

MAGAZINE OF HORROR AND STRANGE STORIES

Volume 1

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Robert A. W. Lowndes, *Editor*

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The Yellow Sign

by Robert W. Chambers

Readers of historical romances, who had become followers of the works of Robert W. Chambers, must have been both startled and puzzled in 1895 when they turned to their favorite's latest book, "The King In Yellow" and found a collection of stories, most of them loosely connected, written after the manner of the "gothic" novel. But it is the spirit, not the letter, of the gothic novel that you will find in "The Yellow Sign", the best of the series. Here is no outworn setting of gloomy castles or decaying mansions, no opening with howling winds, driving rain, and lightning. The story opens amidst the "roar and turmoil of Broadway at six o'clock" of a spring day — a bright day, darkened by the shadows that crouch behind the scenes . . .

*"Let the red dawn surmise
What we shall do
When this blue starlight dies,
And all is through."*

THERE ARE SO many things which are impossible to explain! Why should certain chords in music make me think of the brown and golden tints of autumn foliage? Why should the

Mass of Sainte-Cecile send my thoughts wandering among caverns whose walls blaze with ragged masses of virgin silver? What was it in the roar and turmoil of Broadway at six o'clock that flashed before my eyes the picture of a still Breton forest where sunlight filtered through spring foliage, and Sylvia bent, half curiously, half

tenderly, over a small green lizard, murmuring, "To think that this also is a little ward of God?"

When I first saw the watchman his back was towards me. I looked at him indifferently, until he went into the church. I paid no more attention to him than I had to any other man who lounged through Washington Square that morning, and when I shut my window and turned back into my studio I had forgotten him. Late in the afternoon, the day being warm, I raised the window again and leaned out to get a sniff of air. A man was standing in the courtyard of the church, and I noticed him again with as little interest as I had that morning. I looked across the square to where the fountain was playing, and then, with my mind filled with vague impressions of trees, asphalt drives, and the moving groups of nursemaids and holiday-makers, I started to walk back to my easel. As I turned, my listless glance included the man below in the churchyard. His face was towards me now, and with a perfectly involuntary movement, I bent to see it. At the same moment he raised his head and looked at me. Instantly I thought of a coffin-worm. Whatever it was about the man that repelled me, I did not know, but the impression of a plump white grave-worm was so intense and nauseating that I

must have shown it in my expression, for he turned his puffy face away with a movement which made me think of a disturbed grub in a chestnut.

I went back to my easel and motioned the model to resume her pose. After working awhile, I was satisfied that I was spoiling what I had done as rapidly as possible, and I took up a palette-knife and scraped the color out again. The flesh tones were sallow and unhealthy, and I did not understand how I could have painted such sickly color into a study which before that had glowed with healthy tones.

I looked at Tessie. She had not changed, and the clear flush of health dyed her neck and cheeks as I frowned.

"Is it something I've done?" she asked.

"No. I've made a mess of this arm, and for the life of me I can't see how I came to paint such mud as that into the canvas," I replied.

"Don't I pose well?" she insisted.

"Of course, perfectly."

"Then it's not my fault?"

"No. It's my own."

"I'm very sorry," she said.

I told her she could rest while I applied rag and turpentine to the plague-spot on my canvas, and she went off to smoke a cigarette and look over the illustrations in the *Courier Francais*.

I did not know whether it

was something in the turpentine or a defect in the canvas, but the more I scrubbed the more that gangrene seemed to spread. I worked like a beaver to get it out, and yet the disease appeared to creep from limb to limb of the study before me. Alarmed, I strove to arrest it, but now the color of the flesh changed and the whole figure seemed to absorb the infection as a sponge soaks up water. Vigorously I plied palette-knife, turpentine, and scraper, thinking all the time what a seance I should hold with Duval, who had sold me the canvas; but soon I noticed that it was not the canvas which was defective, nor yet the colors of Edward.

"It must be the turpentine," I thought, angrily, "or else my eyes have become so blurred and confused by the afternoon light that I can't see straight." I called Tessie, the model. She came and leaned over my chair, blowing rings of smoke into the air.

"What *have* you been doing to it?" she exclaimed.

"Nothing," I growled; "it must be this turpentine!"

"What a horrible color it is now," she continued. "Do you think my flesh resembles green cheese?"

"No, I don't," I said, angrily. "did you ever know me to paint like that before?"

"No, indeed!"

"Well, then!"

"It must be the turpentine, or something," she admitted.

SHE WALKED TO the window. I scraped and rubbed until I was tired, and finally picked up my brushes and hurled them through the canvas with a forcible expression, the tone alone of which reached Tessie's ears.

Hearing this she promptly began: "That's it! Swear and act silly and ruin your brushes! You have been three weeks on that study, and now look! What's the good of ripping the canvas? What creatures artists are!"

I felt about as much ashamed as I usually did after such an outbreak, and I turned the ruined canvas to the wall. Tessie helped me clean my brushes, and then danced away to get ready to go home. Then she regaled me with bits of advice concerning whole or partial loss of temper, until thinking perhaps I had been tormented sufficiently, she suddenly changed the subject.

"Everything went wrong from the time you came back from the window and talked about that horrid-looking man you saw in the churchyard," she announced.

"Yes, he probably bewitched the picture," I said, yawning. I looked at my watch.

"It's after six, I know," said

Tessie, adjusting her hat before the mirror.

"Yes," I replied. "I didn't mean to keep you so long." I leaned out of the window, but recoiled with disgust, for the young man with the pasty face stood below in the churchyard. Tessie saw my gesture of disapproval, and leaned from the window.

"Is that the man you don't like?" she whispered.

I nodded.

"I can't see his face, but he does look fat and soft. Some way or other," she continued, turning to look at me, "he reminds me of a dream — an awful dream — I once had. Or," she mused, looking down at her shapely shoes, "was it a dream after all?"

"How should I know?" I smiled.

Tessie smiled in reply.

"You were in it," she said, "so perhaps you might know something about it."

"Tessie! Tessie!" I protested, "don't you dare flatter by saying that you dream about me!"

"But I did," she insisted. "Shall I tell you about it?"

"Go ahead," I replied, lighting a cigarette.

Tessie leaned back on the open window-sill and began, very seriously:

"One night last winter I was lying in bed thinking about nothing at all in particular. I had

been posing for you and I was tired out, yet it seemed impossible for me to sleep. I heard the bells in the city ring ten, eleven, and midnight. I must have fallen asleep about midnight, because I don't remember hearing the bells after that. It seemed to me that I had scarcely closed my eyes when I dreamed that something impelled me to go to the window. I rose, and, raising the sash, leaned out. Twenty-fifth Street was deserted as far as I could see. I began to be afraid. Everything outside seemed so — so black and uncomfortable. Then the sound of wheels in the distance came to my ears, and it seemed to me as though that was what I must wait for.

"Very slowly the wheels approached, and, finally, I could make out a vehicle moving along the street. It came nearer and nearer, and when it passed beneath my window I saw it was a hearse. Then as I trembled with fear, the driver turned and looked straight at me. When I awoke I was standing by the open window shivering with cold, but the black-plumed hearse and the driver were gone. I dreamed this dream again in March last, and again awoke beside the open window. Last night the dream came again. You remember how it was raining. When I awoke, standing at the open window, my night-dress was soaked."

"But where did I come into the dream?" I asked.

"You — you were in the coffin, but you were not dead."

"In the coffin?"

"Yes."

"How did you know? Could you see me?"

"No. I only knew you were there."

"Had you been eating Welsh rarebits, or lobster salad?" I began to laugh, but the girl interrupted me with a frightened cry.

"Hello! What's up?" I said, as she shrank into the embrasure by the window.

"The — the man below in the churchyard . . . he drove the hearse."

"Nonsense," I said; but Tessie's eyes were wide with terror. I went to the window, and looked out. The man was gone. "Come, Tessie," I urged, "don't be foolish. You have posed too long. You are nervous."

"Do you think I could forget that face?" she murmured. "Three times I saw the hearse pass below my window, and every time the driver turned and looked up at me. Oh, his face was so white and — and soft! It looked dead — it looked as if it had been dead a long time."

I induced the girl to sit down and swallow a glass of Marsala. Then I sat down beside her and tried to give her some advice.

"Look here, Tessie," I said,

"you go to the country for a week or two, and you'll have no more dreams about hearses. You pose all day, and when night comes your nerves are upset. You can't keep this up. Then again, instead of going to bed when your day's work is done, you run off to picnics at Sulzer's Park, or go to the Eldorado or Coney Island, and when you come down here next morning you are fagged out. There was no real hearse. That was a soft-shell-crab dream."

She smiled faintly.

"What about the man in the churchyard?"

"Oh, he's only an ordinary, unhealthy, everyday creature."

"As true as my name is Tessie Reardon, I swear to you, Mr. Scott, that the face of the man below in the churchyard is the face of the man who drove the hearse!"

"What of it?" I said. "It's an honest trade."

"Then you think I *did* see the hearse?"

"Oh," I said, diplomatically, "if you really did, it might not be unlikely that the man below drove it. There is nothing in that."

Tessie rose, unrolled her scented handkerchief, and, taking a bit of gum from a knot in the hem, placed it in her mouth. Then, drawing on her gloves, she offered me her hand with a frank "Goodnight, Mr. Scott," and walked out.

2

THE NEXT morning, Thomas, the bellboy, brought me the *Herald* and a bit of news. The church next door had been sold. I thanked Heaven for it, not that I, being a Catholic, had any repugnance for the congregation next door, but because my nerves were shattered by a blatant exhorter, whose every word echoed through the aisles of the church as if it had been my own rooms, and who insisted on his r's with a nasal persistence which revolted my every instinct.

Then, too, there was a fiend in human shape, an organist, who reeled off some of the grand old hymns with an interpretation of his own, and I longed for the blood of a creature who could play the "Doxology" with an amendment of minor chords which one hears only in a quartet of very young undergraduates. I believe the minister was a good man, but when he bellowed, "And the Lorrd said unto Moses, the Lorrd is a man of war; the Lorrd is his name. My wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sworrd!" I wondered how many centuries of purgatory it would take to atone for such a sin.

"Who bought the property?" I asked Thomas.

"Nobody that I knows, sir. They do say the gent wot owns

this 'ere 'Amilton flats was lookin' at it. 'E might be a bildin' more studios."

I walked to the window. The young man with the unhealthy face stood by the churchyard gate, and at the mere sight of him the same overwhelming repugnance took possession of me.

"By-the-way, Thomas," I said, "who is that fellow down there?"

Thomas sniffed. "That there worm, sir? 'E's night-watchman of the church, sir. 'E makes me tired a-sittin' out all night on them steps and lookin' at you insultin' like. I'd 'a' punched is 'ed, sir — beg pardon, sir —"

"Go on, Thomas."

"One night a comin' 'ome with 'Arry, the other English boy, I sees 'im a sittin' there on them steps. We 'ad Molly and Jen with us, sir, the two girls on the tray service, an' 'e looks so insultin' at us that I up and sez, 'Wat you lookin' hat, you fat slug?' — beg pardon, sir, but that's 'ow I sez, sir. Then 'e don't say nothin', and I sez, 'Come out and I'll punch that puddin' 'ed.' Then I hopens the gate an' goes in, but 'e don't say nothin', only looks insultin' like. Then I 'its 'im one, but, ugh! 'is e'd was that cold and mushy it ud sicken you to touch im."

"What did he do then?" I asked curiously.

"'Im? Nawthin'."

"And you, Thomas?"

The young fellow flushed

with embarrassment, and smiled uneasily.

"Mr Scott, sir, I aint no coward, an' I can't make it out at all why I run. I was in the Fifth Lawncers, sir, at Tel-el-Kebir, an' was shot by the wells."

"You don't mean to say you ran away?"

"Yes, sir. I run."

"Why?"

"That's just what I want to know, sir. I grabbed Molly an' run, an' the rest was as frightened as I."

"But what were they frightened at?"

Thomas refused to answer for a while; but now my curiosity was aroused about the repulsive young man below, and I pressed him. Three years' sojourn in America had modified Thomas's cockney dialect but he was still "close."

"You won't believe me, Mr. Scott, sir!"

"Yes, I will"

"You will lawf at me, sir?"

"Nonsense!"

He hesitated. "Well, sir, it's Gawd's truth, that when I 'it 'im, 'e grabbed me wrists, sir, and when I twisted 'is soft, mushy fist one of 'is fingers come off in me 'and."

The utter loathing and horror of Thomas's face must have been reflected in my own, for he added, "It's orful, an' now when I see 'im I just go away. 'E maikes me hill."

When Thomas had gone I

went to the window. The man stood beside the church railing, with both hands on the gate; but I hastily retreated to my easel again, sickened and horrified, for I saw that the middle finger of his right hand was missing.

AT NINE O'CLOCK Tessie appeared, with a merry "Good-morning, Mr. Scott." When she had taken her pose upon the model-stand I started a new canvas, much to her delight. She remained silent as long as I was on the drawing, but as soon as the scrape of the charcoal ceased, and I took up my fixative, she began to chatter.

"Oh, I had such a lovely time last night. We went to Tony Pastor's."

"Who are 'we'?" I demanded.

"Oh, Maggie — you know, Mr. Whyte's model — and Pinkie McCormick — we call her Pinkie because she's got that beautiful red hair you artists like so much — and Lizzie Burke."

I sent a shower of spray from the fixative over the canvas, and said, "Well, go on."

"We saw Kelly, and Baby Barnes, the skirt-dancer, and — and all the rest. I made friends with a new fellow."

"Then you have gone back on me, Tessie?"

She laughed and shook her head.

"He's Lizzie Burke's brother,

Ed. He's a perfect gen'l man."

Then she related how Ed had come back from the stocking-mill in Lowell, Massachusetts, to find her and Lizzie grown up — and what an accomplished young man he was — and how he thought nothing of squandering half a dollar for ice-cream and oysters to celebrate his entry as clerk into the woollen department of Macy's. Before she finished I began to paint, and she resumed the pose, smiling and chattering like a sparrow. By noon I had the study fairly well rubbed in and Tessie came to look at it.

"That's better," she said.

I thought so, too, and ate my lunch with a satisfied feeling that all was going well. Tessie spread her lunch on a drawing-table opposite me, and we drank our claret from the same bottle and lighted our cigarettes from the same match. I was much attached to Tessie. I had watched her shoot up into a slender but exquisitely formed woman from a frail, awkward child. She had posed for me during the last three years, and among all my models she was my favorite.

I knew she would do what she liked, still I did hope she would steer clear of complications, because I wished her well, and then also I had a selfish desire to retain the best model I had.

I am a Catholic. When I lis-

ten to high mass, when I sign myself, I feel that everything, including myself, is more cheerful; and when I confess, it does me good. A man who lives as much alone as I do must confess to somebody. Then, again, Sylvia was Catholic, and it was reason enough for me. But I was speaking of Tessie, which is very different. Tessie also was Catholic, and much more devout than I, so, taking it all in all. I had little fear for my pretty model until she should fall in love. But *then* I knew that fate alone would decide her future for her, and I prayed inwardly that fate would throw into her path nothing but Ed Burkes and Jimmy McCormicks, bless her sweet face!

Tessie sat blowing rings of smoke up to the ceiling and tinkling the ice in her tumbler.

"Do you know that I also had a dream last night?" I observed.

"Not about that man?" she asked, laughing.

"Exactly. A dream similar to yours, only much worse."

It was foolish and thoughtless of me to say this, but you know how little tact the average painter has.

"I MUST HAVE fallen asleep about ten o'clock," I continued, "and after a while I dreamed that I awoke. So plainly did I hear the midnight bells, the wind in the tree-branches, and the whistle of steamers from the

bay, that even now I can scarcely believe I was not awake. I seemed to be lying in a box which had a glass cover. Dimly I saw the street lamps as I passed, for I must tell you, Tessie, the box in which I reclined appeared to lie in a cushioned wagon which jolted me over a stony pavement.

"After a while I became impatient and tried to move, but the box was too narrow. My hands were crossed on my breast so I could not raise them to help myself. I listened and then tried to call. My voice was gone. I could hear the trample of the horses attached to the wagon, and even the breathing of the driver. Then another sound broke upon my ears like the raising of a window-sash.

"I managed to turn my head a little, and found I could look, not only through the glass cover of my box, but also through the glass panes in the side of the covered vehicle. I saw houses, empty and silent, with neither light nor life about any of them excepting one. In that house a window was open on the first floor and a figure all in white stood looking down into the street. It was you."

Tessie had turned her face away from me and leaned on the table with her elbow.

"I could see your face," I resumed, "and it seemed to me to be very sorrowful. Then we passed on and turned into a

narrow, black lane. Presently the horses stopped. I waited and waited, closing my eyes with fear and impatience, but all was silent as the grave. After what seemed to me hours, I began to feel uncomfortable. A sense that somebody was close to me made me unclothe my eyes. Then I saw the white face of the hearse-driver looking at me through the coffin-lid . . ."

A sob from Tessie interrupted me. She was trembling like a leaf. I saw I had made a fool of myself, and attempted to repair the damage.

"Why, Tess," I said, "I only told you to show you what influence your story might have on another person's dreams. You don't suppose I really lay in a coffin, do you? What are you trembling for? Don't you see that your dream and my unreasonable dislike for that offensive watchman of the church simply set my brain working as soon as I fell asleep?"

She laid her head between her arms and sobbed as if her heart would break. What a precious triple donkey I had made of myself! But I was about to break my record. I went over and put my arm about her.

"Tessie, dear, forgive me," I said. "I had no business to frighten you with such nonsense. You are too sensible a girl, too good a Catholic to believe in dreams."

Her hand tightened on mine

and her head fell back upon my shoulder, but she still trembled and I petted her and comforted her.

"Come, Tess, open your eyes and smile."

Her eyes opened with a slow, languid movement and met mine, but their expression was so queer that I hastened to reassure her again.

"It's all humbug, Tessie. You surely are not afraid that any harm will come to you because of that?"

"No," she said, but her scarlet lips quivered.

"Then what's the matter? Are you afraid?"

"Yes. Not for myself."

"For me, then?" I demanded, gayly.

"For you," she murmured, in a voice almost inaudible. "I — I care for you."

At first I started to laugh, but when I understood her a shock passed through me, and I sat like one turned to stone. This was the crowning bit of idiocy I had committed. During the moment which elapsed between her reply and my answer I thought of a thousand responses to that innocent confession. I could pass it by with a laugh, I could misunderstand her and reassure her as to my health, I could simply point out that it was impossible she could love me. But my reply was quicker than my thoughts, and I might think and think now when it

was too late, for I had kissed her on the mouth.

THAT EVENING I took my usual walk in Washington Park, pondering over the occurrences of the day. I was thoroughly committed. There was no back-out now, and I stared the future straight in the face. I was not good, not even scrupulous, but I had no idea of deceiving either myself or Tessie. The one passion of my life lay buried in the sunlit forests of Brittany. Was it buried forever? Hope cried "No!" For three years I had been listening to the voice of Hope, and for three years I had waited for a footstep on my threshold. Had Sylvia forgotten? "No!" cried Hope.

I said that I was not good. That is true, but still I was not exactly a comic-opera villain. I had led an easy-going, reckless life, taking what invited me of pleasure, deploring and sometimes bitterly regretting consequences. In one thing alone, except my painting, was I serious, and that was something which lay hidden if not lost in the Breton forests.

It was too late now for me to regret what had occurred during the day. Whatever it had been, pity, a sudden tenderness for sorrow, or the more brutal instinct of gratified vanity, it was all the same now, and unless I wished to bruise an innocent heart my path lay marked

before me. The fire and the strength, the depth of a love which I had never even suspected, with all my imagined experience in the world, left me no alternative but to respond or send her away.

Whether because I am so cowardly about giving pain to others, or whether it was that I have little of the gloomy Puritan in me, I do not know, but I shrank from disclaiming responsibility for that thoughtless kiss, and, in fact, had not time to do so before the gates of her heart opened and the flood poured forth. Others who habitually do their duty and find a sullen satisfaction in making themselves and everybody else unhappy, might have withstood it. I did not. I dared not.

After the storm had abated I did tell her that she might better have loved Ed Burke and worn a plain gold ring, but she would not hear of it, and I thought perhaps that as long as she had decided to love somebody she could not marry, it had better be me. I at least could treat her with an intelligent affection, and she could go none the worse for it. For I was decided on that point, although I knew how hard it would be.

She would either tire of the whole thing, or become so unhappy that I should have either to marry her or go away. If I married her we would be unhappy. I with a wife unsuited

to me, and she with a husband unsuitable for any woman. If I went away she might either fall ill, recover, and marry some Eddie Burke, or she might recklessly or deliberately go and do something foolish. On the other hand, if she tired of my friendship then her whole life would be before her with beautiful vistas of Eddie Burkes and marriage rings, and twins, and Harlem flats, and Heaven knows what.

AS I STROLLED along through the trees by the Washington Arch, I decided that she should find a substantial friend in me anyway, and the future could take care of itself. Then I went into the house and put on my evening dress, for the little faintly perfumed note on my dresser said, "Have a cab at the stage door at eleven," and the note was signed, "Edith Carmichel, Metropolitan Theater."

I took supper that night, or, rather, we took supper, Miss Carmichel and I, at Solari's and the dawn was just beginning to gild the cross on the Memorial Church as I entered Washington Square after leaving Edith at the Brunswick. There was not a soul in the park, as I passed among the trees and took the walk which leads from the Garibaldi statue to the Hamilton apartment house, but as I passed the churchyard I saw a figure sitting on the stone steps.

In spite of myself a chill crept over me at the sight of the white, puffy face, and I hastened to pass. Then he said something which might have been addressed to me or might merely have been a mutter to himself, but a sudden furious anger flamed up within me that such a creature should address me.

For an instant I felt like wheeling about and smashing my stick over his head, but I walked on, and, entering the Hamilton, went to my apartment. For some time I tossed about the bed trying to get the sound of his voice out of my ears, but could not. It filled my head, that muttering sound, like thick, oily smoke from a fat-rendering vat or an odor of noisome decay. And as I lay and tossed about, the voice in my ears seemed more distinct, and I began to understand the words he muttered. They came to me slowly, as if I had forgotten them, and at last I could make some sense out of the sounds. It was this:

"Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

"Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

"Have you found the Yellow Sign?"

I was furious. What did he mean by that? Then with a curse upon him and his I rolled over and went to sleep, but when I awoke later I looked

pale and haggard, for I had dreamed the dream of the night before, and it troubled me more than I cared to think.

I dressed and went down into my studio. Tessie sat by the window, but as I came in she rose and put both arms around my neck for an innocent kiss. She looked so sweet and dainty that I kissed her again.

I said, "We will begin something new"; and I went into my wardrobe and picked out a Moorish costume which fairly blazed with tinsel. It was a genuine costume, and Tessie retired to the screen with it, enchanted. When she came forth again I was astonished. Her long, black hair was bound above her forehead with a circlet of turquoise. Her feet were encased in the embroidered, pointed slippers, and the skirt of her costume, curiously wrought with arabesques in silver, and the short Mauresque jacket, spangled and sewn with turquoises, became her wonderfully. She came up to me and held up her face, smiling. I slipped my hand into my pocket, and, drawing out a gold chain with a cross attached, dropped it over her head.

"It's yours, Tessie."

"Mine?" she faltered.

"Yours. Now go and pose." Then with a radiant smile she ran behind the screen, presently reappeared with a little box on which was written my name.

"I had intended to give it to

you when I went home tonight," she said, "but I can't wait now."

I opened the box. On the pink cotton inside lay a clasp of black onyx, on which was inlaid a curious symbol or letter in gold. It was neither Arabic nor Chinese, nor, as I found afterwards, did it belong to any human script.

"It's all I had to give you for a keepsake," she said, timidly.

I was annoyed, but I told her how much I should prize it, and promised to wear it always. She fastened it on my coat beneath the lapel.

"How foolish, Tess, to go and buy me such a beautiful thing as this," I said.

"I did not buy it," she laughed.

"Where did you get it?"

Then she told me how she found it one day while coming from the aquarium in the Battery, how she had advertised it and watched the papers, but at last gave up all hopes of finding the owner.

"That was last winter," she said, "the very day I had the first horrid dream about the hearse."

3

The day following was a disastrous one for me. While moving a framed canvas from one easel to another my foot slipped on the polished floor and I fell heavily on both wrists. They

were so badly sprained that it was useless to attempt to hold a brush, and I was obliged to wander about the studio, glaring at unfinished drawings and sketches, until despair seized me and I sat down to smoke and twiddle my thumbs with rage. The rain blew against the windows and rattled on the roof of the church, driving me into a nervous fit with its interminable patter.

Tessie sat sewing by the window, and every now and then raised her head and looked at me with such innocent compassion that I began to feel ashamed of my irritation and looked about for something to occupy me. I had read all the papers and all the books in the library, but for the sake of something to do I went to the bookcases and shoved them open with my elbow. I knew every volume by its color and examined them all, passing slowly around the library and whistling to keep up my spirits.

I was turning to go into the dining room when my eye fell upon a book bound in serpent-skin standing in a corner of the top shelf of the last bookcase. I did not remember it, and from the floor could not decipher the pale lettering on the back, so I went to the smoking-room and called Tessie. She came in from the studio and climbed up to reach the book.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The King in Yellow."

I was dumbfounded. Who had placed it there? How came it in my rooms? I had long ago decided that I should never open that book, and nothing on earth could have persuaded me to buy it. Fearful lest curiosity might tempt me to open it, I had never even looked at it in bookstores. If I ever had had any curiosity to read it, the awful tragedy of young Castaigne, whom I knew, prevented me from exploring its wicked pages. I had always refused to listen to any description of it, and, indeed, nobody ever ventured to discuss the second part aloud, so I had absolutely no knowledge of what those leaves might reveal. I stared at the poisonous, mottled binding as I would at a snake.

"Don't touch it, Tessie," I said. "Come down."

Of course my admonition was enough to arouse her curiosity, and before I could prevent it she took the book, and, laughing, danced off into the studio with it. I called her, but she slipped away with a tormenting smile at my helpless hands, and I followed her with some impatience.

"Tessie!" I cried, entering the library, "listen. I am serious. Put that book away. I do not wish you to open it!" The library was empty. I went into both drawing-rooms, then into the bedrooms, laundry, kitchen, and fin-

ally returned to the library and began a systematic search. She had hidden herself so well that it was half an hour later when I discovered her crouching white and silent by the latticed window in the storeroom above. At the first glance I saw she had been punished for her foolishness. "The King in Yellow" lay at her feet, but the book was open at the second part.

I looked at Tessie and saw it was too late. She had opened "The King in Yellow." Then I took her by the hand and led her into the studio. She seemed dazed, and when I told her to lie down on the sofa she obeyed me without a word. After a while she closed her eyes and her breathing became regular and deep; but I could not determine whether or not she slept. For a long while I sat silently beside her, but she neither stirred nor spoke, and at last I rose and, entering the unused storeroom, took the book in my least injured hand. It seemed heavy as lead; but I carried it into the studio again, and, sitting down on the rug beside the sofa, opened it and read it through from beginning to end.

When, faint with the excess of my emotions, I dropped the volume and leaned wearily back against the sofa, Tessie opened her eyes and looked at me.

WE HAD BEEN speaking for some time in a dull, monot-

onous strain before I realized that we were discussing "The King in Yellow." Oh, the sin of writing such words — words which are clear as crystal, limpid and musical as bubbling springs, words which sparkle and glow like the poisoned diamonds of the Medicis! Oh the wickedness, the hopeless damnation, of a soul who could fascinate and paralyze human creatures with such words — words understood by the ignorant and wise alike, words which are more precious than jewels, more soothing than music, more awful than death!

We talked on, unmindful of the gathering shadows, and she was begging me to throw away the clasp of black onyx quaintly inlaid with what we now knew to be the Yellow Sign. I shall never know why I refused, though even at this hour, here in my bedroom as I write this confession, I should be glad to know *what* it was that prevented me from tearing the Yellow Sign from my breast and casting it into the fire. I am sure I wished to do so, and yet Tessie pleaded with me in vain.

Night fell, and the hours dragged on, but still we murmured to each other of the King and the Pallid Mask, and midnight sounded from the misty spires in the fog-wrapped city. We spoke of Hatur and of Cassilda, while outside the fog rolled against the blank win-

dow-panes as the cloud waves roll and break on the shores of Hali.

The house was very silent now, and not a sound came up from the misty streets. Tessie lay among the cushions, her face a gray blot in the gloom, but her hands were clasped in mine, and I knew that she knew and read my thoughts as I read hers, for we had understood the mystery of the Hyades, and the Phantom of Truth was laid. Then, as we answered each other, swiftly, silently, thought on thought, the shadows stirred in the gloom about us, and far in the distant streets we heard a sound.

Nearer and nearer it came — the dull crunching of wheels, nearer and yet nearer, and now, outside, before the door, it ceased, and I dragged myself to the window and saw a black-plumed hearse. The gate below opened and shut, and I crept, shaking, to my door, and bolted it, but I knew no bolts, no locks, could keep that creature out who was coming for the Yellow Sign. And now I heard him moving very softly along the hall. Now he was at the door, and the bolts rotted at his touch. Now he had entered. With eyes starting from my head I peered into the darkness, but when he came into the room I did not see him. It was only when I felt him envelop me in his cold, soft grasp that I

cried out and struggled with deadly fury, but my hands were useless, and he tore the onyx clasp from my coat and struck me full in the face.

Then, as I fell, I heard Tessie's soft cry and her spirit fled; and even while falling I longed to follow her, for I knew that the King in Yellow had opened his tattered mantle and there was only God to cry to now.

I could tell more, but I cannot see what help it will be to the world. As for me, I am past human help or hope. As I lie here, writing, careless even whether or not I die before I finish, I can see the doctor gathering up his powders and phials with a vague gesture to the good priest beside me, which I understand.

They will be very curious to know the tragedy — they of the outside world who write books and print millions of newspapers, but I shall write no more, and the father confessor will

seal my last words with the seal of sanctity when his holy office is done. They of the outside world may send their creatures into wrecked homes and death-smitten firesides, and their newspapers will batten on blood and tears, but with me their spies must halt before the confessional.

They know that Tessie is dead, and that I am dying. They know how the people in the house, aroused by an infernal scream, rushed into my room, and found one living and two dead, but they do not know what I shall tell them now; they do not know that the doctor said, as he pointed to a horrible, decomposed heap on the floor — the livid corpse of the watchman from the church: "I have no theory, no explanation. That man must have been dead for months!"

I think I am dying. I wish the priest would . . .

