

« « « GRIPPING TALES IN EVERY ISSUE » » »

# Strange STORIES

VOL. IV, NO. 1

CONTENTS

AUGUST, 1940



## THE SEAL OF SIN

*A Complete Novelet of Evil Powers*

By **HENRY KUTTNER**

*Both Blessed and Cursed is the Hand that Wears the Ancient Seal of Solomon, Until a Twisted Soul is Drawn into Its Sinister Bondage and Reaps a Ghastly Harvest . . . . .* 14

<b>THE DEAD KNOW ALL</b>	<b>Norman A. Daniels</b>	
<i>A Would-be Murderer Meets His Nemesis!</i> . . . . .		31
<b>THE HOUSE OF STANLEY</b>	<b>George J. Rawlins</b>	
<i>A Knight in Armor Rides from the Past to Preserve His Noble Name</i> .		37
<b>THE TAPESTRY GATE</b>	<b>Leigh Brackett</b>	
<i>Mortal Greed Was the Force that Drew Souls into the Devil's Cloth</i> . .		46
<b>SATAN'S SIDESHOW</b>	<b>Carson Judson</b>	
<i>Between Two Men Joined by a Strange Law of God Comes a Flame of Searing Hate to Rip the Bonds—and Wreak Vengeance!</i> [A Complete Novelet]		54
<b>BIRKETT'S TWELFTH CORPSE</b>	<b>August W. Derleth</b>	
<i>Darkly Swirling Waters Covered All that Remained of a Hideous Secret</i> .		67
<b>I AM GOING TO CRACOW!</b>	<b>Maria Moravsky</b>	
<i>A Swamp Witch Shows Jacob Wolski the Road to His Heart's Desire</i> . .		70
<b>THE DEAD SHALL RISE UP</b>	<b>Will Garth</b>	
<i>A Prophecy Defeats a Merciless Ghoul</i> . . . . .		79
<b>DESIGN FOR DOOM</b>	<b>Eli Colter</b>	
<i>An Ancient Bronze Tool Evokes Weird Visions of Violence</i> . . . . .		81
<b>THE BLACK ARTS (A Department)</b>	<b>Lucifer</b>	
<i>Join THE BLACK ARTS CLUB—Coupon on Page 96</i> . . . . .		90

STRANGE STORIES, published bi-monthly by Better Publications, Inc., 22 West 48th Street, New York, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Entered as second class matter November 3rd, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3rd, 1879. Copyright, 1940, by Better Publications, Inc. Yearly, \$3.00; single copies, \$0.10; foreign and Canadian postage extra. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope, and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-action articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence.

PRINTED IN THE U. S. A.



*Mortal Greed Was the Force That Drew Souls into the Devil's Cloth of Horror and Wove a Gruesome Pattern of Fearsome Doom!*



The satanic figure seemed to laugh evilly at Stratton

# The TAPESTRY GATE

By LEIGH BRACKETT

*Author of "Martian Quest," "Treasure of Ptakuth," etc.*

"I MUST have it, Dick. It's exactly what I want for your den."

"But I don't want it, Jane," groaned Dick Stratton. "I want that sporting print of mine."

Jane Stratton's carefully made-up face, under the fashionable monstros-

ity she termed a hat, was set like a china mask.

"I'm going to have that place decent enough so that I can show it to my friends without apologizing. Will you bid for it, or must I?" Her voice was hard, uncompromising.

"You don't give a damn what I want,

do you?" muttered Stratton savagely. "You don't care about anybody but yourself."

Jane shrugged coldly.

"I can't see what possible difference it can make to you," she answered. "You always have your nose poked into some silly book anyway. Are you going to bid?"

Dick Stratton placed his bid. He was filled with cold desperate rage, not so much against the scrap of tapestry itself as what it stood for. To him it was a symbol of Jane's implacable domination, her maddening selfishness and stupidity.

Three times in the last year his house had been torn to pieces and redone in answer to the latest fad. It was no longer a home—it was a showcase for Jane. He was banished to his den, and even there he had nothing to say about the furnishings, though his bank account and salary were drained to the bottom to pay for them.

He got the tapestry for seventy dollars. It was an odd thing, about two feet square, with nothing but a patternless blending of odd colors. Jane took it with a little nod of triumph.

"This finishes the house," she said. "Let's go."

"Until next time," prophesied Stratton, under his breath. Their expensive coupé stood at the curb. Before getting in, Jane unrolled the tapestry in the sunlight.

"Modern as Dali. Pity you can't appreciate these things, Dick. It would make things so much more agreeable for me."

Stratton stifled his mounting fury. The tapestry looked different out in the sunlight, almost as though it would form a picture if one could just find the focus. Black and brown and silver, russet and gold, it shone with a soft lustre unlike any thread he had ever seen. Queer, springy texture, too. He reached out to touch it.

"De Good Lawd have mussy!"

Stratton jerked a quick, startled look upward. The Negro bootblack who kept a stand beside the auctioneer's was staring at the tapestry, wild-eyed with fear. As though drawn by the sheer fascination of terror, he came closer.

"Ah seed one o' dem befo'. Ah look into a conjure-woman's hut way down in de swamps in Loosiana, an' she done had one. She laughin' fit to bus', an' she say Mis' Commeroi's name, and nex' weck Mis' Commeroi done gone! De conjure-woman say it's de Devil's joke-rag, whut's used all over de worl' to trap people.

"T'ain't only in dis worl'!" His gnarled black hand fastened hard on Stratton's arm. "De conjure-people knows conjures in other places. Dey swap souls, jus' fo de laugh. Anywheah dey's hate in de house, it work. It steal yo' soul! Hate's whut make it work. Burn it! Burn it!"

Stratton engaged his arm in a burst of anger.

"Sorry," he said, "but I just paid seventy dollars for that rag. My wife insists it's modern art, so you must be mistaken. Besides," he added dryly, "there's no hate in our house." And he smiled as he thought of his own growing dark hate.

He turned his back on Jane's sharp look and slid under the wheel. The Negro still stood there, shivering, his gaze on the tapestry, lying now in Jane's lap.

"Look whut it's made of," he whispered. "Den maybe Ah'm not such a fool."

**S**TRATTON looked. The sunlight glinted on the haphazard threads, crisp and almost alive looking. It was like—well, like Jane's hair had been when he married her. That was before he had money, before the beauty parlors had created their shellacked perfection.

With a shock of revulsion, he realized what it was.

"Jane! It's human hair!" he exclaimed.

Jane's expensively-gloved hands recoiled from it.

"Ugh!" she shuddered. "How disgusting! Dick, take it back. I won't have it in the house!"

Stratton's mouth twisted in a little smile. After all, what was so disgusting about it? Wigs were made of human hair, and nobody minded.

"Why not? Just think, Jane, there won't be a woman in New York that

won't envy you," he sneered. "You'll have something that nobody else can possibly copy. I can just see Mrs. Lydell—"

"You needn't make fun of my friends," snapped Jane. Rather reluctantly, she picked it up, turned it in the sunlight. "Still, there's something in what you say. Alice Kelly copied everything in my drawing room and I had to have it completely done over. And after all, it'll be in your den. Yes, I'll keep it."

Jane, thought Stratton as he drove away, was really a horrible woman. His knuckles showed white against the steering wheel as he felt helpless anger welling up in him.

The Negro bootblack watched the car as far as he could see it. Then he shook his head and muttered something as his fingers touched the amulet in his pocket.

**T**HAT night, when Dick Stratton rose to go to bed, he glanced at the tapestry hanging over the cubistic mantel. The light from the nearby, hideous lamp brought the formless pattern almost into focus. He had a momentary glimpse of people ringed about some central object beneath a darkly branching thing, and just above the center of the little square, he thought he saw a face. An evil, laughing face.

"Nonsense," he grunted. And then the bootblack's half forgotten words came back. He stared at the tapestry, drowsily, thinking of the disappearance of Mis' Commeroi, whoever she was, and thinking—

With a start of horror, he realized what he was thinking. He was thinking how wonderful it would be if the Negro's ravings were true, if Jane might disappear into the picture and leave him free to find happiness. He was thinking of murder.

He turned and fled the room.

Jane didn't sleep well, either, that night. Stratton could hear her tossing in the adjoining room. It kept him awake, and he thought, though he didn't wish to think. Jane was ruining him. She was vain and extravagant and foolish, and cared for nothing except what she could get out of him.

But he had no real grounds for divorce. She'd fight to keep him with every bit of strength and every trick at her command. Besides that, he couldn't afford the scandal.

And yet his life was ruined. He was still young. If Jane should die—

"No!" he whispered. "Never that. You can't get away with that!"

After a long time he slept and dreamed of a soul-trap made of human hair and the Devil laughing over Jane's dead body.

Jane was late for breakfast. Stratton, on his way down, was drawn as though by a magnet into his den. Sunlight struck through ultra-violet glass, which, like everything else in the place, he hated. It shone obliquely on the tapestry.

Stratton felt the skin of his back crawl icily.

There was a picture!

Twelve people were standing in a ring about a cross-shaped block that was oddly channeled. A most peculiar and unpleasant tree coiled twisting branches above them, and, standing behind the cross-shaped block so that his face was just above the tapestry's center—

He wasn't really a man. Somehow Dick Stratton knew that. He looked like a man, but no normal human ever had such eyes, like mirrors of all the foul, evil thoughts that had been born since time began. Laughing eyes. Horribly laughing. As though sin and wickedness were the most pleasurable, the most amusing, the most soul-satisfying things in the universe.

Involuntarily Stratton closed his own eyes and jerked away; and when he looked again the picture was gone.

"Some trick of the light," he whispered almost fiercely. "Imagination. Those dreams I had."

**B**UT he couldn't shake the vision of those laughing eyes. In self-defense, he tried again to find the same spot from which he had seen the picture, but the sun had moved a bit and he could not. For a long time he stood staring at the blurred, mocking little rag, trying to understand the feelings that raged within him. Then, starting almost guiltily at Jane's step in the

hall, he shook himself out of the queer mood that held him.

"Just tired," he told himself. "Worried. Mustn't let this—" He'd been going to say "morbid," but the mood was more than morbid. It was horrible. Funny how that Negro's wild ranting had fished up the thoughts he had never admitted even to himself. You didn't think about—murder. You didn't let yourself hate people that way, openly.

Of course, it wasn't really murder. That stuff about the tapestry being a trap was just ignorant superstition. He hadn't really seen that picture. There was nothing to it. But the thought was there just the same, and he couldn't blink it—he wished there were something to it.

"No I don't!" Stratton pressed his fists to his temples. "Jane isn't really bad. Only selfish and stupid. I've got to stop all this right now. After all, I married her. I've got to try to go on."

He didn't look at the tapestry again. But as he left the room, a thought crossed his mind, unbidden:

"If what the Negro said was true, it wouldn't really be murder. Because there wouldn't be any body." He repeated it, half aloud.

Jane faced him across the table like a china doll dressed in peach-colored satin.

"Dick," she said, before he was fairly in his chair, "I've got to have some money."

"But, Jane! Your allowance—"

"It's gone. I spent it on that dress for Mrs. Lydell's reception, but I've got to have another."

Stratton put down his paper.

"Why, Jane?" he asked.

"Alice Kelly has one of the same material. I simply can't wear the thing to the reception."

"Then wear something else."

"Dick! You know perfectly well I haven't—"

"Never mind," he said wearily. "I can't give you any more money this month. You've cleaned me out."

Jane's mouth tightened and her blue eyes went flat with anger.

"I call that gratitude!" she shouted. "I wear myself out trying to keep your home from looking like a hog-

wallow. I try to keep up appearances when I go out. And you call me extravagant! Well, if you haven't any pride, I have. I'm not going to let those women laugh at us behind our backs because you're so stingy."

Stratton got up.

"Jane," he said very quietly, "you'd better be careful. I don't want the scandal, nor the trouble. But if you don't learn some sense, by heaven, I'll divorce you!"

JANE smiled.

"You can't," she said smugly. "I won't give you a divorce. And if you try to get one, I'll tell about Doris Rider."

Stratton's heart stopped, jerked, and pounded on. He hadn't known that Jane had ever heard of Doris Rider.

"You can't," he said thickly. "There's never been anything between us. Nothing at all!"

"But you can't prove it." Jane nodded, sure of herself. "Even if you could, I don't think such publicity would do her career any good. She's pretty famous, you know. Child welfare, isn't it? I think you'd best make me out a check, Dick."

He made it out without seeing either pen or figures. Then he left the room. He found himself standing in his den, staring at the tapestry, fists clenched and veins almost bursting with the black rage that shook him.

"I wish it were true!" he whispered savagely. "I wish the damned thing were a trap. I wish Jane were dead and in hell!"

It couldn't be just the light. It was as though the hate in him reached out, touched the little woven square of human hair and brought out the picture like a magic wash. Twelve people ringed around a cross-shaped block, with that high priest of hell laughing down at them. It was clear and unmistakable. So clear that Stratton realized there was an empty place in the ring just at the high priest's right, as though the weaver had intended a thirteenth person.

He went closer. It must be the violet glass that gave the picture the illusion of depth, the sudden dizzy effect of mists parting over an abyss. It

was almost as though he could see the trees of that strange forest growing, spreading back and out, shooting upward into an eerie sky.

He found he was trembling violently. He turned away, though it took all his will power. He must get hold of himself— The crazy gibberings of that bootblack, coupled with his own disrupted emotional state, had set everything awry. Suppose he did see a picture. There had been pictures before, done with treated dyes that showed only in certain lights or temperatures. After all, he had no idea how human hair would react as a fabric. The fact that there was a picture in the tapestry didn't in any way mean that what the Negro said was true.

A soul-trap. Conjure-folk of one world bartering souls with the wizards of another. Traffickers in evil, laughing at their secret jokes. Even Satan had to have a laugh now and then.

*"Anywheah dey's hate in de house, it work!"*

"No," said Dick Stratton. "No. I'm a sensible man. It's impossible. I'll simply get rid of the cursed thing."

But if he did, he'd be admitting fear. And besides, buried deep under his denials, under the revulsion of his civilized, conscious mind, was the fiendish, trembling hope that it was true.

For the second time Dick Stratton fled the room. And it seemed that he took with him a breath of charnal wind from a deep and rotting forest.

**J**ANE slept even worse that night. Dick Stratton shivered in a mad turmoil of thought. In the morning, utterly unable to keep away, he looked at the tapestry.

It must have been the light; but he was almost sure that a nebulous mist was forming in the thirteenth place, the gap in the circle.

In the evening they went to one of Jane's interminable 'musicales.' Stratton, dog-tired, went to his den for some papers he'd want in the morning. And this time there was no doubt. A blurred shape was forming on the weird tapestry.

Jane's voice woke him from troubled sleep, late that night.

"What will you give me?" she was saying, quite clearly.

Stratton smiled grimly, then shivered. There was something unnatural about her voice, about the way she waited, as though she were listening to someone. After a bit she sighed, a little breath of pure ecstasy.

"How wonderful!" she whispered. "Everything I want. Everything! And no one to nag me. But so far away, another world!"

Again the waiting silence.

"What payment?" she whispered. A pause. "It can't be anything very bad, you're so nice. So generous. Everything I want! But my husband?"

There was quite a long wait this time. And then Jane laughed and rolled over into sound, deep sleep.

It was several minutes before Dick Stratton realized what a chillingly horrible sound that little low chuckle had been.

Driven by a feverish wildness, he went quietly downstairs, using a small pocket torch. In the pitch darkness of the den the beam made a brilliant white finger of light and touched unerringly on the thirteenth place in the circle in the tapestry of human hair.

The mist had thickened, grown to the blurred yet recognizable outlines of a woman.

The torch went out as Stratton dropped it. He stood there in the grip of a dense fear that crawled out of some unknown abyss to freeze his heart to ice and his blood to snow-water. Every atom of common sense, of sanity, or normality, rose in him to declare that this was a lie, that it was all a nightmare from which he would awaken.

But he knew. And the Negro had known. Jane, sleeping upstairs with some strange new power, knew.

There was hate in this house. He hated Jane, and his hate had broken the barrier. He had let Jane's selfish little soul be tempted to—to what?

Even in the dark the picture was visible, as though it had light of its own. It was as if some unimagined moon rode an eerie sky, to light a demon's way through that forest. And

all the while the high-priest's face was full of laughter.

**S**HUDDERING, sick with terror, Dick Stratton pressed his hands to his pounding temples. There was still time. He could burn the tapestry. Jane would be safe. The whole mad business could be forgotten.

But he wouldn't be free. He'd have Jane's selfishness, Jane's extravagance, Jane's smug knowledge of her power over him, until the end of his life, or the end of his money—or both. This way, if he didn't burn the tapestry, he'd be rid of her. He wouldn't really have murdered her. There couldn't possibly be any legal repercussions. They'd never find her body, because it would be in the tapestry. He'd be free.

He could enjoy life, perhaps even marry Doris Rider.

Another thought occurred to him, and he jerked a frightened glance at the picture. If the hated one was trapped into the other world, what happened to the hater?

Then he shook his head. The circle was closed. There was no more room for anyone. Besides, after Jane was gone, he could burn the tapestry. Then the gateway would be closed forever.

For a long, long time Dick Stratton stood in that cold, dark room, looking into the laughing evil eyes of the high priest. Then he turned and went back to bed, leaving the tapestry safe on the wall.

Jane was languid and tired the next day. It was as though some vital force were being drained out of her. Stratton thought of the mist in the tapestry and smiled. He even gave her a check without complaint.

"You dreamed last night. I heard you talking," he said, prompted by a curiosity he couldn't deny.

"Did I? I don't remember." Jane stared vacantly out of the window.

Stratton fought down a shudder and left.

That night Jane, moving almost as though in a dream, put on a white satin gown that had been part of her trousseau. It looked more like an evening dress, with its exquisite white

roses at the neck. One of them was loose.

Dick Stratton lay down, but he knew he wouldn't sleep that night. He heard Jane's breathing slow to a deep, steady rhythm. For several hours she slept. Then, without speaking or waking, he heard her get up.

He followed her silently downstairs. Moving slowly at first, Jane went faster and faster, like a child approaching some promised treat. At the doorway of the den she paused, and Stratton saw her shiver, as though some shadow of dread had touched her. Then she went through.

He didn't follow. He knew he couldn't and remain sane. Grabbing a whiskey decanter from the library, he fled back upstairs, where he paced his room all night in a curious and semi-alcoholic state that plunged between light-headed relief and nightmare horror.

Morning brought saner thinking. His first impulse was to burn the tapestry at once, but he decided against it. The act was too abrupt, too senseless. It might even lead to awkward questions. And while there was no danger of a murder charge lodging permanently, there was always the fact that he dared not tell the truth. It would only mean an insane asylum.

Taking a deep breath, he went downstairs to call the police.

**H**E DID rather well with his bewildered husband act. He might have managed to get away with it, but there were complications. Jane's maid testified that her lady wasn't the sort of person to leave in the middle of the night without money, or clothes.

The butler hastened to tell of their quarrel over money. Jane's mother, a fat, overdressed, hysterical woman, heaped abuse on Dick Stratton's head. And the Law frowned, having heard before of mysterious vanishings that turned out to have been involuntary.

Stratton was called into the den for private questioning. He stood it for a surprisingly long time, bathed in icy sweat, heart thudding wildly, fists clenched. But his eyes were drawn, slowly, inexorably above the mantel toward the cloth made of human hair.

A shaft of sunlight shone through the violet glass, lighting the tapestry like a spotlight. The ring of people stood there under the monstrous tree, clearer than Stratton had ever seen them. Again he had that dizzy sense of depth, of distance. Their faces were ghoulish, convulsed with a secret mirth that held the shadow of a horror beyond human knowledge. They waited; with a curious, relaxed tensivity, they waited. And the eyes of the high priest laughed.

The nebulous mist had thickened to solidity. The thirteenth place was filled.

Dick Stratton's nerves broke. His story lost coherence, became studded with babblings that hung on the brink of madness. He tried to pull himself together. He knew, in some lucid corner of his brain, that it was only the shock of seeing the final, indisputable proof—the mad, the impossible. He achieved silence, but that was all.

The frown of the Law deepened. The half-empty whiskey decanter was found in his room. And then, under the tapestry, almost hidden by the cubistic jut of the hearth, a white satin rose.

Dick Stratton looked at his wife, standing at the high priest's right, at the head of the cross-shaped block. The white satin gown showed bone-white against the dark of the twisting tree, the gown with the satin rose missing at the neck.

"What are you staring at?" demanded the Law, and it was then Stratton realized that the picture was visible only to himself. He laughed, just a shade hysterically.

"You'd better come with us," said the Law, "till we get this business cleared up. Sorry. Suspicion of murder."

Dick Stratton went quietly. He wasn't afraid of a murder charge. But an uneasy question clung in his mind.

"The Devil's joke-rag. What are they laughing at?" he would ask himself, frantically.

After a bit he was glad he was in jail. He hadn't realized what an unhealthy influence the house was beginning to have on him. He stood the grilling of the homicide men well

enough, and by nightfall he had so recovered his assurance that he lay down on his cell cot in a mood for healthy sleep. It was all over, and he was rid of Jane. He was safe. All he had to do now was wait until they let him go. Then he would burn the tapestry and forget about it.

He slept—but not well. He woke in the morning, tired and dimly conscious of dreams, dreams he could not quite recall, hideous dreams.

It was then that he began to be afraid.

**T**HE next night it was worse. He woke in a cold sweat of fear, his mind breaking with an almost physical struggle from a black web of evil. Then he slept again, dreamed again, and woke, screaming. He fought until they threatened him with a strait-jacket. Then he crouched silently in a corner, trembling because of his knowledge.

He, too, was being drawn into that circle!

Another nebulous mist was growing and thickening on that hellish tapestry of human hair, a mist that would be himself. He knew that, surely as he had ever known anything in his life.

He had to get out. He had to go and burn that tapestry. But he couldn't get out. He had to wait. He fought against sleep, but it trapped him. He dreamed, of a ring of leering faces, of a monstrous, towering tree, of band of constriction, of heaviness.

Jane's dreams couldn't have been like this. She hadn't been ridden with terror. She hadn't remembered them when she woke. And the circle was filled. There was no place for him to go.

What was happening to him? What inevitable fate was in store for him?

They talked about letting him go the next day. No body, no murder. But the law was reluctant to give up, just yet. Stratton stayed. And again sleep caught him like an entangling cloak.

He saw the tapestry hanging on his wall, and a little point of light struck full on the high priest's face. His eyes



were full of laughter, his face convulsed with some secret, cosmic mirth.

A gateway between two dimensions, a trap woven of human hair to snare souls so that Satan could have his laugh. Stratton felt evil. A black, abnormal sensation brushed his mind with charnel fingers. An evil that attacked the subconscious in sleep and lured the soul away, away into—

He woke shrieking, fighting back a knowledge that struggled to reveal itself. Again they threatened him into silence, and again he crouched—shivering, thinking.

He could feel a vital force draining out of him. First from his soul, then his body. Something was waiting for him in the tapestry, something that made his dreams different from Jane's.

It wouldn't be long now—perhaps tonight. He had to get out, he had to burn the tapestry before it was too late.

Miraculously, his cell door clashed open.

"All right, Stratton," they said. "This still looks fishy, but we can't prosecute without a body. You can go."

**H**IS trip home was a nightmare wherein he strove to hurry with his feet buried in quicksand. Everything was against him—traffic lights, all the possible delays of driving. A consuming weakness weighted him, coupled with fear that tottered on the brink of madness. One single thought hammered over and over within his mind:

"Burn the tapestry, burn the tapestry."

The servants were gone, amusing themselves during his absence. He let himself in, ran panting down the hall to his den. The sun was dropping low in the west.

Shaking with frantic haste, Stratton clawed his cigarette lighter from his pocket and reached up to tear the tapestry from its place on the wall.

A level red ray struck through the violet glass full on the waiting, laughing eyes of the high priest. Those

eyes drew Stratton's as though an invisible bond had been forged in those minutes when he had stood there in the dark, making his decision.

Stratton screamed once. The lighter dropped from his hand and lay unheeded, burning a hole in the pale rug.

The sunlight dimmed, reddened. Shadows curled across his vision, drew back, showed him depth and thickness. He reeled in icy vertigo as distance opened suddenly into long forest aisles. Tiny trees shot hugely up and up into an eerie sky.

Dick Stratton swayed horribly between two worlds. The little figures swelled dizzily to human size and the shadows thickened around the monstrous tree. A heavy, sepulchral breeze rustled the clothing of the thirteen who stood in the waiting circle, and the laughing face of the high priest was horribly close to his own.

In a wrenching whirl of worlds and dimensions, Dick Stratton looked at the spot where his soul-mist had thickened and shaped. Then he was lying on the grooved and cross-shaped block. Bonds cut his wrists and ankles as he stared up into a face contorted with secret, evil mirth.

A pan-pipe made a reedy, whispering chuckle. A little ripple of laughter ran through the waiting circle. And as though the pipe had been a signal, they closed in.

A ring of faces was over him, blotting out the twisting pattern of the tree above. He saw the stamp of evil on them, the mark of souls condemned mingled with the sins that had brought them there—hate, greed, wickedness. His gaze fled wildly across them, stopped on Jane's haughty, selfish face—a face that had changed. . . .

The high priest laughed, and the deep, gloating sound went round the circle like a litany. The Devil's joke-rag. Why did they laugh, why—

Dick Stratton lay on the cross-shaped block, quite still, and beyond screaming.

In another minute, he would know.