



*Night and sleep were a constant fear to Bronson—for they brought The Thin Woman to him.*

**I**T WAS a fear when it began. A fear that what he thought was a dream, might NOT be a dream. Other men have had that fear. But not from something so lovely, so utterly alien in its strange beauty—something so endlessly cherished within the heart.

Yet it was that lovely unknown she, the woman in the night, who had left that fear.

*The thin woman* began subtly, a slow assembling of many intangibles of the dusk of sleep, a slow materialization of the impossible fantasies of his lonely life into—*the thin woman!*

At first he could not wait to get

back into bed, could not wait for the sun to sink, for the lonely beauty of the sheer mountainsides beneath to slip their robe of darkness upon their gargantuan slabbery sides, could not wait for ... bedtime.

That period was the honeymoon, and it lasted a long, long time.

It might have lasted a lifetime, but for the fear.

That came subtly, too, compound of many little things that slowly, awfully assumed terrific, crushing significance.

Like the tiny, fairy-like book. It was printed in some unknown language, and the pictures were of nothing on this earth. They were pictures of a life and a time and a

place no man's mind could ever conceive. He had spent a lot of time over that book, wondering how it came to be upon his night table—the morning after! *After...* he dared not think that out.

Yet he must face it. It was after he had failed to fall asleep, and had heard that odd shuddering sound deep under the house, within the rocks. Deep at first, it had come closer, and he had lain and wondered what it was. Then had come the faint steps, closer and more distinct, but still no human ever made such sounds upon floors with its feet. He could remember faintly that thin long white hand upon the door, but after that his mind refused. Just plain refused!

There were a multitude of such things in the book. He picked it up, looking long at the idiotically meaningless typefaces, wondering just how such intricacies could ever *mean* anything and still be so utterly lovely.

He was afraid to show the book to anyone. Anyway there weren't many came here to show such a thing to ... Not anyone capable of understanding why it was anything other than an ordinary, but foreign book.

It couldn't be what he suspected. He must be going mad, and that was the second great fear that loomed now always behind the other one. It was of course but a bit of obsolete decorative printing in some obscure tongue that had accidentally found its way into his house in the long periods when he had been absent. It had been picked up absently by himself, laid by the bed table for use in puzzling himself into sleep—and then forgotten. Later, he had attached undue significance to the odd little volume because the recurrent, usual dream had been overexciting—upsetting him.

Then, if that were true, there remained but the recurrent dreams to

explain away, and sanity would be clear before him, his mind his own possession and dwelling place.

But, the fear remained and it was not anything but this—that he was sane, and not mad in the least! Recurrent dreams were no proof of madness. Many people had them.

**I**F HE didn't long for her so. *If* the bright days had not turned into tortuous expanses of burning, empty sunlight—*If* his life had not become completely enclosed in hers.—*If* he was not a man in a spell waiting always for sleep to release him—*if* a great many things that were not as they should normally be. *If!*

That word *if* was too constantly in his thoughts. If only he could see her with his waking, daylight eyes. If only she would cease her masquerade and become a part of normal life in the brazen sunlight. But she told him that could never be—that she was alien and that the light of day—any light at all—was deadly to her. That if he saw her with a waking man's eyes he would scream in refusal and be forever lost to her. That she was not anything that could be seen except as he saw her—with the true eyes of a mind asleep.

The eternal nagging questions kept on and on and on—*what was she?*—Why did she come to him so persistently, so readily? Like a wife to her home, she came to his sleep.—Yet, *she did not exist!* Why should a dream possess him so completely? Why couldn't he throw the dream aside and go out into the world, down that mountainside into the bright, soft, fleshy, real and glittering life of the cities? Why did he, a young man still, hide himself away here with a dream his only companion?

He lay the book down, and left the

bed chamber, left the silent gloom of his only place of pleasure, of life's strange metamorphosis into another thing than life, and strode down and out through the great old house. Past the ancient shelves where the relics of two hundred years of Bronsons quietly gathered the dust of neglect.

Past the great mirrored doors where long ago the great had circled in the dance, past the long gloomy trophy hall where some of his own game also gathered dust, now that the *Thin Woman* was mistress here.

And *she did not exist!* His mind shuddered, put her away, and his body went out into the sun. But the heart of him, the reason for living, the spirit and marrow of him, sat still up there in the great darkened sleeping room and waited—waited for the passing of the unimportant day and the coming of the all-important night. Night, night, NIGHT ... it went on and on, inside him, and off up there in the great house of his ancestors—"night"—"night"—a prayer and a confession and a magic charm and a word rich with reverberating meanings beyond meaning, of love and constancy and ecstasy and fatherhood and motherhood and the dim past shrieking of its awful secrets—NIGHT.

Himself strode on into the forest, modern man, booted and breeched and jacketed with modern clothes—yet bearing within him the long arm of *incubus*, or was it *succubus*?—He couldn't think. Bearing within him the ancient magic of the night, the dark, deep eyes of possession loomed over the horizons of his mind.

**Y**ET it was so infinitely satisfying, so *right*, so irresistible. There was no denying her, no revulsion, no nothing but an endless knowledge of her all through

him, an infinite sense of her worth, of his own relatively unimportant status in the scheme of things. He was man, average, unimportant man.—She was genius and wisdom, magic and enchantment, mind and sweet endless benevolent intent.—And she was *night*, and ever about and behind and through her hovered the evil that threatened—*threatened*—what?

Just another question, added to the awful mass of questioning his thinking had become. And she would not, could not answer him, and it troubled them both.

There were the other objects, Bronson thought, slashing savagely at an inoffensive bush with his stick. The things that had been there in the morning, and that should not have been. The things his mind refused even to remember. Yet he knew, he knew how many there had been that he had destroyed—refusing. And now memory flooded back to torture him, and he writhed inwardly, and the waiting Bronson, up there in the bed-chamber—the love-chained Bronson that was himself and that he refused except in his sleep—that Bronson laughed at this one's stupid self-torture. And as abruptly his refusing mind closed down the curtain of memory and he forgot the torturing memories again.

He would have to send for Evans. Harry, good old Harry, would set him right. He would save him.

Off in the bed-chamber, the real Bronson laughed—to himself. For he did not want to be saved. Nothing so wonderful as this "madness" had occurred to him, ever—and his mind insisted on planning ways of getting "free." It was too foolish. But reason said that if it was madness, if the whole slowly growing, materializing wonder of HER was only madness—the sooner he retrieved himself from the morass the better.

Love, a morass? His mind just could not cope with this—and that was the thing that was driving him mad, for he could not *understand*. She just did not realize his terrible need of understanding. In his sleep all that waking need of reason and sanity and knowing whys and wherefores was absent. He could enjoy life in his sleep.

But since when did a healthy man occupy his waking time just waiting for sleep to begin again? She had a place to go, something to do, wonder to occupy herself with—and she did not need what he called reason. But himself was a modern man! He could not accept... *enchantment!*

Bronson went back to the great lonely house, called up Evans—off in his prosaic, human office in the city.’

**E**VANS drove rapidly. Another half hour would bring him to the slopes of the mountain Mairam, and within sight of the huge and ancient House of the Bronsons.

Queer, thought Evans, how young Bronson had holed up here. With everything to make life a round of pleasure, travel, sport, women and social activities his occupation, with no reason to spend his days in work as less fortunate men;—he had chosen, quite suddenly—to make his home here away from all men—to become a recluse.

In college, he had given every promise of becoming a noteworthy figure. But, after a few short years of travel, he had disappeared from the knowledge of his friends. Evans had known where he was—but there was no reason and no invitation to seek him out. Now came this call...

Frank Evans parked his car in the wide gravel approach to the house, took his bag out of the rumble seat, set it on the

ground.

Bronson came out of the wide doors, a tall man with haunted eyes, pale skin, rumpled hair of a startling blackness. Evans could not see that his hermit-like life had changed him greatly. A bit thinner, perhaps, but not much. He looked very fit, in truth.

Bronson shook hands with the stocky, tweed-suited, ruddy-faced friend. Evans looked very capable, very much the successful lawyer.

“I just had to talk to someone. You are the only close friend I ever had. I hope I haven’t butted into your activities or put you out.”

“No. Glad to get away. I’ve been sticking too close to the grindstone. I’m hungry as a bear. Do you have food way out here so far from the delicatessen?”

“Plenty of food. No one but myself and old Barnes to eat it. He is so deaf, though, he’s like having no one around. You can’t talk to him, he never gets it straight. I use gestures, he does whatever he thinks is expected.”

“Just what do you stay up here for, anyway? It seems so strange for a man like you to refuse the life of the world for this solitary place.”

“That’s why I called you. To explain and to ask your advice. Not that I think you can do anything for me. No one can, I am sure. But I owe myself the effort at least.”

Evans looked down the long rocky slopes up which he had just driven. Fir and hemlock and spruce, many of them hundreds of years in the growing, gave the scene a gloomy grandeur. Upward from the rather square and squat old house the same slopes leaped even more abruptly, up and up toward the snow-line, where the mountain tops dreamed lazily, in

magnificent, tranquil dignity. A long snow plume played about the tall white peak of Mt. Mairam.

Over the roast beef, Evans asked: "Might as well start telling me, and get it off your chest."

"After. It isn't anything that can be said in a few words. Let's take the coffee into the lounge."

**I**T ALL began with a strange dream. One of those dreams where you walk, and strange and new and wonderful things are half seen. I kept trying to isolate and pin down some of the things in the dream. You know, in dreams, you never can remember afterward. But I *did!* I caught an elusive something, and held it close to my eyes, held it tight."

Bronson paused, looking at Evans with his deep, enigmatic eyes. "It was a hand, a human hand!"

"What about the hand?" Evans was puzzled.

"It was an *alien* hand. A woman's hand. And it was pleased, grateful in my own hands. I ... there's just no way to tell you."

"Seems you had better try. You've gone this far. What did the hand have to do with making a hermit out of you?"

"It possessed me. It was a woman's hand, and it possessed me!"

Evans started. My God, he thought, the poor fellow has really gone off his trolley. He'll need a psychiatrist, not me.

"Since that night, that hand has opened my bedroom door every night. I live only for that moment when she comes."

"What is she like?" Evans leaned forward.

"That's just it. She seems very long and thin, attenuated. Very white with long

soft lips that droop a little sorrowfully. She is like an enchanted person who cannot free herself ... and she is wholly *alien* to anything we know."

"I don't get it!"

"I don't get it either, Frank. I don't understand anything except that I'm madly in love with a creature who is hardly human, who never allows me to see her with *waking* eyes. She comes only *after* sleep, and she goes *before* I awake. But ... and here's the rub—she is NOT a dream."

"Not a dream? Explain that one, or forever after expect me to think you have lost your mind!"

"I placed some flour about my bed. In the morning there were tracks, and they were not my own. They were feet, a woman's unbelievably long and thin and delicate feet, and they were shod. Shod with some fine soft material through which even the toes made imprints on the floor."

Evans only sat there shaking his head. "I just don't get it. What are you trying to tell me, anyway?"

"I'm trying to tell you that in this modern age, I am possessed by a dream-shape which leaves footprints and comes to me every night. Isn't that enough?"

"I think you're plain goofy from being alone. I think you'd better come along home with me, forget this place, and find a wholly different way of life. I think you're driving yourself mad and though I don't know why, or what the cause may be, I do know you're in a dangerous condition. You are believing a fairy tale, and that might be all right for a boy ten years old—but it is certainly nothing a grown man can get away with. I've heard enough!"

"But the footprints! I set a camera too. Wait while I get the prints."

Evans looked a long time at the

snap. There was nothing on it but an opening door and one unbelievably long and unbelievably delicate hand reaching around the edge of the door to keep it from swinging wide open. It was a photograph of a *hand* such as no human Evans had ever seen possessed! His mind refused to think about it at all. He handed it back.

“That ties me, Bronson. I have nothing to say after that.”

“What I really want to know, Frank, is this—If you were me, what would you do about this woman? I love her, I can never see her except after I have fallen asleep. She seems to control my sleep and when I am awake, I wait impatiently for the night and sleep again. I am possessed by her, mad about her, and I can’t seem to break down the impossible wall between us that I can’t understand. Like you, I think I am mad, and then this photo, the memory of the footprints, and *the book*.”

“What book? You didn’t mention a *book*.”

“ONE morning there was upon my dressing table an object I had very obviously *never placed there!* It was a book *in an alien tongue!* She must have left it, but why? *I can’t read it!* It’s beautiful, yes, but meaningless to me.”

“Get it! She must have meant something.” Evans’ brain was in strange condition, the condition of accepting the truth of an impossibility. He knew he must be very careful, very sure of all his thought—to make no assumptions without sufficient evidence—must understand this thing, for it was deep water, over his head. He had no idea what to think, but he was sure going to do *some thinking* about this. Never in his life had any mystery seemed to him, unexplainable, no superstition or phenomena seemed anything but childish

to him—the childish malfunctioning of some brain that made the commonplace seem the bizarre. But here he was face to face with the weird and unexplainable—and everything he had accepted in his mind as unalterable and stable and true was shaken, falling within him. His mind boiled, reaching out after the meaning and the wonder of this “thin woman”—and his mind kept whispering subtly—*something, then, was true of the ancient tales of magic.* Something was true in the past that is not known today.



It seemed as if she were in the background, always watching him . . .

The problem was too much for Evans. His mind retreated, as men’s minds always do before that fearful unexplainable thing that contains factors their school-taught logic will not handle, cannot be made to embrace. He began to explain away the book, the photographs, the footprints, with the trite ancient phrases with which men of education have met the primitive and awful truth of miraculous phenomena which are not primitive at all—but which can be made to appear so.

“These things are also products of your delusions, Bronson. So far as I can see, you must be in such a mental state that

you go into a kind of trance during which your body is in control of the deluded part of your mind. *You* make those footprints, *you* got that book somewhere in some old second hand store, *your* mind has deluded itself into playing tricks on itself! I think the only answer is for you to leave here, go away, marry, take up an active life of a normal kind. Forget the whole thing!”

“If I only could,” murmured Bronson, looking at Evans sadly with a wise and ancient expression. It is the expression with which those who know of magic always look at those who do not know and cannot understand. “But I cannot *even want to!* I am in love, and even if the being whom I love is but a creation of my own disordered mind, I will not give her up. Nor could she give me up, Evans. If I did what you suggest she would find a way to revenge herself! I know her, she would find a way to get her own back again. She would find a way! I *cannot* leave, Evans. You see ... She is with child!”

Evans started. “She is going to have a child! And you have never even seen her? You must realize it’s a ridiculous obsession! You will ruin your whole life. You must leave here!”

**H**OWEVER it was done, the time-worn arguments, the well known words, at last won. Bronson agreed to leave, to give life a chance to free him from his “obsessions.” Evans insisted, once he had won his point, on making the trip that very night, before “she” had a chance to turn him from his promise. So it was that Evans’ car bore them away that evening, before the dark had even lain its robe of soft purple on the slabby sides of Mt. Mairam.

But something within Bronson’s breast shivered and sobbed and wept with

lonely dread of the days to come. The sorrow did not stop, the sensation of terrible bereavement did not cease. The pain, the hidden gnawing hurt, drove him from liquor to sport to women. And at the last to a marriage he knew would never work. For he loved the thin fragile foot that came from the dark night below, loved the hand-that-was-too-thin that opened his door, and for him this lovely apple-cheeked, healthy, robust female was only an experiment in “*self betterment.*” She was to him only perhaps a door to life without the gnawing want of the dream that was his all. She offered him escape from a long, thin, desiring reaching that drew and drew him back, drew him with a promise of alien indescribable delight. And the part of him that men call the sane mind refused, and argued, and pleaded and won—its own way of life.

The honeymoon passed, a sweet month of voyaging to the Caribbean, of fishing on the sunny quiet sea, of dreaming and talk in the moonlit night, and of soft promises that his heart shrank from giving, but which his sanity compelled.

Then somehow that elastic band that had drawn so steadily and so long became firm, irresistible! It was as though his resistance had at last worn out against the steady pull, and that now, worn out, he must give in.

So it was that the long car drove up the long slopes of Mt. Mairam. In the car were Mr. and Mrs. Bronson. And the night lay ahead of him, and his body quivered with anticipation of some incredible long denied need to be supplied, some consuming thirst to be once again quenched. So that he hardly noticed the pale cheek of his new wife, or her inward shudder at the sight of the huge and gloomy old house, or her frightened eyes

trying to brave the impossible heights and depths and stark impossible rocky cliffs of Mt. Mairam. Or *did* he notice, and fail to care?

The big deaf servant that only answered to gestures, and mouthed his uncouth sounds that passed for words set her into near hysterics, so that he had to give her brandy to calm her. But his real self hardly noticed for it was waiting, quiveringly waiting for the coming of the night.

The night came. And Edith put on her daring black lace negligee over her sheer black nightie that he had given her, among many other things, after the wedding. Edith calmed her racing heart, held still her plucking nervous fingers, and made her eyes seek out the shadows of the dull old house and see there was nothing there to frighten anyone. Edith resolved to conquer this place as she had conquered the dark brooding in Bronson's eyes, and bring out the laughter here as she had the laughter in him. Edith went to bed.

After a long time, Bronson followed. The house grew still, too still. Far down, the big clock in the dark library ticked. Beneath that, far down, began for Bronson that strange movement that only he had ever heard. Nearer and nearer it came, rushing with those long thin ecstatic feet. Her Lord had returned! She would join him once again in ecstasy unbearable! Nearer, nearer ...

**I**N THE dark, he knew that incredible hand had opened the door, was even now visible, if he could see in the dark as she did. Bronson waited, was he awake? Soft, soft, the unbelievable feet that no sane man could ever believe in slid nearer, the soft delicate fingers touched his face, his lips, his hair, his eyes. Slid on across the bed—

touched Edith!

That fearful scream came like the tearing of the temple curtain, like the sightless veils of time reft by a wind, like darkness shattered with lightning. Edith leaped to her feet, and light flooded that room in which no light had ever been allowed by Bronson at night. Not before. He sat up, awake. He saw one swift glimpse of that he knew was there. That long, thin hand before the eyes that could not know light, those limbs that were too long, too thin for beauty and yet were beautiful as lilies in their fragile perfection. That tall graceful figure, so thin yet somehow lordly. That floating hair clouding her in a bright nimbus. . . . Then she was gone, slipping through the door like smoke on soundless feet. The door closed so softly behind her, as a breath at wind might have touched it, made the lock click. And Edith screamed, set once in rending sorrow—but again as had the *thin woman* and again in unbearable fear. Again and again and again until he could bear it no longer, but got up and left her.

He stood there in the hall looking in the mirror at his own face, and what he saw was somewhat the thing a murderer sees. He had slain something impossibly fine and above the dross of earth. He had been guilty as no man can be guilty and survive. He turned from his own guilty face with disgust. How can a man be such a fool? And in his mind her whisper echoed, "How?"

**T**IME passed. The days were swift and clean and bright. The mystery and dark beauty and strange dreams had left Bronson. Life became pleasant but somehow *empty* as a lovely room that waits for a tenant who never comes, and *never will*. Bronson hunted on the mountainside,

or drove into town with Edith to a show, or played golf as before the strange possession had been upon him.

The months passed, and Edith grew big with child. And the child was born and laughed up at Bronson with the Bronson blue eyes, and grinned at him with Bronson lips. Happiness haunted the big bleak house like a stranger who was not quite welcome. And a benediction seemed to rest over them wearily, like a sorrowful mother, and life was good. Not wonderful, but certainly good.

Then came that day that Edith left little Robert for a minute in the nursery. Came that moment when he heard her scream that terrible repeated scream of fear that he had heard but once before.

He came running on somehow leaden feet, for in his heart *he knew*. No child borne of such sorrow as *hers* could live for long, children not *borne with a will to live ...*

He, stood with a now collapsed and quiet, an unconscious Edith in his arms. He looked down into the carriage where his

son had lain. *His son still lay there*, but his heart sank and sank! This child, with the Bronson blue eyes staring up blankly, these long attenuated hands, this thin yet somehow strong body, these lean and sorrowful lips—this was *not* Robert! *This child was nearly a year older ...*

Unbelieving he reached out and touched the tiny hands folded beneath the sharp chin, touched the bulging, too-big brow that was yet the Bronson brow.

*The changeling was dead!*

In his mind that voice whispered, now fierce and no longer ecstatically his own complement, but the voice of a mother who will not be denied.

“Your deed killed the will to live of my child. You killed my love, and your child died. I will raise this one never to trust the light, or those who dwell in the light!”

A faint echo of that voice—  
“Forgive me, my Lord, forgive me, I cannot bear it. I cannot bear the dark alone....”