyst which will start me on the same path. Each time that I see her, I burn with the desire to possess her. By withstanding that desire, I can sublimate my energy into the channel of mysticism. And by the time her beauty succumbs to dehydration, I also will be in Nirvana.

"Thus we will have projected ourselves beyond mere physical and intellectual mating and will have fulfilled our marriage vow by entering together into everlasting life."

I do not know whether it was his words or his voice, or a combination of both, which lulled me into accepting all that he said. Already I was numb from shock. Now I became a blank of credence.

To me, Corinne was no less dead, and there were no fresh tears to shed. It was now a nightmarish unreality which intrigued me only by its strangeness. As in a motion picture, I wondered what was going to happen next. And this had to wait upon Hayward, for surely there was no role here for me.

Hayward smiled again, understandingly, utterly lacking his former mockery. It made me feel like an illiterate child learning rhetoric from a kindly instructor.

"You get a glimmering of the truth, I see? So much the better for your peace of mind. But don't let your conviction rest alone on what I have said. Having come so far, you might as well come the rest of the way.

"Later tonight you will observe Corinne as she takes her nourishment. If my words have been impressive, her actual demonstration will sweep you into complete conviction. It's agreed, then? Meanwhile you look as though you need a glass of this excellent tokay."

With these words he reached for a fresh bottle. . . .

It lacked ten minutes of midnight. For the past two hours I had not exchanged a single word with Hayward. I was immersed in groggy introspection. And he, having killed one bottle, was well on the way to consuming the second.

But he was not drunk. He sat deep in a comfortable chair, sipping his wine meditatively, brooding into his glass upon some private musing which I would never know.

Only once had he risen, and that was to change the records on his electric phonograph. Inappropriately, the machine had been playing over and over the ironic compositions of Alec Templeton.

Now, having changed the repertoire, the room was suffused with a sombre Brahms.

Unexpectedly a clock bonged a

single chime. Hayward jerked out of his chair.

"Five of twelve," he said. "I keep a clock to remind me in case I'm asleep or in a trance, for if Corinne doesn't get her wine at exactly twelve the results would be fatal. Her balance of metabolism is hair-line perfect."

"Why twelve?" I asked.

"Arbitrary. There's poetry in the hour."

Opening a wine cabinet, he selected a ruby-glass goblet etched with silver. It was a beautiful piece, and as he lifted it in the light it reflected a diadem of red and silver sparkles.

"Persian," he explained, as he filled it with wine from a decanter. "This was a gift from my *guru*. During his student years he drank tiger's blood from it."

Having filled the goblet, he carried it upstairs to the landing and set it down on a small teakwood table. All of this was visible from where I sat. Then he came downstairs and turned off the lights.

Only the light on the landing remained. It was heavily shaded, permitted only a soft bluish light to glow. It was like a stage scene in an Orson Welles production. As Hayward settled back in the chair beside me I felt an electric, pre-theatre hush.

"You're the first outsider who's ever seen this," he said softly. "Nonetheless I know I can count on your discretion. This isn't the type of thing that you talk about at the Officer's Club."

HE NEEDN'T have spoken. Thoughts of the Officer's Club and of the rest of my life were so remote they had not even entered my mind. As before, yet in greater concentration, I felt myself to be an impersonal observer, a brain and eyes without a heart, about to witness something which itself was heartless.

"She should be coming any minute now," said Hayward.

I could not help myself. A chill of horror ran through me. I wanted

to run. I could not move. It was like looking at the gallows a minute before the condemned person is brought in.

The silence was damning. I could hear Hayward breathing and that was the only sound in the room. The blue light on the landing was blindingly bright. In my heart I prayed for darkness. And we lolled in our chairs like wine-sated Romans in the amphitheater. Disgust, horror, and nausea tried to reach me, and I was worse off because my soul could not admit them.

"Less than a minute," Hayward breathed.

Parts of the landing, those corners where the bedroom doors were located, were hidden by darkness. I could not tell which door was opening. The rest of the landing, particularly the table which supported the goblet of wine, was under a cone of harsh light.

"Here she comes," he whispered.

At that instant, my mind went blank. I tensed. Leaning forward, I riveted my eyes on the darkness where the doors stood.

Corinne stood there.

She was a shadow of herself. In the blue light, her gown was a web and her hair a golden halo. Between these two, there was no semblance of a woman. It was the ghost of Corinne. Her face was a Benda mask of silk, and there was nothing in her eyes but blackness. She moved limply, flowed along, as a phantom moves, seemingly without touching the floor. At the table, she paused, and with the grace of a sylph, lifted the goblet to her lips and drank.

Here the illusion was shattered. It was no phantom drinking. The noise reached me first—the slaking noise of liquid taken greedily. I saw the tetanic convulsions of muscles in her throat. She seemed to gasp as an asphyxiated person gasps for air. The wine spilled. In red rivulets, it dripped from the corners of her mouth. It was like blood. And Corinne, drinking it, was suddenly monstrous.

"Under hypnotic compulsion," Hayward whispered, "the muscular com-

trol is weak. She will improve with practice."

And as she stood there still, spilling the wine down the white of her gown, the thought struck me like a mailed fist—"This is Corinne. This is the girl I have known and loved. This is my Corinne!"

As suddenly as she came, she went. Laying down the goblet, turning around, she vanished into the gloom. I did not know she was truly gone until I heard the faint clicking of the door.

AGAIN the silence fell, and for my life I could not shatter it.

Hayward stood up. In the darkness, he was as ghostlike as she.

"She didn't know we were here. That was better than I expected. It means she is now completely beyond our plane. Nothing can disturb her now, Crane. You have just seen the woman Salome would have liked to be. Now I suppose you'd like a shot?"

"Make it rye," I pleaded.

I knew I could never touch a drop of wine as long as I lived.

"Sorry, no rye. Nothing stronger than wine in this house. Maybe a bit of air? I think it has stopped raining."

He walked to the door, and I followed. The cool cleanliness of the night air did more for me than the strongest rye. I inhaled, I drank the air in gulps. Then Hayward took my arm to lead me down into the garden.

I struck him. Why, I don't know. It was instinctive, as mechanical as striking a snake. I hit him squarely on the chin with a blow that nearly cracked my fist. It was the hardest blow I've ever struck. He snapped up straight, then doubled over. I think his jaw was broken. His mouth was bloody when he picked himself up.

A normal man would have struck back. But Hayward wiped his sleeve across his mouth and grinned—that horribly mocking grin I knew so well.

"Of course," he muttered, "I expected something like that from you.

As I said before, it's a matter of energy running through a sieve."

CHAPTER V

Blood—for Wine

IDID not sleep that night. Nor did Hayward and I exchange another word. Immediately after our scene on the porch, he went back into the house. Later, I heard his chair scraping on the library floor. Presumably he was settling down for a few hours, "intense cerebration."

What did occupy my mind was the bedroom at the top of the stairs where Corinne lay in her deep sleep. It was difficult to withstand the urge to enter the room. I wanted desperately to touch her, if possible, to awaken her and try to pierce the veil which separated her world from mine. That she was under some hypnotic influence I did not doubt. But whether it was a normal somnambulism or a psychic state known only to yoga, I could not guess. One thing was definite—Corinne was alive.

The longer I stood on the porch, the more convinced I was that something must be done to queer Hayward's plans. I was tempted to return to Washington and get Clyde's help, then I canceled the idea. Any publicity would be intolerable. Besides, Clyde had no experience with this type of thing. So it was up to me. But what could I do? I was no psychiatrist, Corinne's hypnotic state was as mysterious to me as death itself. But she was alive, and therein lay all my hope of bringing her back to a normal condition.

It was dawn before I went back into the house, and even then I had formulated no plan of action. The house was silent. Apparently Hayward had gone to bed. I stood at the foot of the stairs for a few minutes, staring at Corinne's bedroom door. Then I abruptly turned about and went back onto the porch. How could I possibly deal with this thing?

I shall not attempt to describe my activities during that day and evening. Externally they were dull. I walked about listlessly, smoked a lot, and ate almost nothing. Mentally, however, I was performing gyrations. How to awaken Corinne? I thought of such things as throwing water on her, shaking her, trying to talk to her. But they were theoretical questions. I did not once attempt to enter her room. I admit that I was frightened. Any blunder on my part might throw her mind off its precarious balance of sanity.

IN THIS I was wise. Hayward, who awakened shortly after noon, apparently sensed my thoughts. Without any preamble he threw a diatribe which once and for all abolished any plans I had formulated.

"I told you once," he lisped through swollen lips, "that Corinne's condition was on the hairline between life and death. Any disturbance will kill her outright. Remember that in case your West Point tradition suggests any heroic rescues."

This was no jest. From his expression and his voice I knew that every word of it was true. But to make it even more clear, he went on with dispassionate iciness, emphasizing his words with a warning forefinger.

"As far as you're concerned, Corinne died over two months ago. You've shed your tears, and if you hadn't blundered in here last night you'd have been none the wiser. I admit I was foolish in showing you Corinne. But in the long run, it's harder on you than on me.

"All day you've been walking around like a sick calf. The officer in you refuses to leave a lady in distress. But the man in you—if there is a man left—would do better to clear out and forget all this. Go back to Washington, tell them you've knelt at Corinne's bier, and then forget her. For believe me, Crane, to you and the others, Corinne is as dead now as she will ever be."

He left me then, entered his study and closed the door. But he did not

know that his words had resurrected my once dormant dread. Corinne was dead to me. But I vowed not to leave this house until she was dead to everyone else, not only to Hayward, but to herself as well.

From then on Hayward and I had no words for each other. When I made no move to leave Cypress House, he merely ignored me. Possibly he wished to show his contempt for me. Nonetheless his taciturnity was convenient. I was left with free run of the house and grounds—except for Corinne's bedroom, which he had locked. And Hayward made no objections when I helped myself to his food and tobacco.

For the most part, he remained in his study on the second floor, and from the occasional glimpses I obtained I saw that he was drinking more than was good for him. Possibly the blow on the jaw hurt him more than he would admit.

Meanwhile I had formulated a simple plan for bringing this bizarre affair to an end, and I bided my time patiently until midnight.

Hayward showed no surprise when I appeared a few minutes before midnight. Probably he thought I only wanted another look at Corinne. He made no comment. Ignoring me, he poured Corinne's wine and carried the goblet up to the landing. This time he did not sit down beside me. After unlocking Corinne's door, he came downstairs and went directly to the library. He had left me alone!

I suspected at first that he was spying on me from some vantage point I knew nothing about, but a silent visit to the library convinced me of my error. Hayward sat at his desk with a thin volume opened before him. He looked too intent to be playing possum.

It was a better break than I had hoped for. My original plan had been forcibly to prevent Corinne from drinking the wine, thereby causing her death from malnutrition. Hayward had said the wine was a necessity and that without it she would die. A painless death, surely, for her heart, without its nutriment, would

simply stop beating. Now there was no need for violence. I would merely take away the goblet.

I was steeled to the job. I knew that it was murder. And I knew that, despite her trance Corinne would have a horrible moment when she found no wine. But the old Corinne would have wanted it done like this. It was the memory of the old Corinne that burned in my heart.

The thing was done with utter simplicity. Three minutes before midnight I walked up to the landing, removed the goblet, and carried it down to the garden, where I emptied the wine onto the ground. As an afterthought, I threw the goblet as far as I could into the night. Re-entering the house, I lowered the lights and settled down for the ghastly ordeal of waiting.

Ghastly is a weak word for it. Time dragged like an anchor. The silence was punctuated by night noises—the brushing of branches against the roof of the house, the whispering of the wind, and unplaceable sounds, like footsteps, or the creaking of floor, or even tensed breathing that was not my own.

I had the chill feeling that even in that darkness I was the object of scrutiny. Added to this, my sense of criminal guilt stirred me to repair the damage before it was too late. Yet I held myself in check. At all cost, this euthanasia must be carried out. If I failed now, I would never have the courage to try again.

The sound of the door opening was electrifying in that silence. The shock seemed to paralyze me into immobility. This was my savior! Without that paralysis I would have tried to call out.

CORINNE was suddenly on the landing. From that distance, I could see only blackness in her eyes. Yet I imagined that they were open and perhaps glazed by the trance that held her. When she stepped to the table a change came over her face. It was horrifying. She groped about like a blind person looking for an object which has been removed from its familiar place.

It was her hands, not her eyes, which exhibited surprise. Opening, closing, grasping, searching, they were animated first with impatience, then with anger, and finally with despair. Suddenly she flattened her hands and swept them frantically across the top of the table. Finding nothing, she straightened, and for a moment it looked as though she would collapse.

This was the most unbearable moment of all. This was the moment I had dreaded, and now, as it came true, I don't know how I stood it. Utter forsakenness was stamped on Corinne's face. Her body trembled, her face seemed whiter, and her hands, lifted to her temples, opened and closed as though kneading that poor brain, trying ineffectually to stimulate it to understand what had happened.

Suddenly her tension relaxed. Her face cleared. Bracing herself, she gripped the bannister and started to walk slowly down the stairs.

I shrank back. Down she came, straight toward me, her face a blank, her eyes clouded with blue shadows, with nothing in them but canny intelligence. For a horrible moment, I thought she would touch me, but at the foot of the stairs she turned and went directly to the table standing beside Hayward's customary chair. Standing on it was a decanter of wine.

Hypnosis? Tropism? I could not say. Something magnetic seemed to draw her. She reached for the decanter, removed the stopper, lifted it to her mouth. . . .

One, two, three, four sips. . . . She sighed as she set the decanter down. Then she turned and walked past me to the stairs, her lips glistening with wine, her white chin overrun with a red rivulet. For an indeterminable time, I did not move. Corinne vanished at the top of the stairs, and the moment after the door clicked shut I heard a voice speak softly from behind me.

"You see," said Hayward, "it's out of your control. Her flesh demands the wine, and the will-power behind it cannot be overcome."

I left Cypress House immediately. I had no plans, I didn't know where I was going. I only wanted to get away and give myself a chance to think this out. I drove aimlessly for hours. Finally my sleepiness forced me to draw up beside a lunch wagon. I ordered breakfast, and spent another two hours over my coffee.

It was clear what had happened. I had simply misjudged the potency of Corinne's hypnotic state. The only thing I could do was to try again. The next time all wine must be taken from Corinne's reach.

During the remainder of the day and evening I thought out my plans over and over. There must be no hitch. Tonight *all* the wine must be removed.

At eleven o'clock, I returned to Cypress House. It was a sultry black night, ideal for my purpose. A hundred yards from the house I stopped my car and proceeded on foot. I had better luck than I expected. The house was black. Hayward had gone to bed.

I had no difficulty entering. In his drunken stupor Hayward had neglected to lock the doors. So much the better. I slid into the living room at just ten minutes to twelve. There was no time to lose. As last night, I removed Corinne's goblet—Hayward had found a silver one someplace for the purpose—and emptied the wine outdoors. Following this, I searched the house and gathered every bottle of wine, then packed them all in the wine cabinet and locked the door. As an added precaution I threw away the key.

It was then just twelve o'clock. Corinne's bedroom door opened on the dot.

Pressing myself back against the wall, I watched Corinne cross the landing toward the table. She looked somehow more wan, as though the delay of last night's meal had produced fatigue. And again, as she reached for the goblet which should have been there, a look of stunned surprise came over her face. This time, however, there was no hesitation before her next move. Turning from the table, she started down the stairs.

I flattened myself as inconspicuously as possible. She was less than three feet from me, but her eyes were fixed upon the table beside Hayward's chair. It was empty. She stopped. Again her face changed from bewilderment to anger and to despair. Again it looked as though she would faint. And again she stiffened as her fuddled brain grasped a straw of hope. I could almost see an illumination in her face. She lifted her hands and walked directly to the wine cabinet.

It was ghastly. She rattled the handle, and when the door did not open, she began to dig at it with her fingernails. I could hear them scraping on the wood. She fought desperately—for her life. But the door did not give way. Then she realized its futility. Her body sagged. She turned around.

For a moment she didn't move. She seemed to be suspended in a vacuum of despair. Her eyes roved about the room, wide, haunted eyes that passed over me without any recognition, and finally lighted upon the stairs. Again something seemed to draw her. She lifted her hands like a sleepwalker and moved slowly across the room. At the foot of the steps she paused, as though uncertain of her next move. Then she straightened. She went swiftly up the stairs and disappeared in the gloom of the landing.

I watched breathlessly, then my knees sagged and I slumped against the wall. Sweat oozed over my face. My heart pounded. But I had won! In a few minutes at the most Corinne would fall into a sleep of death.

I waited. It was out of my hands now. One minute passed. I felt my strength returning. Two minutes. I worked up the courage to walk to the foot of the stairs. Three minutes. I began to ascend the steps.

I was halfway up the stairs when I heard a door slam. There was a moment of silence, then an ear-splitting scream rang out. I don't know if it was a man's or a woman's voice. I know only that it was hysterical with horror. Before I could take another step I heard the sound

of stumbling footsteps coming down the upstairs hall.

Out of the blackness a figure came, half-running, half-staggering, with its arms flopping grotesquely and its throat giving voice to a gurgling moan. It was Hayward. As he came under the glow of bluish light I saw his face white and drawn, his mouth an oval of glistening red. He was only half dressed. His bare chest was crimson with blood. And then I saw why. The whole front of his throat was torn out.

When he saw me, he tried to call out, but the words were macerated into groans. He tried to clutch me to keep from falling, but I backed away instinctively and he fell sprawling at my feet. Even then, he tried to rise. He got as far as resting on his elbow, but when he tried to speak again a spasm shook him

and he fell again, this time to remain motionless. Without examining him I knew that he was dead.

Vaulting his body, I ran down the hall to his bedroom. But I didn't enter. Corinne lay across the threshold, face-down, her arms outstretched as in supplication. She, too, was dead. But the blood on her hands was not her own. And the blood on her mouth was Hayward's—red as wine. And as I backed away, I could smell the wine, the strong odor of the wine he had breathed from his throat into the room.

I retreated from the weird house, sobbing under the strain of the broken spell.

"Corinne's really dead now," I mumbled.

"It's better so—Hayward, too . . . Better so. . . Better . . . so."

