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**WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH**

# The Withered Heart

By G. G. PENDARVES

*A strange story about the evil heart of Count Dul, which continued to pulsate for two hundred years after its owner's death—a tale of the dire catastrophe that took place when the Count's half-forgotten grave was opened*

DEAR JOHN,  
If a fifteen years' friendship means anything to you, come at once. Sorry to hustle you like this, good old slow-worm that you are, but we've simply got to go into session about this thing before the month's out. The Ides of March are on Tuesday next, May 31st, this year.

My whole future is at stake and you've got to come and help. It's a very very queer thing, and Jonquil and I don't agree at all about it. I wish to heaven we'd found the box earlier and had more time to argue it all out. I see Jonquil's point of view, of course, and feel in a way bound to carry on for her sake, but—well, you know my views about playing round with anything like magic and necromancy. Jonquil says I'm morbid, still— Oh, well! come and see us through it.

RAFE.

May 27th, 1938.

I TRIED to pretend to myself that I couldn't go, that I wouldn't go! But even as I made these protestations inwardly, I was giving instructions to the boy, Joe, who daily and conscientiously thwarts my best efforts to grow flowers, fruit and vegetables. For a quarter of an hour or so my foredoomed struggle went on.

“—and Joe! that gallon of weed-killer is for the whole lawn, don't pour it over one dandelion root.

“It's merely one of his latest ideas, he gets them like measles. I won't be fooled into rushing off and leaving my garden just now.

“Joe! if you let that dog bury his bones in the new seedling-bed, I'll kill you when I get back and bury you with them.

“All rubbish about his future! Another few weeks would make all the difference here! Why next Tuesday?

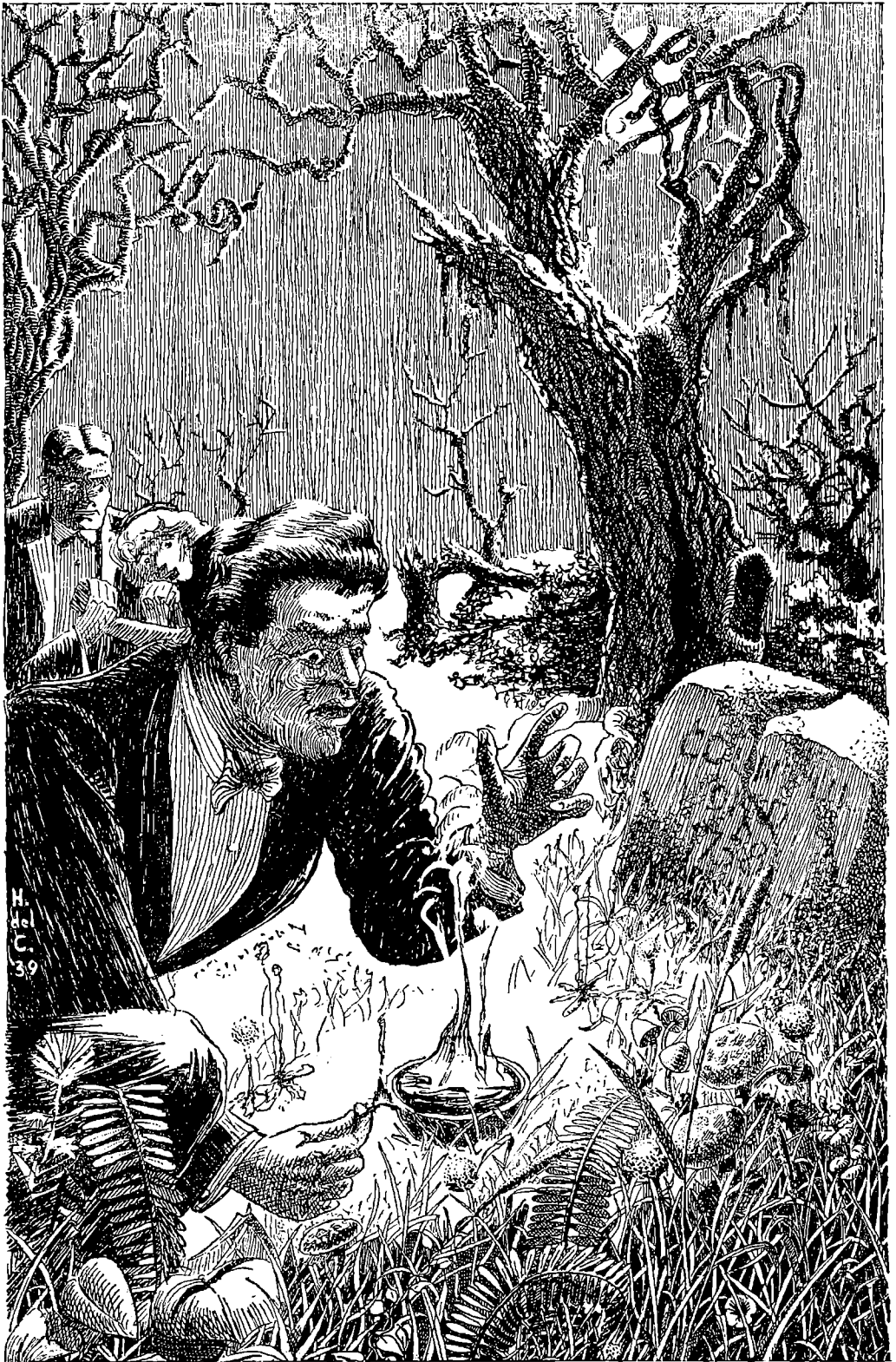
“Don't forget the quassia for the gooseberries, Joe!

“—and what the devil has magic to do with his future? No! I won't go! I won't waste—”

By this time I was in the potting-shed, kicking off my heavy shoes and scrambling hastily into another and cleaner pair. Like iron to a magnet, I was drawn to the house where my mind continued to carry on acrimonious debates while my body intelligently took no notice of my mental disturbance and obeyed my will.

I packed a bag, interviewed my old housekeeper who expressed her disapproval of my plans by serving up watery coffee and an India-rubber omelette for my lunch, and set off within the hour with parting instructions to expect me back in God's good time.

It would have been more fitting to have said in the devil's own time. So far, however, no tinge of the saturnine malice which had, after a lapse of two centuries,



"Here is light for your sightless eyes."

begun to manifest itself, darkened the joyful anticipation of seeing my friend, Rafe Dewle.

I clambered into my old Austin-twelve and set her battered bonnet northwards. Those last hours on the open road when life was still free and untainted! Never, never again shall I experience anything like them. Knowledge has crippled imagination since then—evil polluted every spring of happiness.

On Shap Fells I stopped to cool my engine. Around me, yellow gorse breathed out its honey perfume; bumble-bees fussed to and fro as I lay stretched out on the heath and watched white cloud-feathers drift in the blue above. I slept for a brief spell on the warm breathing earth with the thin lonely call of curlews in my ears and the sense of hoary guardian hills all about me.

In sleep, the first faint brush of evil touched me. I dreamed that I journeyed on—on into a dark valley where, amidst mist and darkness and confusion, I felt the approach of invisible and threatening hosts. Yet I must go on swiftly—swiftly! Someone was waiting. Someone was in danger. I must hurry, hurry, hurry!

I woke to find my sunlit hemisphere all dark and angry. The great hills reared up threateningly into thunderous cloud-banks. Gusts of wind scattered the golden gorse-bloom and whistled the coming storm along over shivering grass and heather.

With a sense of urgent fear left by my dream I started my car and dropped by long winding loops of road down to the valley, and, as I tore along leafy green lanes toward Keswick this fear persisted. Once past the town, I drove even more quickly, cutting across the head of Borrowdale under dark Helvellyn's shadow and along the unfrequented road which led to *Braunfel*.

The rambling old manor house lay some twelve miles from town. I'd known

it well when Rafe and I were boys together. His people had been wealthy landowners before 1914. The war took their men. The lean following years took their money and lands. *Braunfel* was on its last legs, financially, and I wondered why Rafe hadn't sold up before his marriage. I couldn't reconcile what little I knew of Jonquil French with the austere bare life that Rafe's inheritance offered. Their meeting and the marriage that so swiftly followed had been romantic and impassioned, a sort of Lochinvar affair; for Rafe had snatched her from another and very wealthy suitor almost at the church doors.

So characteristic of him and that hot Magyar blood of his! Even the lovely spoiled Jonquil French had succumbed to it. But for how long?

His letter indicated the thin end of a wedge to my mind. I'd met his bride in London and had not particularly liked her—not the wife for Rafe at all. I'd no idea what was the mysterious "thing" the pair disagreed about, of course, and I wished he'd been more explicit. Planning a good sensational story for me, no doubt. He loved being melodramatic.

At last I could see the bulk of *Braunfel* ahead, gray in shafts of pale clear light piercing a curtain of rain. About it, wide untended meadows stretched. Behind, the bare face of the fell, where only stumps remained of the great fir forest that had been so beautiful a background to the ancient house. War victims, those sheltering lovely trees! And no plantations showed their young green promise for the future. How gaunt *Braunfel* appeared! Not only that—it was positively sinister. I tried in vain to put the thought away. There was a look of boding grimness hanging over the massive pile that even neglected lands and bare scarred hillside could not wholly explain.

My old car splashed along the last mile

of muddy lane between high ragged hedges. The road turned and twisted like a sea-serpent. Preoccupied and depressed, I took a sharp angle and put on my brakes with a curse. A tall and very agile figure seemed to leap from right under the Austin's bonnet.

"Rafe! What the deuce——"

"Hello! Hello! you old mud-turtle! I forgive you—don't apologize!"

He opened the car-door, slid his long legs under the dashboard, put an arm about my shoulders and grinned in the old familiar way.

"You're a marvel, John. I didn't really count on your coming until tomorrow, but I got so restless thinking you might turn up that I've been hanging round for the last hour here. Never been so glad to see your solemn old mug in my life!"

My heart grew light at sight and sound of him. Marriage had not altered him as far as his friendship and affection were concerned; they were mine still, perfectly unchanged, the warmest, strongest tie I had in the world.

I grunted and glowered up at his face, dark as a gipsy's, lighted up with the inner fire that burned so strongly in him. I never knew man, woman, or child with so glowing, so intense a quality.

"Same old mad March hare!" I grumbled. "I'd hoped marriage might have given you a grain or two of sense. I suppose you realize you've practically ruined my garden for the next six months by dragging me up here?"

"Splendid! I have made a hero of you!"

He burst out into a wild barbaric song and yelled and yodeled until I drowned him with my car's horn. The noise was insane. We broke down and laughed like hyenas at last and I drove on feeling younger than I'd ever expected to feel again—my twenty-eight years had weighed heavily since Rafe's marriage.

SATURDAY, *May 28th*. Once under the steep gabled roofs of *Braunfel*, my bubble of delight was pricked. The sight of Jonquil French—Jonquil Dewle I should say—brought back the formless fear of my queer dream on Shap Fell. Why the sight of a girl like a princess in a fairy-tale should depress a man, I didn't know. Jealousy? No, neither of Rafe nor of his exquisite bride.

I had been jealous, afraid she'd come between us: I knew now most emphatically that she had not. Nor did I envy him. A woman has never yet roused the passionate thrill of joy I feel at sight of a perfect flower. It's no use arguing with me, I can't help it; that's the way I'm made.

"Mr. Fowler—John, I mean! How *perfect* that you've come! What a relief! You simply can't imagine what a time I've had lately. How lovely and large and shy you look! Isn't he *too* perfect, Rafe?"

"Certainly not. I refuse to live with two perfect beings. John's a mere man like myself."

She blew him a kiss, pirouetted round the dark paneled room like a little red flame blown on the wind, dropped on one knee before me and raised her hands in an attitude of prayer.

"Dear, dear John! You *are* perfect! Oh, if you could only see yourself. Just like a lovely solemn pine tree planted in the middle of our library. Please, please may I kiss you—I really must."

In a flash she was on her light dancing feet, her arms about me, her pleading face upraised. I bent a stiff reluctant head, received a moth-like touch on my lips and watched her and Rafe clasp each other in ecstatic amusement.

"I take it back, darling." Rafe wiped his eyes. "He certainly is—perfect."

"Well, now you've settled that, perhaps you'll start explaining things. You haven't brought me here to point out the singular beauty of my character?"

"No," chuckled Jonquil. "But you wouldn't be of any use to us unless you were such a perfect wise old owl."

Her smile glanced like sun on running water.

"Not time to explain before dinner. It's a long, sad tale. Rafe will take you up to your nice large drafty room, and when you hear a sound like a bull being massacred—come down for dinner. Rafe's invented a patent bugle-thing he uses when I'm late for meals; he's too lazy to walk the half-mile upstairs."

LEFT to myself in a bedroom whose size and dignity made me feel something like a small dry ham-sandwich on a platter designed for the traditional boar's head, I pushed open a diamond-paned lattice window, slumped down on the broad uncushioned seat beneath it and glared out at the cobbled garth below. Pigeons kept up a low bubbling complaint from roofs of stables and outbuildings—ruinous affairs, minus doors and windows, their slates and stones stained with centuries of rain, their woodwork gray and cracked, weeds, moss and lichen a green-gold signal of defeat.

It wasn't the garth, or the many evidences of poverty elsewhere that worried me, however, as I sat listening to the *broo! broo broo* of the pigeons. It was the thought of Jonquil.

It was impossible to do more than put into mere words her remarkable beauty, and what are words when it comes to a young, living, exquisitely made creature like her? She had crisp red-gold curls, eyes of changing deep warm brown that reminded me of wallflowers in sunlight, a milk-white skin, and body so light and quick in movement, so sure in poise, so extraordinarily expressive of her every mood that she seemed winged—a brilliant tropic bird darting and flashing to and fro.

But it was the will behind her laughing eyes that frightened me. Her will—blind,

ignorant, unyielding, a terrible weapon in her reckless hands!

Abruptly, my dream possessed me again. . . . I was hurrying along that dark valley into mists and darkness and confusion—someone needed my help—I must hurry, hurry, hurry. And now Jonquil was beside me, her hand on my arm, her voice laughing, persuading, telling me to come back, come back, come back—she hindered me—I could not shake off her detaining hand. Her clear laugh prevented my hearing what my ears were straining for. I only knew I must hurry, hurry, hurry—in the gathering darkness ahead someone needed me. . . .

It wasn't until after leaving the dinner-table, graced no longer by Queen Anne silver and Waterford glass, that I realized the significance of Jonquil's inclusion in my disturbing and recurring dream.

Rain and wind turned the May night to chill discomfort. Rafe lighted the big library fire, piled up fir-cones and logs until a heartening blaze warmed a respectable area of the lofty room with its moldering books, threadbare rugs and worm-eaten oak.

Stimulated by tobacco, whisky, and Rafe's company I began to discount my boding fears again—but not for long. Jonquil was eager as Rafe seemed reluctant to enlighten me. He yielded to her importunity at last, lifted down an iron casket from a high bookshelf and set it on a heavy table near the fire.

"There you are, lady and gentleman!" he made an exaggerated showman's gesture. "This is the Luck of *Braunfel* and guaranteed to supply your heart's desire. To make its magic work you need a nice round full moon, a strong belief in ghosts and devils, and a bottle of my best whisky inside you. These will qualify you to commune with a Benevolent Gent who died two hundred years ago in the hope of an extraordinary Resurrection from the Dead."

His nonsense wasn't well received. The sight of that twelve-by-eight inch box filled me with a nasty crawling sensation of horror. I set down my glass and stared at it in silence.

Jonquil ran up to the table, tried to pull the box from beneath Rafe's long brown fingers.

"It's not fair—it's not fair to tell him like that! You're trying to prejudice him. Let *me* show him! Let *me* tell him!"

Instantly he became the bland infuriating nurse with a spoiled child, patted her shining coppery curls with one hand and imprisoned her impatient fingers with his other.

"Now! Now! Now! Remember there's a little visitor here, darling! Don't forget your pretty manners!"

He kissed and put her back in a chair with another admonitory pat on the head.

"This is my Ancestor! My Benevolent Gent—hereafter known as B.G., and I will not be intimidated by a woman with red hair!"

I knew Rafe well. He was stalling now. It was a very old habit of his to approach anything he deeply disliked with idiotic badinage. Well, he might deceive Jonquil, but not me. So I sat tight and waited. My hands and feet grew cold in spite of the hot cheerful fire. I was most acutely awake, my eyes on Rafe's face, when that cursed dream of mine recurred . . . a dark long valley stretched between us . . . he faded, dissolved into distance and smoky dark confusion. . . .

"John! What is it?"

I FOUND myself on my feet, blinking stupidly down into Jonquil's alarmed face. Rafe was staring at me across the table, his mouth open in surprise.

"Cramp?" he inquired. "Must have been a bad twinge. I never heard you yell like that before."

"Cramp!" I echoed feebly, then pulled

myself together. "No—it's a tooth—going to have it out."

I mumbled apologies, filled my glass, drank and felt considerably better. My mind cleared.

"Let's get down to business." I waved my pipe toward the box on the table. "I want to know where *I* come in. Let's have the story straight, mind!"

"John, you *are* such a darling! When you look at me like that through those enormous specs I feel just like a criminal before a judge."

Jonquil sat very stiffly and raised a hand as if to take an oath:

"I promise not to interrupt—unless I *have* to."

She tucked her little green slippers under her, curled up in the corner of a settee, and assumed an air of child-like innocent patience. I watched her with a pang. She was so sure of herself. She knew so exactly what she wanted—and intended to get it at all costs.

"Well?" my voice was brusque with anxiety as I turned to Rafe. "Bring out the skeleton in the cupboard."

His lips twisted in a rather doubtful smile.

"Queer you should say that. It's not exactly a skeleton, but it is part of a dead body."

"What? Your Ancestor, did you say—was he embalmed?"

"His heart was."

He lifted the casket's heavy lid as he spoke. A breath of thin cold air blew across my face and neck as I leaned forward to watch. I hated to see him standing over that beastly box; there was something so repulsive and ominous about it that my flesh crept when his fingers touched its rusty lid. Intuition told me that he did more than open a lid—he opened a door to something deadlier than plague.

It was a relief to my taut nerves to see him take out two tangible objects

and set them on the table. One was a fat little book, fastened with broad brass clasps and bound in solid leather. The other—I got to my feet and went to examine it more closely.

My gorge rose at sight of the dark dried thing. I've seen mummies, and some were hideous enough. I've prowled about laboratories and examined scientific specimens preserved in fluids, and many were fairly revolting to a mind and imagination like mine. But this little horror, black and withered, with a strange metallic sheen! In amazement I drew still closer, unable to credit my sight. Then I straightened up with a jerk and glanced at Rafe.

"It's living! It beats—the thing beats!"

He nodded—"Since 1738, according to his tombstone date."

I saw he shared my revulsion. I forced myself to touch the heart, and drew back in horror at finding the dark withered bit of muscle was warm.

Jonquil clapped her hands. "You see! You see! Now perhaps you'll persuade Rafe to do it. Oh, he must—he must!"

She could contain herself no longer and flashed across to us. There wasn't a vestige of fear in her eager face as she put out a delicate exploring hand and touched the withered heart. Her faith in it, her strong will to test it, lent the dreadful thing power, and I saw it swell under her fingers—saw the throbbing pulse beat stronger, fuller.

"No! Don't!"

Rafe's voice sharply admonished her. His hand snatched back her own. She looked from him to me and laughed, but the red-brown eyes were bright with impatient anger.

"How exasperating men are! You look like two old hens with a duckling! I didn't think you'd be afraid to, John."

She gave me a stormy scornful glance. Next moment she was curled up in her corner again, sudden as a puff of wind.

"John, darling!" her voice was honey-sweet now; "that's a heart of gold. Quite literally a heart of gold for Rafe and me—if he chooses! Oh, I see what you're thinking. You're a sentimentalist like Rafe. I'm not. *His* heart won't reduce the Bank's overdraft, you know. *That*"—she flicked an airy hand toward the table—"that heart will."

I caught Rafe's glance at her and sharply realized his carefully concealed unhappiness. His shining tower of romance was fast changing to an old house in need of repair. The solitary countryside where he and she would walk in dreams was being reduced to an estate whose every hedge and gate and meadow clamored for money—money—money! I'd never felt the pinch of my own straitened circumstances before, but now I hated myself—I'd have given anything to put things right for Rafe. And I hated Jonquil too—unreasonably, fiercely, for making him unhappy.

I didn't answer her. I was watching Rafe as, with swift distasteful touch, he took up the repulsive little heart, restored it to its metal box and dropped the lid with a clang.

Then he picked up the squat leather book and I followed him to the fire-side.

I was convinced he was as much relieved as I to have that beastly heart out of sight.

"Don't tremble in your shoes, old man! I'm not going to read this tome right through. It's full of queer stories and experiments that don't concern our problem directly. This is the really juicy bit that does."

He drew a stiff yellowed crackling sheet from a pocket of the book's cover and unfolded it with a flourish.

"This is the apple of discord in the house of Dewle! This is the bee in Jonquil's bonnet! This is what's muting the family lute! *A scrap of paper*—a thing capable of starting anything in the world



—wars, duels, murders—all the trouble that is, or ever will be.”

“A check for £1,000,000 is a scrap of paper I’d love to see—with your name on it, dearest!”

“It was only £100,000 this morning,” he reminded her. “Even a B. G. has limits, you must remember.”

“And those that don’t ask, don’t get,” she retorted with a flirt of her red curls.

“Well, we’ll see what John thinks of my ancestor, Count Dul’s *billet-doux*.” He gave me a swift glance. “There’s a preliminary but I’ll spare you about his grave. It’s been lost for generations, but Jonquil discovered it after reading this.”

I could see the black thick lettering through the semi-transparent paper as Rafe held it up. He seemed to know it pretty well by heart, to judge by the way he galled through the closely written lines:

*This document concerns only those in whose veins my blood doth run, and who bear the ancient name of Dul. Let any such read these words with faith to believe and courage to obey, and to them will I grant the wish that lies most closely to their heart, be it for life beyond mortal span, for riches, for fame, or for the sweet delights of love. Let him who would seek my aid ask in the full knowledge that I, Count Dul, have power to give him his desire.*

*For his part, he must most strictly observe such instructions as are writ hereafter, failing not in any particular. Let him take careful heed therefore to obey.*

*THE DEED MUST BE DONE UPON A CERTAIN NIGHT and that the first night of a month of June when the moon is at the full between its second and third quarters.*

*I MUST BE SUMMONED BY ONE WHO STANDS BESIDE MY GRAVE and in such words as are graven upon the inner side of the Box in which this docu-*

*ment shall be discovered, together with the Book and my Heart.*

*AT THE FIRST LINE OF THE CONJURATION MY KINSMAN SHALL LIGHT A FLAME and it shall be of oil poured out in a black bowl and set at the foot of the grave.*

*AT THE SECOND LINE HE SHALL SPRINKLE EARTH UPON THE GRAVE and it shall be earth which fire has made bitter, and rain has washed, and the four winds blown upon.*

*AT THE THIRD LINE HE SHALL SET MY HEART AT THE HEAD OF THE GRAVE; then, kneeling beside it, he shall cut his left hand until his blood drops from it upon the heart.*

*LASTLY HE SHALL SUMMON ME IN A LOUD VOICE AND PRONOUNCE HIS WISH. And I shall hear him. And I will come to him. And whatsoever boon he asks, it shall be his.*

RAFE stopped reading as abruptly as he’d begun, and held out the paper.

“You can read the Conjunction yourself. It’s a bit melodramatic to declaim aloud just now.”

I read in silence, then sat staring into the fire. The touch of the paper, its crabbed evil lettering and the hateful words themselves filled me with loathing.

“Well?” Rafe continued. “How’s that for an ancestor? Jonquil’s convinced that if I do my little song and dance he’ll come rushing back from—well, this Book leaves no doubt from *where*—with a Present for a Good Boy under his ghostly arm.”

“Yes, I’m convinced he would.”

“Oh, John! You dear! You absolute darling!” cried Jonquil. “You *do* think there’s something in it? You really and truly do! Oh, I’m thrilled. Rafe’s been so exasperating about it. Now he’ll simply *have* to give in.”

“I didn’t say that I agreed with you,” I interrupted.

She sat up with a jerk, scattering cigarette ash over the satin iridescence of her dress. Black cold rage possessed me, brain and body. I knew I'd never make her understand—spoiled lovely little materialist that she was. 'Superstition urged her to snatch at this promised wealth. Ignorance blinded her to the hideous risk.

"You don't agree with me? You've just said you believed the Count could and would return!"

"Yes. I believe that."

"Well?" Her face grew radiant again. "Then you're just teasing! You *are* on my side, after all."

"No. Once and for all, I'm utterly against you. The man that wrote that promise and left behind him that foul thing"—I pointed to the box on the table—"must have been the devil's own brother."

"Oh-h-h!" wailed Jonquil. "You're not going to talk about demons and dangers and unholy powers, too! Rafe's been croaking like a raven for three whole days—and now you!"

"Go to it, old man!" urged Rafe. "She won't take it from me, but perhaps you can make her see it's not just money for jam."

I knew I couldn't move her, but I tried—explained, reasoned, argued, all to no purpose.

"It's no use trying to frighten me. You believe Count Dul can be brought back," she repeated for the twentieth time, "and that he could make Rafe a rich man. That's enough for me. He's only a ghost, poor thing! Perhaps he was just a harmless eccentric old man. Wouldn't make a will. Wanted to give it himself to his descendants."

"Harmless! What about that heart of his—beating two hundred years after his death? D'you think unaided human knowledge could leave *that* behind? Count Dul will surely return if the door is opened

to him. But it's forbidden. The dead may not—*must* not return."

"I can't see why not. You don't actually know any more than I do myself. You've read a lot of stuffy books and believe everything in them. I haven't. I'm unprejudiced. I'm willing to take risks."

"You mean to let Rafe take them."

Rafe, who'd sat listening with a queer twisted smile, laughed out at this.

"Hear! Hear! Exactly. Is *she* to do a pantomime scene at midnight by the grave of a disreputable old nobleman? No! Is *she* to chat with a two-hundred year old devil-worshipper in the moonlight? No! Is *she* asked to shed her good red blood on a thing that looks like a bit of cat's meat? No!"

"Well, Rafe, darling! It probably *is* all nonsense and I'm tired of arguing about it. Still——"

She jumped up from the settee and stood before the fire, facing the two of us.

"John has helped me, after all." She dropped me a mocking curtsy. "Yes, you dear old Solomon! You've helped enormously. Now I feel absolutely certain there *is* something in it, or you wouldn't be so worried.

"You know, darling," she turned to Rafe, "you promised to be guided by John's opinion. He's given it. He completely believes in your ancestor. And so do I—now! I'll never forgive you if you don't take a chance and try this thing out."

"Jonquil!" I was on my feet now, almost incoherent with fury. "What I believe in is the risk—the damnable risk of trying such a thing. You only believe in the money you want and shut your eyes to anything else. D'you suppose for a moment that dead Thing has waited two centuries to give you a fortune?"

She burst out laughing. "John, if you could only see yourself! You look like one of the Minor Prophets in action! There's

a picture in the National Gallery that exactly——”

“Rafe!” I was almost shouting now. “You know enough, if she doesn’t, to realize the wicked insanity of doing such a thing. D’you remember Harland and the sticky end he came to? And Browning who’s gibbering away in an asylum? They happen to be men we know personally, but think of the hundreds of others who’ve been fools enough to think necromancy’s a mere parlor game— who’ve deliberately walked into hell! It’s hushed up—such cases always are. People are called mad, or reputed dead of heart attacks, etc. The truth is too beastly to publish.”

“There’s a good deal in what you say.” Rafe had assumed a poise of amused detachment now. “I’ve not delved into occult lore as you have, old man. I dislike what I know, however. Still, Jonquil’s attitude of ‘nothing venture, nothing win’ has a lot to recommend it.”

She flew to him, took his hand in both her own.

“Oh! I knew, I *knew* you’d be an angel! You really mean to try it out?”

His answering look at her eager lovely face, his gesture as he rumbled her flaming aureole of hair, was sufficient for me. She’d won. My hot angry opposition had decided him, had pushed him into doing so. And I cursed myself for a pompous muddle-headed fool. I’d tilted the balance down—down to hell. If I’d kept calm and laughed at Count Dul, made light of the whole affair, Jonquil’s belief might have faded. I’d lost my temper with her—lost my best chance by forcing Rafe to take her part. . . .

My dream enveloped me in its swirling vapor. . . . I was driving furiously down that long desolate valley—in the cloudy smothering darkness I heard a voice—*Count Dul! Count Dul! Count Dul!* The piercing cry was echoed by howls of laughter from the swirling mists—I drove on—

on — someone needed me — someone I loved, needed me. . . .

**SUNDAY, MAY 29th.** I spent a night of wretched anger and self-reproach and misery, interspersed with lapses into the haunting terror of my dream.

Rafe found me at eight a.m., empty pipe between my teeth, sitting on the stone parapet of a bridge, my thoughts dark and cold as the water I watched so gloomily.

“Not worth the usual penny, I can see!”

Rafe came to perch beside me.

“Still, there’s some excuse for you. Enough to make anyone broody—my estate! Reminds me of the hymn, ‘Change and decay in all around I see’.”

He patted me on the back.

“Cheer up, Jacko! And don’t worry about the way things have turned out. This way—or another! What odds? I’m tremendously bucked up to have you here, and I’m bent on enjoying myself while I can. Forget Tuesday night—forget it! After all, you never know.”

His look, his voice, his friendly touch cheered me. After all, as he said, one never *did* know! It was a relief to let myself be bluffed by his absurdly high spirits. Depression slipped off like a wet cloak as we tramped home for breakfast as carefree as if the pair of us had nothing more on our minds than a boat-race, or a thesis to be finished.

Jonquil appeared in high feather at the breakfast table—adorable with Rafe, mockingly sweet with me. And, of course, she scarcely talked of anything but Count Dul—how and when and where and what was going to happen about the wealth with which the family fortune was to be restored.

Rafe refused to be serious for even a moment about the B.G., as he called the Count. He was in the unreasoning fey mood that always seized him before any special test in our college days.

"I think the date's a mistake," he remarked. "The old boy meant April 1st."

I didn't remind him that the last night of May, this year, was peculiarly fitted for Count Dul's return. He knew considerably more than he acknowledged of ceremonial magic. It was unlikely that the significance of next Tuesday's date had escaped him. Together, as students, we'd read the Fourth Book of *Philosophia Occulta*, and the works of Pirus de Mirandola, and the *Grimoire* of Pope Honorius.

Above all, he'd read the book which Count Dul had left behind him. I'd borrowed and read it too, from cover to cover, and it was plain that Rafe's ancestor had, after many experimental essays, followed the teachings and practises of the infamous Lord of Corasse. These entailed observance of astronomy and, according to them, such a purpose as the return of the dead could only be accomplished at certain rare conjunctions of the stars and moon and planets. Rafe must be aware of these facts.

"Perhaps," Jonquil's face sparkled with excitement, "perhaps it will be priceless old jewelry he brought from Hungary. Count Dul was the first of your family to settle in England, wasn't he, Rafe?"

"He came because he was pushed," he replied. "They found he'd smuggled emeralds mined in the High Tatra Alps. He escaped from a particularly spectacular death connected with rope and four horses by a miracle—and, tradition records, by the aid of the devils he served."

"Emeralds!" breathed Jonquil, her eyes two deep pools of ecstasy. "How I adore emeralds! I shall keep the very most beautiful for myself, Rafe. You can sell the rest if I have just one perfect stone to wear."

"Certainly, Madam!"

He whipped out a notebook and pencil and assumed a business-like air.

"Let me see, now! What size and color

does Madam prefer? I would not like to order something unsuitable. Oval, round, or square? Green or rose-red?"

"Rose-red," she took him up promptly. "A very very large square-cut stone set as a pendant with diamonds."

He licked his pencil and printed her order laboriously.

"You can take off that superior smirk, my child," he assured her. "There are such things as rose-red emeralds."

Their discussion went on to the end of the meal. Then she announced that we were all going to climb Hawes Fell.

"I've found a black bowl for the oil. All we need now is the earth."

"Earth! Climb up five hundred feet on a good Sabbath day of rest! Your breakfast has flown to your head, child. Think again—what about my untilled acres?"

"Doesn't it say the earth must be bitter with fire, and washed with rain, and blown on by the four winds? Very well, then. Wasn't there a heath-fire on Hawes Fell last month? It's as black as soot now and soaked in rain, and every wind in the world blows up there."

She'd made up her mind. It was to be earth from Hawes Fell, and the remainder of the day was spent in getting it.

**TUESDAY NIGHT, MAY 31st.** Tuesday morning—afternoon—night. At last, Tuesday night.

Rafe and I stood waiting for Jonquil in the library. It was after eleven p.m. In a few minutes we should set out across the fields to where Count Dul's grave lay. From the Book he'd left it was clear that in England, as in his own native country, the Count had been excommunicated by the Church and his body buried therefore in unconsecrated ground. It was Jonquil's indefatigable curiosity that had discovered the grave with its broken headstone in one of Rafe's outlying meadows. It was this initial discovery that had first determined

her to carry out the remainder of the Book's instructions.

"Who actually found the metal box?" I asked now.

The constraint between Rafe and myself on this last day had made me desperate. He'd steadily avoided being alone with me until now, although I'd persistently sought such opportunity, for today Jonquil had, for the first time, weakened in her project.

Too obstinately proud to say outright she was afraid, she'd endeavored in round-about ways to get Rafe to change his mind. He'd refused to rise to her bait, brushed aside her every tentative move toward canceling the date he'd determined to keep with his B.G.

But her wavering had given me a gleam of hope. Perhaps I might persuade him out of his insanely dangerous rendezvous even now. I felt sure Jonquil had given me this last chance to do so.

"Was it you who found the box?" I repeated.

He gave me a queer slanting look, half speculative, half sad.

"It found me," he laughed. "Slipped from the top of a bookshelf. I haven't the slightest recollection of seeing it in the house before. Never heard my father mention it. Must have been pushed out of sight somehow—it fell with a crash right at my feet and the Book and the B.G.'s heart rolled on the floor."

"Rafe! Don't go on with this. Even Jonquil doesn't want it now. You know—you surely know the risk. Why will you—"

He caught my eye, and changed color. I saw he was trying to bring himself to answer me, and waited. He began to speak in quick, almost stammering words.

"Yes, I know the risk. I know, old man, but—I must go on now. It's been heaven—these last six months with Jonquil—heaven! But it can't last. We married in haste, but I'm damned if I'll let her 're-

pent at leisure.' It's a million to one I'll come through—with money, or without it, tonight, but—she'll remember I've tried."

"Rafe! You can't . . . you won't—"

"I will. It's easier to die than to lose her. I can face any hell but that."

"But she's going to—to lose you. And she's afraid of that now. She'd be glad—thankful if you gave up."

He smiled, as he'd smiled a thousand times when I'd missed some obvious point.

"Dear old chap! You don't know Jonquil. She's temperamental—just working up to the proper goose-flesh mood for tonight's orgy. No use, John! I'd never live it down if I failed her now. She's a child, an adorable child. I've had more than most men—and I'm choosing the easiest way out."

Jonquil's light step sounded on the uncarpeted old stairway.

"Ready?" her shining curls appeared round the door. "It's after eleven o'clock. We ought to start."

We went out to the great, echoing hall; our feet, on the old-fashioned red tiles, clanked dismally.

"This the picnic basket?" Rafe took up Count Dul's box from an oak chest. "Got the champagne and oysters, dear? Right! Let's start."

THE night was cool, almost cold. Wind stirred in the tree-tops. Tall solemn elms on either side of the avenue whispered uneasily as we passed between their double ranks. Overhead a brilliant sky of stars, and a proud moon sailing in full majesty.

I wondered if any remote world up there was like the one I trod; if any other beings knew such bitterness and horror and evil as we did on our earth. I wondered if I could go on living here—alone, when Rafe—when Rafe—

Suddenly my dream blotted out moon, stars, and earth. . . . I had reached the end

of that awful valley — breathless, spent from long pursuit—before me a broken pathway descended to the lip of a yawning chasm. And along that path, walking with steady purposeful tread, a man's tall figure loomed. Rafe—it was Rafe! In agony I stumbled after him. . . .

My dream blew like mist from across my vision. I was back in a country lane with Rafe and Jonquil, under the full moon's menace, the moon that would presently light Count Dul from hell.

"Here's our field-path." Jonquil turned aside to an old stile of flat stones laid with gaps between to keep cattle from crossing.

We followed her, cut across a field to another stile and across it to the desolate overgrown rocky bit of wasteland that was our objective. In another minute Jonquil stopped and pointed.

"There! There it is!"

The white merciless moon showed up every grass-blade and flower and stone of the hummock before us. Nature had flung a poisonous pall over the dead, and even the moon's glare could not blanch the blotched evil of henbane, viper's bugloss and deadly nightshade, or the scarlet-spotted fungus on Count Dul's grave. A cracked and sunken headstone leaned awry at the head of it. The worn lettering showed only a few words of whatever inscription had been cut two hundred years ago—COUNT DUL . . . DIED 1738 . . . A WARNING TO ALL WHO READ . . .

Rafe looked at his watch, glanced up at the moon as it climbed to its fateful meridian. He'd doffed his armor once more. With mocking brilliant smile he looked down on the horrible grave and airily kissed his hand.

"Rafe!" Jonquil's brows went up in anxiety. "You *must* be serious."

"Darling! I'm sure the B.G. wouldn't like it. Think what a gay old dog he was

in his time. Think how much he must have enjoyed himself to have tried for two centuries to get back again. Must make his little trip enjoyable, you know! About time I got to the front door to meet him. I suppose it's no use arguing any more—you won't go home?"

"For the hundredth time—no, dearest! You might take my rose-red emerald and run off with some other pretty lady."

She was looking up into his face and, even to my jaundiced eyes, was a sight to stir the blood of any man. For a second, Rafe's devil-may-care mask dropped, his dark burning eyes and drawn features showed such anguish that I started forward with a cry. This was my dream . . . his tall figure—so dear, so obstinate, so tragic — moving steadily onward to the edge of an abyss. . . .

At once he recovered himself. Behind the brilliant smile he turned to me I read entreaty. He wanted me to take Jonquil away. He was in terror of what she would see and hear, in terror that she might be endangered too. But I knew also, and it was the only poor comfort I had left, that he wanted me—needed me as he and I always needed each other in a tight corner.

No one on earth—nor from hell—should move me from that graveside, and I confess I was glad that Jonquil should be there also. I wanted to spare her nothing.

I hoped if Rafe did not survive that she too would be destroyed.

I don't know how much of my thoughts he read, but in any case she wouldn't have left with me. He turned away, opened the metal casket, lifted out of it the withered pulsing heart and set it down at the head of the grave under the deeply sunken headstone.

My fascinated gaze was held by the horrible little thing. I saw it throb and quiver to the beat—beat—beat of whatever infernal power quickened life in it. I saw

its dark withered walls gleam in the moonlight like tarnished copper.

At the other end of the grave, Rafe uprooted a clump of spotted henbane, set down a small black bowl and poured oil into it.

Jonquil's small hands clasped in excitement. She watched with dancing eyes, her curls ruffled about her eager flower-like face.

Rafe glanced at his watch again, smiled once more at Jonquil. He didn't look toward me—I was thankful for it.

"Now for my old B.G. Stand back! Stand back, there!" he waved an imperious hand. "Make way for the Count Dul—make way——"

He took from his pocket the crackling parchment on which the conjuration was written, its black lettering very plain in the moonlight, ran his eye over it for the last time, although I was certain every word of it was stamped deep in his memory.

His voice rang out as I'd heard it ring on the playing-fields when we were boys together:

*For your sightless eyes—this Flame!*

He stooped to set alight the oil in the black bowl.

*For your fleshless bones—this Earth!*

He scattered dry dark soil from the basket.

*For your withered heart—this Blood!*

He knelt, held out his left hand and slashed it with a knife until blood dripped upon the heart. Then he got swiftly to his feet. His loud voice challenged the dead:

*Wake from your sleep, Count Dul!*

*Rise from your grave, Count Dul!*

*Return from the dead, Count Dul!*

*Give me wealth—wealth for my boon!*

My body was turned to ice, my feet rooted to the ground, my whole being concentrated on Rafe's tall rigid figure standing at the graveside—at the mouth of hell.

His last word echoed and reverberated like an organ-note; louder — louder it

swelled and boomed, until the quiet night hummed and quivered, and the poisonous grave-weeds slowly withered, blackened, lay in dust, until the earth beneath them cracked widely open and the burning oil shot up into a red roaring fire that was cold as wind off an ice-field and seemed to lick the stars.

It froze the tears on my cheek. It chilled even the unbearable anguish in my heart.

The heart—in the red flame's brilliance—shone, incandescent, fiercely alive, then vanished.

In that moment the flame sank to earth again, the noise of its burning ceased—silence far more ominous fell, while overhead the great moon looked down in passionless survey.

The grave yawned widely open; from its void rose a wisp of dark smoke that turned and wreathed and twisted and coiled in ever denser volume as it swelled and blew and eddied to and fro above the gaping grave, blind, purposeless, uncertain. Then a nucleus formed in the vaporous evil, a dull purplish-red heart-shaped glowing core about which the dark mist swiftly formed and re-formed to a tall swaying pillar—an imperceptibly growing outline—a recognizable human body whose white face of damnation stared into Rafe's, whose awful rotted hands reached out to touch, to hold, to bind him fast.

And now I could not distinguish Rafe from the smothering infernal Thing itself. It swirled about him. It covered head and hands and feet from sight. When he moved, he moved within the enveloping darkness. When his face turned to me I saw only the dreadful livid face of the dead.

Still I was frozen there, unable to speak, to move, to do more than see and hear the Thing that now moved forward with fixed pale staring eyes and loose dark lips that mouthed and laughed and whispered as it came.

I could not turn to look at Jonquil. I felt her arms about me, clutching—I felt her warm soft body pressed to mine, her face against my cold and empty heart. I heard her long shrieks echoing above the thin dry whisper of the Thing that steadily advanced—nearer—nearer.

It halted beside us. Now I could see Rafe's tortured eyes, his face and form behind the clouded horror that enfolded him—he was shut up inside it like a chrysalis in a dark cocoon. He was Count Dul—Count Dul was Rafe!

Next moment Jonquil was plucked from my side. Her body was flung down on the dew-wet earth, her curls gleamed as two hands met about her throat, choking a last thin cry. . . .

The Thing that killed her rose and moved back to the grave. Now I could see Rafe more distinctly beneath the wavering cloud of evil. His dreadful garment grew thin and patchy, drifted from him, lost density and outline as it hovered over the open grave.

And the grave's darkness sucked it down out of sight, back to the hell from which it came.

The yawning hole closed up. The ugly weeds grew rank again upon the hummock. A sunken headstone leaned awry at its end.

In the same moment, I was released and ran stumbling over the long grass to where Rafe lay huddled.

**A** MONTH later. Rafe was not dead. But he would have died—he *would* have died if that devil hadn't barred his way out!

By some infernal miracle, and after lying unconscious for a week, Rafe woke to full possession of his faculties. No memory was spared him of that fatal resurrection, or of Jonquil's unthinkable end.

He lives to remember it hour after hour, day after day, week after week.

For another two months his torture will endure. Then he will be hanged. That much is certain. He confessed to the murder of his wife and stands trial next week. He'll plead guilty and there'll be practically no defense. Neither he nor I mean to confess a word of the actual truth. It would condemn him to years and years of life as a criminal maniac—remembering—remembering. . . .

A murderer—and a millionaire! Oh, yes! Count Dul kept his promise. A will turned up when the Chief Inspector of Police was going through Rafe's papers in the library—the thing toppled off a bookcase at the inspector's feet. It stated that the count had left a legacy buried in the cellars of *Braunfel*.

The police dug it up. Emeralds! An astounding collection which was photographed and written up in every rag in the country.

The finest gem was a great rose-red emerald, cut square and set with diamonds as a pendant.

I burned the Book and the Conjunction. I threw the metal box into Lake Derwentwater. But I couldn't find the heart—I went over every inch of the grave and all round about it.

Rafe takes this as a sign Count Dul's power is expended. I'm thankful that he doesn't understand.

I know that devil will return somehow—somewhere! Jonquil's death means life for him. Her will to live is added to his own.

When Rafe dies, he will look for her—and never find her. Never. She is one with the Count now, part of his thought, his will, his enduring evil.

Whether I can learn his secret, learn enough to meet him—and destroy him—I don't yet know.

When I am left alone, it will be all that remains worth doing in a world of fear and shadows.