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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

"Then a dreadful metamorphosis began to take place."



# The Silver Bullet

By PHYLLIS A. WHITNEY

*'An eldritch tale of horror, of a terrible adventure on Loon Mountain,  
and a talisman that was potent in the old days  
against witches and warlocks*

**F**OG writhed up from the hollow of Loon Valley and crawled thick and yellow before the headlights of the car. Ramsay's hands tightened on the wheel as he swung away from destruction and back onto the muddy, unseen road. He glanced once at the white-lipped woman beside him and then gave his at-

attention to the obscurity that whirled beneath the wheels of the car.

"We can't go on," he said at last. "It's impossible to see the road. I can't risk it."

From the corner of his eye he could see the convulsive movement of the woman's hands in her lap.

"Linda!" he warned.

Again her hands twitched. "It's this beastly fog. It has a slimy feel against my face—as though I'd been touched by a slug. We *must* go on, Gordon."

Quietly he applied the brakes. He could feel the sucking of the tires as the car came to a halt in the mud. The woman gave a little moan of despair and sank back in her seat. He watched her for a moment in silence, trying to recall MacDonald's exact words.

How had the doctor put it? That if ever she were to overcome her strangeness, these whims of Linda's must not go unchallenged.

"My dear," he said, "we've come here to help you—to hunt back to the very beginnings of your life and lay them in the open. Once we've discovered the reason, the origin of these nervous spells, we can exorcise them and you'll be well again."

"Exorcise!" she repeated. "What a horrible word! As though I were possessed by devils." She laughed with a faint note of hysteria in her voice, only to break off as the sound struck flatly against the crawling wall of fog.

Ramsay lowered the window beside her and stared into the writhing darkness.

"Look!" he cried, suddenly eager. "I do believe we're near a house. Isn't that a light?"

The fog thinned, drew aside its heavy folds and then rolled soundlessly back upon its tracks again. In the instant of

clearing, however, the light had been visible—a square, dim eye in the mountain above them.

"We'll go there," he said, "and ask for directions. Perhaps we can find a place to put up for the night."

Linda sat motionless as he got out and went around the car to open her door. "We shouldn't have come, Gordon. My mother must have had some terrible reason for sending me away from Loon Mountain with strangers when I was a baby. There's something revolting about the very name of the place. Loon Mountain! I've said it over and over to myself until it begins to sound like the words of an idiot."

Ramsay took her arm impatiently. These fantasies of his wife's were beyond the understanding of his own practical mind. He knew only that he must follow MacDonald's directions and get to the bottom of the thing.

**B**RAMBLES caught at their ankles as they struggled toward the light, and once a fog-wet branch slapped across their cheeks.

"It *is* slimy," Linda said, wiping the moisture from her face with a quick gesture of disgust.

The eye grew larger as they stumbled up the hillside, and they were able to discern the wavering black outline of a building through the fog. Two pointed gables pierced the night like the pricked ears of a wolf, while across the entire front stretched a ramshackle veranda, its cracked palings forming an eery, broken-toothed grin.

Ramsay lifted his fist to the door, and at the first echo of his knock the gleaming eye of the window was wiped from existence, leaving the night darker than before. There was a faint, clicking sound from the room beyond, and although he

could see nothing, the man received the strange impression of a human eye staring at him through a knothole in the door.

Linda's hand lay heavily upon his arm. "Come away!" she whispered.

But even as she spoke, light reappeared at the window and the door was pulled inward, leaving the two upon its threshold blinking in the flood of light. A woman stood in the opening with her back to the illumination, so that her face and the details of her person were invisible.

"What do you want?" she asked in a voice which, heard there on the lonely mountainside, seemed possessed of an odd, metallic beauty.

"The fog made it unsafe for driving," Ramsay said. "We were bound for Loon Mountain—the town on Loon Mountain."

"This is Loon Mountain," the woman told him, continuing to stand uninvitingly in the doorway. "But the town is five miles down the road."

"Five miles!" Ramsay echoed. "It might as well be a hundred in weather like this. There's a sheer precipice on the left of the road, and my wife is nervous."

He could see the turning of the woman's body as she moved her eyes. Apparently she was looking at Linda for the first time.

"Come in," she said, stepping abruptly back into the room.

The words were more a command than an invitation. Linda obeyed and Ramsay followed his wife through the doorway. Immediately their hostess flung the door shut behind them and Ramsay experienced an odd sense of relief, as if for the first time since they had begun the upward journey from the valley, they had truly escaped the groping fog-fingers.

The woman had crossed the bare floor of the room and was standing beside a

deal table, her hands fumbling at a kerosene lamp. She presented a somewhat startling figure to Ramsay's city-accustomed eyes. Her dress was of a heavy dark material, sack-like and without style or shape, while about her head her hair was wound in coil after night-black coil, smooth and gleaming as satin.

Even as he considered her she turned from the lamp and he was able to view for the first time the utter, wild beauty of her face; an alarming beauty that sent his eyes shifting hurriedly to Linda's own dusky, more passive loveliness. It was a relief to see Linda's yellow, modern little sport dress, her tinted fingernails and the yellow felt hat pulled down upon her dark waves of hair. She seemed so entirely sane and as far removed from this strange, black-clad creature as the sunshine of noonday was from midnight.

Linda, too, had felt the spell of the other's beauty. She was staring with velvet-dark eyes that seemed abnormally large in the whiteness of her face.

"Now that we know just how far the town is," she said hesitantly, "perhaps we'd better go on. We can travel slowly and there will probably be a hotel——"

"You can stay here," the woman offered. "This used to be a hotel. We still take people in now and then."

Ramsay accepted quickly, grateful enough to postpone the journey along the mountainside.

Without further speech the woman opened a drawer in the table and drew out a candle which she set in a grease-spattered holder. She had just lighted a match and was bringing it near the wick when, somewhere behind Ramsay, a door was opened. Under ordinary circumstances he would have turned at once to view the newcomer, but something in the utter quiet of the woman in black held his attention.

It was as though all power of motion had been drained from her body at the sound of that opening door. She stood with the candle in one hand and the burning match in the other, and made no effort to bring the two together. There was something horrid in her frozen immobility. Ramsay watched in fascination while the match burned nearer and nearer her fingers. Surely it was singeing her skin. And then, when he was sure that the smell of burning flesh had risen in the room, the tension snapped and with a quick flick of her hand the match was extinguished and hurled to the floor.

She turned and faced the door, and Ramsay turned also, finding his will suddenly freed. Framed against the blackness of the corridor behind him stood a man, a tall, spare individual with darkly yellowed skin, inky hair and the most curious eyes Ramsay had ever seen. They possessed a flickering, greenish flatness and moved not at all in their sockets, but stared straight ahead while a strange shimmer, like the flutter of green moonlight on water, went on in their depths.

The woman in black moved quickly across the room, threw out a long, slim-fingered hand and shut the door abruptly in that staring face. Then, with no word of explanation, she returned to the lighting of her candle.

**R**AMSAY found himself listening tensely for departing footsteps beyond the door, but there came no sound. Was the fellow still standing there with his flickering eyes fixed upon the closed door, like the eyes of a corpse upon the lid of its coffin? God! what a terrible thought! Was this night going to leave him as nervous and fanciful as Linda?

"I'll fetch our bags from the car," he muttered and went reluctantly back to the fog.

When he returned, the woman was awaiting him with her candle ready. She crossed to the door leading into the corridor, and it seemed to Ramsay that she hesitated for the merest instant before flinging it open. When she did so, the long hallway stretched empty and dark into the far reaches of the house. Linda followed the moving candle, stopping once to look back at Ramsay, her eyes glittering too brightly in the flicker of light.

At the end of the door-lined corridor a staircase presented itself to view, steep and narrow, with steps that creaked beneath the weight of their mounting feet. Again there was a corridor to traverse and again there were closed doors on every side. What was there about a closed door, Ramsay thought, to give him this sense of hidden evil? After all, the many rooms must be vacant, disused, harboring only dust and echoes, and perhaps a stray rat or two.

He was relieved, however, when they came to a halt and their hostess took a key from the pocket of her sack-like dress and fitted it to the keyhole of the last door. It screeched rustily in the lock and the door swung inward.

The room was large, with a bare expanse of dark floor. There were two iron bedsteads from which the dirty white paint had peeled in layers, one chair, a rickety washstand bearing a white bowl and cracked pitcher, and, as Ramsay saw with relief, a second kerosene lamp.

With the lamp burning, the place seemed more habitable. Their hostess departed for bedclothes and hot water and Linda drew off her felt hat with a weary gesture and laid it on the chair.

"My head feels so tired," she said, "so heavy."

Ramsay opened the two travelling-bags while Linda slipped out of her sport

jacket, leaving her arms bare in the sleeveless jumper beneath. Automatically Ramsay's eyes sought her left shoulder. He had learned that the odd little birthmark in the shape of an inverted cross was a gage by which he could reckon the depth of her emotion. When she was happy, calm, the mark was a pale rose, scarcely to be discerned against the smooth skin of her shoulder. It was not pale now, but glowed in a deep vermilion blush. He was suddenly conscience-stricken.

"Linda," he said, "if it means so much to you, we can go on even now. If this house frightens you, we won't stay."

She looked at him almost listlessly and began plucking at the pins that bound up her heavy dark hair.

"It's too late now." Her voice was without emotion and she stared at him for a second as if at a stranger. "Don't you understand? It's too late!"

The mark on her shoulder flushed to an angrier scarlet. She snatched the hairbrush from her bag and began to brush her hair vigorously, so that it covered her shoulders in a thick mantle and began to gleam with a life of its own.

**A** KNOCK upon the door bespoke the return of their hostess. She came into the room, her arms laden, and then paused to stare at Linda.

"Your hair!" she said in a low, startled voice.

Linda's brushing hand went steadily on. "Yes—my hair?"

"It's very beautiful. Smooth and sleek——"

"Like yours?" asked Linda softly.

It seemed to Ramsay in that instant that a strange look of understanding passed between the two; then the woman in black shook her head vaguely and turned toward the beds.

There was a long silence while she

worked. When she had completed her task, she took a key from her pocket and laid it upon the washstand.

"For the door," she said to Ramsay. "You may want to lock it tonight."

She turned to go, but something in the sheen of Linda's hair seemed to fascinate her so that she paused to lift a long strand in her fingers, revealing the bare shoulder beneath, where the crimson mark burned against the flesh. The woman's eyes widened; her slender fingers clutched convulsively about the strand of hair, then let it slip away from her touch.

"You mustn't stay here!" she gasped. "You must go at once!"

"What do you mean?" Ramsay asked, more startled than he cared to admit.

The woman turned, her black eyes blazing. "Fool! To bring her here! You must go quickly—now!"

Strangely enough it was Linda who remained calm. "It wouldn't be any use to go now. It's too late."

The woman's head with its heavy bands of hair drooped in submission. Then her fingers sought again for the pocket of her dress and she drew forth a small object that shimmered in the light. She pressed the thing into Linda's hand.

"I've been keeping this for a long time, but I've never dared use it. Perhaps you will have more courage than I."

She was gone quickly, leaving Linda standing in the middle of the room, staring at the small, silvery thing in her hand.

"What is it?" Ramsay asked. "What was she talking about?"

Linda began to laugh with the old trace of hysteria in her voice. "It's fantastic! Idiotic! A silver bullet. Do you see?"—extending her palm to Ramsay. "A silver bullet!"

"What——" he began, but she broke in upon him, her voice lowered to a whisper.

"Don't you know? Fire and silver for witches and warlocks!"

Her laughter rose shrilly. Ramsay threw one arm about her shoulders and clapped a hand to her mouth. "I won't have you uttering such nonsense!"

She broke away from his grip with a strength that surprised him. "You should be reassured!" she cried mockingly. "You see—I'm not a witch. If I were, the very touch of silver would burn me. But it doesn't. I can hold it in my hand—like this."

"Yes," he said soothingly. "Of course you can."

Gradually her excitement subsided. Her body drooped like that of a weary child and tears came into her eyes. She was very light in his arms as he carried her to the bed.

"It isn't true," she whispered. "Tell me it isn't true! I mean—there aren't any witches? There couldn't be—because they burned them all in Salem."

"Hush!" he said. "There never were any witches except in fairy-tales."

Long after she had slipped into the soft, cool silk of her nightgown, he sat beside her bed, waiting for her to fall asleep. She had thrust the silver bullet beneath her pillow, and its presence seemed to comfort her, for her eyelids ceased to flutter and after a time she slept.

**R**AMSAY quietly locked the door. Then he walked to the one window and endeavored to peer into the night. Fog curled to the very sill, obscuring the mountainside. There was to be no sleep for him, he knew, as he sat down on his cot to watch and wait for dawn. Once daylight came, they would be on their way—out of this terrible Loon Mountain region with its unreal inhabitants and insane talk of witchcraft, away from that

strangely beautiful woman and the mad, ghastly creature who had stared through the doorway downstairs. He wished he could erase the memory of the flat, shimmering gaze of the man into whose eyes he had looked so short a while before. Or was it a short while? Somehow his sense of time was vanishing. All memory, all recollection, seemed to consist of two flat-surfaced eyes that stared hypnotically—stared and flickered like some noiseless measure of time.

He blinked and shrugged his shoulders violently. He must stop thinking of those eyes. He must forget them—think about his surroundings, about Linda. He froze into sudden, terror-stricken immobility. The lamp—the kerosene lamp! It was out. But he did not remember its going. A gray streak of light had begun to crawl through the window. The *open* window. And it was dawn.

He started up from the cot, Linda's name on his lips. And then he saw.

Linda's bed was tumbled. The pillow bore the mark of her head, but Linda herself was gone!

He strode to the window and looked out upon the gray and ghostly morning. The fog had cleared a little, but it still lay in wreaths upon the drab shrubbery. The explanation of Linda's going was apparent. What a fool he had been not to examine the window more closely last night!

The room was located at the back of the house, and the window opened immediately upon a narrow veranda, which in turn could be reached by an easy swing from the sloping side of the hill. Out of that window Linda had been spirited while he had sat blindly upon his bed, dreaming of a strange green gaze.

He turned from the window and rushed across to the locked door. The rusty key defied him, only to give sud-

denly before the force of his twisting fingers. The corridor beyond was silent and filled with night. He gave no thought now to closed doors, but stumbled to the stairway, whose steps shrieked beneath the weight of his plunging feet.

The large room at the front of the house was empty.

He turned back through the corridors, shouting now, waking long-dead echoes with his strident voice. Every moment he expected to see a door open upon the banded head and black-garbed figure of the woman who had admitted him the night before. But no door opened, and when the last echo had died away only a heavy silence came down upon the house.

The silence was more terrible than all the tumult that had gone before. He fought against it, trying the doors systematically, banging upon their panels, but the echoes had a tired sound as though they longed to creep back to their crevices and sleep again through undisturbed years.

Every door was locked, and the corridors, graying now in the dawnlight, gave back only emptiness to his cries. In the end he gave up and returned to the room where Linda had slept. Perhaps, after all, this was only some terrible nightmare from which he would awake at any moment. Perhaps he would find Linda in her place beneath the bedclothes, her hair dusky against the white pillow. But the room was as empty as the rest of the house.

He sat down upon the one chair and buried his head in his hands, trying to force sanity into his benumbed brain.

After a time he heard a sound that brought him erect and tense, the sound of footsteps upon the porch below, the grating of a key in a lock.

He was out of the room and down the stairway in an instant. The bare front

room had a human occupant this time, and he found himself exchanging stares with a little, straight-backed old man who gazed at him in astonishment.

"Well," the fellow drawled after a moment, "an' how did *you* get in here?"

"I was let in. We took a room for the night—my wife and I. And now my wife has——"

The little man tugged at his gray-peppered beard. "Slow up a bit, stranger. *Who* let you in?"

"Why—the woman who keeps the place. She——"

The old man shook his head. "There ain't no woman who keeps this place. *I* keep it. But I'm only a sort of caretaker. Nobody lives here any more."

"Do you think I'm mad?" Ramsay shouted. "I tell you a woman let us in last night. And now my wife's disappeared. I've got to find her!"

"If you've really lost somebody, I'll try an' help you. My name's Samuels. An' if you'll go ahead and give me the whole story without gettin' too excited about it, we'll see what we kin do."

**H**ow he got through that day, Ramsay never knew. He told his story to a dozen apathetic men of the countryside and each one shook his head in apparent doubt as to the teller's sanity. There was no such woman as he described on Loon Mountain. There was no one who could possibly have let him into the house. Some doubt was expressed as to the existence of Linda, until Ramsay brought down the yellow sport dress and shook it before their puzzled eyes.

Finally a search party was organized and sent out to scour the mountain. Ramsay remained behind. He had the strange feeling that somehow Linda might come back of her own accord, and she must not return to find him gone.



It was not until early evening that Samuels reappeared. He came into the room with a certain hesitancy in his step.

"I—I guess we've found her," he said, his bleared old eyes avoiding Ramsay's. "There's a gravel pit up yonder on the mountain."

"Where is she?" Ramsay cried, shaking the man's shoulder.

"Don't be in a hurry, son. It's too late for hurry now."

The significance of his words began to make itself felt.

"What do you mean? She—she's not hurt?"

"I hate to tell you, son. We—we found her at the bottom of the pit. Her—her neck's broken, I guess."

Ramsay could only stare in horror. This *was* a nightmare! Why, only last night he and Linda—his eyes moved in slow fascination toward the veranda and the steps.

It was true, then. They were bringing her in now. His Linda. Her head was twisted terribly so that the black coils of her hair hung across her face and dripped toward the floor. The soft silk of her gown was muddied and torn, and against the dead white skin of her shoulder the tiny mark of an inverted cross stood out, livid and colorless.

There was a bench against one wall and the bearers laid their pitiful burden upon it and turned away.

Very gently Ramsay lifted the heavy strands of hair from her face and stared into the dark, sightless eyes. In the first instant of his looking the shock was too great to register properly. Then realization swept upon him—and relief. The face turned so blindly toward him was the face of that dark, strange woman of the night before.

He turned quietly to the uneasy men, "This is not my wife," he said.

He knew by the quick, sidelong glances they exchanged that they thought him mad. One after another turned away from him.

"Don't you know this woman?" he cried. "I tell you *she* is the one who let us in last night!"

Samuels looked down at the pale face. "She's not from hereabouts. I'd know if she was."

Perhaps in that instant Ramsay did go a little mad. Blank, futile walls seemed to be crowding upon him, crushing all thought, all power of reasoning. He sank onto a chair in a corner and sat with his face pressed into the cold dampness of his hands.

As the long moments slid away, it seemed to him that something hateful and malevolent was crowding itself into his consciousness. He steeled his mind against its onslaught, but the sense of a malicious shadow encroaching upon his reason persisted. He began to see with an intense clarity that he knew would be the last before the oblivion of madness swept down upon him—unless, by the strength of his own will, he could overthrow the menace.

Drunkenly he staggered to his feet and snatched up the heavy cylinder of the smoking lamp.

"Get out!" he cried. "All of you!" And he advanced upon the roomful waving the lamp like a vengeful torch.

At once the pressure upon his brain subsided. The people of Loon Mountain faded from the room and Ramsay knew the thing that was required of him if he was to save himself and reach Linda. He must be as cunning as the dark forces leagued against him. Never again must he give way to despair, thus opening a doorway to all evil. And he must fight alone. By some strange intuition he knew that all the mountainside was

against him—little men like Samuels, with blurred and shifty eyes, crowding their lies upon him; driving him with a slow, devilish persistence until his mind would abandon its last outpost and they would be rid of him for ever.

They knew the identity of that tragic figure well enough. Of that he was certain. But they sought to bemuse him with their cunning until his reason recoiled so that he would take the dead woman and return to the world, a chattering simpleton, unaware that Linda remained behind.

LAMP in hand, Ramsay crossed the room and lifted the cloth from the face of the woman who lay upon the bench. How terrible she was in death! How bitterly beautiful! He stood for minutes, staring down upon her utter pallor, as if by the very force of his gaze he would draw out the secret—the dark mystery—from the languor of death.

Who was she? How came Linda's gown upon her bruised body? And what was the meaning of that mark upon her shoulder? Where lay the key to this entanglement of Linda's life and hers?

Overcoming a certain repugnance, he lifted a strand of hair that shrouded her shoulder and bent close above the mark. It was indeed the duplicate of the cross which Linda bore upon her upper arm. He allowed the hair to glide from his fingers absently and was startled to see the woman's head twist suddenly to one side.

It was the weight of the hair, he told himself, but the movement sent a chill of horror through his veins. It was as though the woman on the bench had, by some horrible power, twisted her head in order to stare past him with her wide, dead gaze. He followed the direction of that stare with his own eyes, fascinated in spite of himself.

W. T.—7

It was then he saw the rifle, half shadowed by the open door which led to the hall. He crossed the room in an instant and snatched it up, his mind clear, his body ready for action. The feel of the weapon gave him back a sense of reality, brought release from the frenzy that had come down upon him with his first sight of Linda's empty bed.

The gun was unloaded, but there must be ammunition about the house. Once armed, he would not be afraid to venture into the mysteries of Loon Mountain. Somewhere out in the smother of darkness Linda was waiting for him to come to her help. He had failed her long enough.

But there was no ammunition to be found. He recalled then the silver bullet that Linda had placed beneath her pillow. That might serve, and it would be better to have a single shot in the gun than none at all.

He stumbled up the stairs and down the long corridor to the bedroom. Eagerly his fingers sought beneath the pillow. It was there! The cool silver made a talisman against the crowding shadow of the house as he went back down the stairs. He recalled Linda's words of the night before, less ready now to laugh them to scorn. Too many dark and unintelligible things had happened since then.

The bullet had evidently been cast for this very rifle. He slipped it into the chamber and then went out into the waiting silence of Loon Mountain.

FOG again! An undulating world of fog that twined slimy gray tentacles about him, thrusting him back and down with a weight that pressed upon his spirit rather than his body; that tugged at his eyelids and raised within him so deep a desire for sleep that he could scarcely deny the impulse.

He did deny it, however, with the new power that the knowledge of the loaded gun had given him. Straight up into the wet shrubbery of the mountainside he strode, and so heavy was the fog that the light from the open door behind him vanished instantly from view. For a little while he walked aimlessly, and then, in one of those rare moments when the fog rolled to a higher level, his eyes made out a difference in shading in the gray wall ahead—a flaking of yellow, as though a bonfire in some hollow cast a reflection upon the ceiling of fog.

The gravel pit! He began to move more warily, and as he advanced, the flicker of light grew clearer as it beat against the heavy atmosphere. The sound of a voice rose suddenly from the void ahead, chanting in a dreadful, unknown tongue.

Forewarned, Ramsay dropped to his knees and squirmed across the wet ground, snake-like on his belly. Gone was his assurance now, gone all reason; gone, too, his desire for sleep. His flesh crept at the hideous tautophony of that voice, and a horror greater than any he had ever known swept through him.

Involuntarily he closed his eyes as he crept forward, dreading the moment when the veil would be torn from his vision and he would look down upon the horror in the pit below. His groping fingers found the edge of a precipice, light flared against his closed lids and an odor rose to his nostrils—an odor of rot, of death and decay.

He pressed his face into the clean, damp earth for a long moment; then with a quick lift of his head he opened his eyes and fixed his gaze upon the scene below. A shudder passed through every limb and cold drops of sweat trickled down the sides of his face. Always and for ever the thing that was happening in

the gravel pit would be etched upon his brain.

There was no bonfire as he had expected, but only the pin-point flaring of a myriad candles, burning aslant in the stifling hollow of the pit as they moved in a crawling, everlasting circle, carried backward by a multitude of black-shrouded figures. The circling candles were horrid enough, but it was the naked, obscene thing which lay in the center of the circle that set Ramsay shuddering with repugnance.

Perhaps at one time it had been a man, but so hideously and unspeakably had it been mutilated that it was now a mere heap of quivering flesh stretched upon a sacrificial block. With an effort Ramsay tore his eyes from the beastly sight and his heart gave a stifling leap as he did so.

Two figures had stepped from the obscurity beyond the circling lights. One of these was the man with the green, flat gaze. The other was Linda, white-robed and more dreadfully beautiful than he had ever seen her. About her naked shoulders the black coils of her hair moved uncannily with a strange life of their own. Her eyes were set and staring, and in her extended hands she held a small black bowl, against the edges of which trembled a murky liquid.

The man with the green eyes lifted a dark, thin hand, while the abominable voice in the background chanted on and on.

"Drink!" he commanded.

Slowly, with unseeing eyes, the woman raised the bowl to her lips, and in doing so, half turned toward the evil gaze of the man at her side.

Ramsay's voice grated from his throat in a harsh scream that he barely recognized as coming from his own lips.

"Linda!"

The woman started violently, so that

liquid spurted from the bowl in her fingers and left a spatter of scarlet against her white robe. The gaze which commanded hers wavered not at all at the cry. The man's swarthy hand was still raised in its gesture of command.

"Drink!" he repeated softly.

Again Ramsay screamed. "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

The black figures in the pit ceased their backward circling for an instant and he was aware of faces tilted curiously toward him—faces he seemed to recognize—Samuels' bleared eyes and the faces of his mountain neighbors. Then the heads turned and the low sound of a dreadful laughter rose upon the night.

So they *were* in league against him—these dwellers on Loon Mountain? This, then, was their reason for refusing to recognize the dead woman? They were banded together by a dreadful alliance, sworn to oppose his search for Linda.

Was his gun impotent? Was he helpless against the malevolent power of the man in the pit below? Man—or warlock?

He raised the butt of the gun to his shoulder and rested the barrel upon the edge of the precipice. One shot only was allowed him. He dared not miss. Those below were paying no attention now, circling again in the eery light. Once more Linda had lifted the black bowl to her lips. Ramsay sighted along the barrel.

The shot crashed upon the hateful night, echoing from the side of the mountain to the valley and back again, silencing the monotony of the chanting voice. All motion in the pit ceased; all attention was fixed with incredulity upon the figure of the man within the circle of candlelight.

For a moment he stood there, staggering a little upon his feet. Then a dread-

ful metamorphosis began to take place—a transmutation too fearful for the eyes of man to witness. Ramsay hid his face against the damp earth, his ears tortured by the shrieking of voices and the trample of flying feet. When he dared to gaze once more into the pit below, he could see the flicker of three dying candles and the stained white robes of Linda, his wife.

Cautiously he slipped down the steep slide of earth and lifted the unconscious girl in his arms. As he did so a candle sputtered out, and in the light of the remaining two, stuck upright in the ground, he saw again the horror of that torn thing upon the slab of the sacrifice block. He pressed Linda tightly in his arms and went round the object, only to thrust one foot into a moldering obscenity that crawled below the block. He drew back with a stifled cry and in the dying candlelight he glimpsed two flat, greenish eyes that shimmered faintly from an ooze of gray and jelly-like matter.

**S**OMEHOW he fled back to the fog-filled world above the pit. Somehow, with Linda in his arms, he stumbled along the mountainside—past the black outline of the building, with its gaping, lamp-lit doorway, back to the car and the road.

Linda lay against the seat, pale to her very lips, but conscious now. As the familiar jolting along the mountainside began again, she began to talk very softly, half to herself.

"She was my sister—my twin. She knew because of the mark. Before she died she told me—everything. We were dedicated when we were born. Dedicated to—*that!* But because our mother was good, she tried to get us away from Loon Mountain. Myself they never found, but *he* caught my sister and brought her back. She didn't know what he was—no one knew—only that he was something evil

that had crept up from some dark place in the earth.

"But my sister was not obedient to the cult. In her heart she was good, like our mother who had died because of her goodness. And in the end my sister died too. They could afford to fling her over the pit once they had me to take her place."

By some instinct Ramsay kept the car to the road while he listened, until at last the fog thinned and rolled back upon the mountains. Far ahead a hint of gray light crawled up the sky.

Linda sighed and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the shadow of horror had begun to fade.

"I'm free now," she went on softly. "I couldn't be free before, because he was calling me. Wherever I went, he was there—at the back of my mind—calling."

Against her bare shoulder the faintest tint of rose gave evidence of a mark that was like a tiny inverted cross. Ramsay slipped one arm about her and drew her close to him on the seat.

"Look!" he whispered, "far ahead along the sky. Dawn, my darling!"