

GRUESOME HORROR NOVELETTE OF A NIGHTMARE GODDESS
**FRESH FIANCÉS FOR THE DEVIL'S
DAUGHTER** BY RUSSELL GRAY *Author of "House Where
Evil Lived," etc.*



And then he had the hot iron, and what he did to Portia would be nothing compared to this

The unholy lust, the unspeakable orgies, the hideous tortures would have sufficed to damn my soul—but this vampire luring me worshipped evil, enshrined it, until virtue was to be despised, and vileness was all I lived for!

CHAPTER ONE

THE GOLDEN TEMPTRESS

IT was the usual sort of literary party at which half the guests were uninvited. By midnight you didn't know whether the man drinking with you was a famous English author come to America to make war speeches or a crasher who wanted to rub shoulders with the famous. It didn't matter because by that time everybody was pretty

drunk and nobody paid any attention to those who drifted in and out of the apartment – until that woman suddenly appeared.

She was the kind who drew your eyes and held them and made you forget that there were other attractive women in the room. She wore a mink cape which dropped open in front so that you couldn't miss her high-bared breasts which pushed against the low bodice of a slinky gown. The gown was golden and so was her skin, and the way the material molded her body it wasn't easy to tell precisely what was skin and what gown.

She undulated over to the table where the drinks were served, and at once men closed in around her, pouring for her.

Helen, my wife, and I, Roland Cuyler, the Author, and his wife Clara were standing near a window in an attempt to get a breath of air. We had ceased our conversation when the woman had entered. All of us looked at her.

"Who's she?" Helen asked.

Roland Cuyler licked his lips and swallowed hard and said: "Never saw her before."

He was a bad liar. He'd become jittery as soon as he had been aware of her presence; looking at her a few minutes ago, some of the liquid had spilled from his cocktail glass. I wondered why he didn't tell the truth, then dismissed it from my mind. As his literary agent, it was my business to sell his novels, not to delve into his personal life.

Our little group at the window broke up. Helen moved away to talk to Portia Teele, whose love novels sold by the hundreds of thousands, and I found myself alone. But only for a moment. I turned and there was the woman in gold. A cocktail glass was raised to her lips, and above its rim I saw gray eyes, flecked with gold, calmly appraising me.

"You're Lester Marlin, the literary agent, aren't you?" she said. "I'm Tala Mag."

Curious name. And curious woman. She could have been called very beautiful if you liked them that way – exotic, with eyes slightly slanted and extremely long and narrow brows and high cheekbones, and a body so vibrant that each motion was a sensuous invitation. Not my type, however. I preferred the pure fresh young beauty of Helen.

Tala Mag dropped the glass from her lips and suddenly I realized that she was so close to me that her pointed breasts almost touched my chest. Over her left shoulder I saw Portia Teele and Helen staring at us. Helen smiled. She knew that a literary agent of my reputation, who, by accepting to handle a writer's manuscript, practically assured its sale, was always being annoyed by women authors who tried to use their bodies as substitutes for lack of literary talent. This Tala Mag was probably one of those.

Tala Mag glanced over my shoulder and coldly studied Helen. Then she turned back to me and intimately tucked a hand through my arm and leaned against me so that I felt the soft yielding of a breast.

"Your wife appears jealous," she whispered.

Somebody must have told her who Helen was, and it was because my wife watched that she was trying to make me. What the hell was her game?

"Of course she's not," I told her. "Why should she be? She knows that no other woman could mean anything to me."

Her gold-flecked eyes looked up at me challengingly. "She is rather attractive."

I let her have it right where I knew it would hurt. "By far the most attractive woman in this room," I said.

I had expected her not to like the indirect insult, but I hadn't thought that such utter rage would flood her face. With a thin cry of fury she dropped my arm and stepped away from me. I smiled as I watched the indignant sway of her hips as she moved across the room. Helen was smiling also. We understood each other, my wife and I. That was why we were so incomparably happy together.

A COUPLE of minutes later Helen and I left the party. As we walked down the two flights of stairs to the street, Helen observed with that rippling laugh of hers: "Poor darling, having so many women after you. How do you bear up under it?"

"Easily, sweet. I think of you and then they appear like hags before my eyes. This Tala Mag – that's her name – was so obviously wanton that she was funny."

And both of us laughed quietly, intimately, as if only we could understand the grand joke we shared.

Then suddenly our laughter died in our throats. We had turned the landing and there, with her back against the wall, stood Tala Mag. It was impossible for her not to have overheard us.

She said nothing but her expression told us plenty. I think that if she had had a weapon in her hand she would have killed us both on the spot. She drew her cape tighter about her. We passed quickly.

In the street Helen shuddered. "Did you see the way she looked at us?"

"Forget it, darling," I said. "There's nothing she can do about it."

By the time we had reached home, we had dismissed her from our minds.

The following morning there was a gold-tinted envelope in my mail, sent special delivery. It contained two notes. One, from Portia Teele, read:

Dear Les:

I've never before asked you to do me a personal favor. Tala Mag told me what occurred last night and feels that it was a misunderstanding on both your parts. She had no opportunity to tell you that she is a writer and would desire your assistance. I have read her manuscripts; she has a great deal of talent. Please see her for my sake.

PORTIA.

The second note was heavily scented. It contained but a single line:

Dear Mr. Marlin:

Please come to my apartment at four this afternoon.

TALA MAG.

I was in something of a spot. I couldn't afford to antagonize Portia Teele who was my best client, and I didn't want to have anything to do with this Tala Mag. And why insist that I come to her apartment? The proper procedure was for her to come to my office.

By the afternoon I had made up my mind to go, solely, I assured myself, because Portia Teele had asked me to. Yet in back of my mind was a vagrant desire to see this exotic Tala Mag again. Anyway, what had I to be afraid of? I'd never had much trouble putting a demanding woman in her place.

I arrived there twenty after four, deliberately, to show her that I wasn't in the least anxious. She lived thirty stories above Park Avenue in a penthouse. Well, one thing was certain: she certainly wasn't an impoverished struggling writer.

The biggest man I had ever seen admitted me. Not the tallest, although he must have been a least six-six, and not fat either, but simply built in a huge, powerful mold. He was, in addition, ugly as sin, with hardly anything in the way of a brow or a chin. I'm of average size and build, but he made me feel like a pigmy as he stepped aside to let me by.

TALA MAG came forward to receive me in the foyer, and she was wearing a spider-web blue negligee and a pair of blue mules and not another thing. A pleasing combination – blue against the rich gold of her skin, and there was plenty of skin

showing, and the rest of it, voluptuously curved, shimmered under the negligee.

So! She was taking up where she had left off yesterday. As I followed her into the library, I determined to get out as soon as I could.

She said nothing about last night and made no attempt to come near me. She took a sheaf of typewritten pages from the desk and nodded toward a comfortable leather chair. I sat down and started to read. She retreated to the other end of the room and mixed highballs. She handed one to me and then offered me a cigarette. As she applied a match to my cigarette, she leaned over and her negligee fell away from her throat and there was no covering over her breasts. They were golden and rose-tipped and dangling with the bending of her torso. I dropped my eyes quickly to the manuscript.

A sensation of mingled horror and revulsion crept over me as I read. How can I describe the story she had written? It wasn't quite pornographic and yet it was more than that. There was not a sentence or a paragraph which standing alone, could be called obscene, yet the effect of the whole was incredibly vile. It concerned unholy lust and unspeakable orgies and hideous tortures, but it was chiefly the point of view that shocked my hard-boiled soul. She reveled in evilness, extolled it, until virtue was to be despised and vileness all that made living tolerable.

I went to the desk and tossed the papers down and turned to her. She was looking at me expectantly, with mouth half-open.

"You like it?"

I shrugged. "Put it this way: no publisher would touch it."

"But if you, with your reputation, took it to a publisher?"

"That won't help either," I said. "Sorry." I started to go.

She came to meet me, and somehow her negligee had fallen open and was trailing behind her. No doubt that she was startlingly attractive, but the only effect of her nudity on me was one of anger.

She caught my arm as I tried to pass her. "Mr. Marlin – Lester – you know that you are devilishly handsome."

I said tightly: "You're wasting your time." And I jerked my arm roughly away from her.

She ran around me so that she was in front of me again and threw her arms about my neck. I admit that as I tried to pull her off, pulses pounded

in my veins. The memory of Helen blurred with the furious agitation of her torso and thighs against me. But not sufficiently to make me succumb to her. Violently I tore her arms away from about my neck and, with an exclamation of rage, threw her to the floor.

She sat up, glaring up at me, her bared breasts rising and falling. When I was a step from the door, she called out: "Emil!" And a split-second later her servant's enormous body filled the doorway.

I was too angry to be afraid. I said in a voice that quivered: "Let me pass."

He stood there as solidly as a rock. And as if she were telling a dog to fetch something, she ordered: "Get him, Emil."

I stepped backward as he came at me with his great arms apart. Realizing that my only chance was an attack, I threw myself forward, plunging my right fist into his midriff. My knuckles felt as if they had struck corrugated iron.

And then his arms were around me, and I knew that I was through. I thrashed in his grip, but I might as well have tried to struggle in a steel vise. Slowly his arms tightened, constricting my ribs, my lungs. Breath choked up in me. The motion of my kicking legs grew feebler, then stopped altogether as, my face pressed against his massive sweaty chest, I sank into unconsciousness.

CHAPTER II

THE ROOM OF TORMENT

WHEN I opened my eyes, I found that iron chains, dangling from the ceiling, were fastened about each of my wrists. My feet just about touched the floor, so that I had to stand erect. My clothes had been taken from me; they lay neatly piled on a chair nearby.

For dazed moments I thought that this must be a nightmare; that Tala Mag's huge servant must be a figment of my imagination; that perhaps even Tala Mag was only a dream of dark desire. And then I saw that I was still in the library where I had read her curiously vile manuscript. Furniture had been pushed from the center of the floor where I hung from the chains.

This was ridiculous, of course – to have something like this happen in a modern apartment house in the heart of the city. I took a deep breath and called for help at the top of my lungs.

Behind me somebody laughed. Twisting my head over my shoulder, I saw Tala Mag, still clad in that diaphanous blue negligee, coming toward me.

"It may interest you to know that this room is soundproof," she said.

My voice broke off. I was staring with bulging eyes at the murderous whip she held in her hand. Part of its black length wriggled like a live snake on the floor behind her.

"What are you going to do?" I demanded harshly.

"Teach you respect for Tala Mag," she said. "And break your stubborn spirit until you grovel at my feet."

I cursed her then, hoarsely, steadily, and I tore hopelessly at the chains, while she stood off a little way and watched me with a half-smile on her red lips and hellish lights dancing in her gray-and-gold eyes. Then she stepped toward me and ran a hand over my chest, letting her fingers drag so that the nails pierced and ripped skin.

"You are a handsome man, Lester Marlin," she said. "There is much that we can do together, you and I – startling ecstasies which we may attain. Forget that prosaic woman who is your wife. Say the word and I will have Emil remove the chains from you, and then you and I –"

The rest of her words were cut off by her agonized grunt as I brought my knee up into her stomach. She fell away from me and her face became a hideous mask. She straightened up and stepped around me and I tensed for the bite of the lash. When it came, curling around my back and cutting through skin and into flesh, it felt like a band of living fire encircling me. A cry of pain rose to my lips, but I choked it back, determined not to give her the satisfaction of hearing me scream.

I swung around from my wrists and kicked out at her again. But she was prepared now and jumped out of the way, and again the cruel lash snapped against my body.

I went through a queer frantic dance as I tried to get at her with my feet, but she was nimble and always just out of reach, moving slowly around me, her arm swinging back and forth as the agonizing leather thong kept curling about me. And so I ceased all effort to kick her because my gyrations added to her diabolical enjoyment and I hung there from the chains as the whip formed a mantle of anguish about me.

"Scream!" she panted.

But I would not give her that added pleasure. Blood trickled down from where my teeth sank into my lower lip.

"Scream!" And the whip cracked.

Her negligee fell open in front. Sweat glistened on her golden skin, trickled down between her heaving breasts, soaked through the material. Encumbered by the negligee, she savagely ripped it off and, naked, continued to apply the lash.

I must have hated her more than any man hated anybody to have the strength not to give voice to the agony which was trying to force screams past my lips.

Suddenly the lashing stopped. Through a mist of pain I saw her standing before me, her flesh twitching and quivering with terrific emotional exertion. But the fury had gone out of her face and her eyes were suddenly soft.

SHE dropped the whip and came at me, throwing her arms about me and mashing herself against my anguish-torn body.

"You are the man for me," she whispered. "You have the proud, stubborn spirit. Love me and I will bathe your wounds and make you whole again and teach you such passion as you never dreamed existed."

It would have been simple then to submit, to possess this exotic creature and have done with unendurable anguish. But I knew that I could not. It had gone beyond mere physical faithfulness to Helen. It was a relentless struggle between good and evil; for my immortal soul, if you care to put it that way. If I gave in to her, I would always thereafter consider myself less than a man. Better to die of torture than to let her triumph over me.

Through swollen, bloody lips I said: "Go to hell!"

"You stubborn fool! Do you prefer to be cut to pieces?"

I tried to jab my knee into her again, but she was too close to me and I was too weak. She clung to me, digging her teeth into the side of my neck, and the whole weight of her body pulled down on my strained arm muscles. Then she slid away from me and picked up the whip.

"I won't kill you," she said in a voice that shook with fury. "Not yet. I would not accept you now if you came crawling to me. Before I am through with you, I shall make you suffer infinitely more than any whip can make you suffer."

And again I felt the hellish sting of the whip. She danced around me, applying the lash wherever the skin was still whole; and as through a shimmering veil of torment I saw her magnificent breasts bobbing and sweat form a sheen over her golden skin. After a while the mist grew thicker until I could no longer see her or the room or anything at all. But I could feel. Every quivering nerve throbbed under the whip which had become a white-hot rod of flame.

And yet I kept my voice locked within my throat. It was no longer physical effort which kept me from shrieking, for I had none of that left. It must have been something rooted deep in my subconscious which deprived her of her final triumph.

And then I sank into a world in which nothing existed but pain....

Dawn was painting the city sky a dull gray above the East River when I awoke. I was propped up against a warehouse on South Street. Several men, going early to work, passed without so much as glancing at me, thinking, no doubt, that I was a drunken bum. I was again fully dressed. She had spared my face with her lash, and save for dried blood on my chin I looked more or less presentable.

When I tried to rise, bands of agony held me. I clenched my teeth and clawed myself erect along the side of the building. Each step was anguish. Finally I made my way to the curb and hung onto a lamppost until a taxi cab passed. I hailed it and flopped into the back seat and muttered my address on Washington Square.

When I reached my home, I told the taxi driver that I was sick and tipped him generously and he helped me up to my apartment. After considerable ringing, Helen came to the door in her sleeping pajamas. She took one look at my greenish, pain-twisted face and screamed and ran to me.

"Darling, what happened to you? I went to bed early, thinking that you were out late on business, and not until the bell rang just now did I realize that you hadn't come home. Darling, you're sick!"

She led me into the bedroom where I dropped down on the bed. I did not tell her the truth; I had resolved not to tell anybody, especially not the police. This was strictly between Tala Mag and myself. And if any of this came out, the

newspapers and the gossip columnists would have a field-day.

I said that I had been walking along a dark street last night when I had been waylaid by a couple of men whose faces I had not been able to see and they had beaten me. I didn't know why, I said; perhaps I had inadvertently injured somebody and this was his or her revenge.

GENTLY Helen removed my clothes. And when she saw what the whip had done to my flesh, she cried out and went into a semi-hysterical fit of weeping. But she maintained enough self-control to call a doctor and bathe my wounds until he arrived.

For a week I lay in bed. I made Helen and the doctor promise to tell nobody, saying that I did not want the newspapers to get the story. And under Helen's tender care, I was soon as good as new save for certain parts where the lash had struck too many times and where I would forever have ridges on my skin.

When I had recovered, I obtained a permit to purchase a pistol, and then

I went to pay a visit to Tala Mag. The pistol was for the huge servant Emil; Tala Mag I could handle with my bare hands.

From the building superintendent I learned that she had moved the day after my beating. She had left no forwarding address; he had no idea where she might have gone. I looked up Portia Teele, but she was out of town. Not even Sam Spaulding, her publisher, knew where Portia Teele could be found.

So there was nothing for me to do but bide my time. I was convinced that I had not seen the last of her. She had told me, in the fury of her hatred at my refusal to submit, that she had a worse fate in store for me than the whipping. Well, this time I would be prepared for her.

CHAPTER III

INVITATION TO DEATH

ONE morning I received a letter from Roland Cuyler, the author:

Dear Les:

A friend of mine, who has gone on a journey, has been good enough to allow me the use of his charming upstate place until he returns. I've been staying here with Clara and working my head off. I've completed my novel, and rather than send it down to you, how about you and Helen driving up here to spend a weekend or longer with us?

It's an ideal place – swimming and tennis, and only a three hour drive from the city. Don't bother to reply. I'm assuming that you and Helen will arrive some time Saturday.

It sounded good. The city was in the grip of one of those heat waves which made New York unbearable. When I told Helen about it, she was enthusiastic.

So that Saturday afternoon we started out in my car. After three hours we found ourselves in a rather wild and isolated valley. Following the directions which Cuyler had enclosed, we turned off to a dirt road which ran through a deep woods and was only wide enough for one car. Seven miles of bumping over ruts brought us there.

Frankly, the place surprised us. We had expected a fairly sumptuous cottage at the most, but this looked like a vast estate in the heart of the woods. A seven-foot fieldstone fence enclosed it entirely.

I drove up to the twin massive solid iron doors and got out of the car. There was a telephone on the wall. I lifted the receiver and spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Your name, please?" a man's voice asked.

I told him, then returned to the car. The two doors swung open.

"Pretty swanky," Helen commented as I drove through. The doors closed behind us. And thirty feet ahead of us, to our astonishment, was another stone wall, this one at least four feet higher than the first and rimmed for a couple of feet more with barbed-wire. A second pair of doors swung open at our approach.

Helen frowned uneasily. "This place looks like a fortress."

"Millionaires go in for this sort of thing," I said. "Probably there are armed guards about the place also. The rich are always afraid of kidnappings and intrusions on their privacy. The Cuylers certainly fell into something soft."

The second pair of doors also shut behind us. As we drove along the gravel road toward the large stone house, I noticed that the grounds had been allowed to run pretty much to seed. The lawns which must once have been velvet smooth, were overgrown and the flower gardens were a chaos. We passed a tennis court which evidently hadn't been cared for in years and then a swimming pool which was absolutely dry.

Queer. Was this what Cuyler had raved about? And where was everybody? No sign of guards or servants. Both doors had been opened by unseen electrical control.

Helen shifted closer to me. "This place gives me the creeps, Les."

"They're probably all in the house," I said. "Ah, look, there are a number of parked cars, and there's somebody on the side terrace."

I stopped the car behind four or five others and Helen and I got out and walked to the stone terrace. Frank Bord, the publisher, and his exquisite little wife, Lillian, were lounging on easy chairs and sipping drinks.

BORD waved a hand toward us. "Hi, folks. So it's going to be a party after all. The Rooneys are somewhere inside. Haven't seen hide or hair of anybody else save a moody servant named Si who brought us drinks."

"Where are the Cuylers?" I asked.

"Search me. All we could get out of the servant was that they'd be down eventually. Hell of a way to receive guests. Look for Si and you can get some drinks."

Helen and I passed into the house. We found ourselves in an enormous drawing room. Sitting on a couch at the farther side were Victor Rooney, the Broadway producer, and Jane, his wife, a charming redhead.

As we entered, Jane was saying: "I don't like it. There's an atmosphere about this place which – well, makes me uncomfortable. There seems to be only one servant in this huge place and the Cuylers don't seem to be about and we haven't even been shown to our rooms."

Victor Rooney saw us and stood up. "Greetings, folks. Looks like a gathering of the

clan. Guess Roland wants us all in on the reading of his new book." He raised his voice. "Hey, Si! Drinks for four."

Several minutes later a squat man with shoulders the width of a barn door came in with a tray on which were four cocktail glasses. If the servant had mixed the drinks himself, he could have made a fortune as a bartender. It was the smoothest liquor I had ever tasted and had a curiously exotic flavor.

By the time we had finished the drinks, we heard another car pull up. The four of us went out to the terrace and joined the Bords. The latest arrivals were Rob and Inez Spaulding. He was also a producer, a friendly rival to Frank Bord. His wife had been a former showgirl – a statuesque blonde who made up in figure what she lacked in brains.

We called for eight more cocktails from Si and stood about drinking and raking the Cuylers over the coals for not having come down to receive us.

"Damn them, I'm going up to find them," Bord announced.

"Let's all go," Inez Spaulding put in.

We started into the house. And as we entered the drawing room, we saw Roland and Clara Cuyler coming toward us.

"It's about time you two paid some attention to us," Victor Rooney growled.

Suddenly we all stopped dead, staring at Roland and Clara Cuyler. Something had happened to them – to their faces which seemed to have become lined and flabby with age within a couple of weeks; to their bodies which drooped in attitudes of utter hopelessness. And they stopped also and moved close together, each holding to the other as if in that way they found the courage necessary to face us.

"I couldn't help it," Roland Cuyler muttered across the room to us in a weak voice. "She made me write those letters to you and invite you to this hell. I held out as long as I could, but she –"

"Whom are you talking about?" I demanded, feeling my heart turn to stone.

"Haven't you guessed?" a voice said softly.

Yes, I had guessed at Cuyler's first words; and now, turning my head toward another door at the side of the room, I saw that my worst fears were justified.

Tala Mag stood just inside of the doorway, a self-satisfied smile playing on her red lips. Her gold-flecked eyes glowed with an exalted sense of victory. She moved toward us a few steps, and her

body was a glorious blue-and-gold flame. She was clad in a blue evening gown which was spun of incredibly delicate silk so that it covered her without hiding her voluptuously curved flesh.

I felt the pressure of Helen's hand tightening on my arm. We all stared at Tala Mag with a kind of dreadful fascination, and I realized, somehow, that all the other men in the room had met her, and had had some sort of unpleasant experience with her.

TALA MAG laughed. "I have told each of you men that you shall see me again. I am not one to be spurned or insulted. You, Frank Bord, would not publish my manuscript and called me vile names. You, Bob Spaulding, read my manuscript and returned it with a nasty note and then absolutely refused to see me. Victor Rooney, you would not produce a play of mine and, when I offered myself to you, took me and then spurned me. Lester Marlin, you I hate with all the depth of my being. Indeed, I hate and despise all of you and your pretty, vapid wives."

I had resolved that the next time I saw her I would beat her within an inch of her life. But I found a great weakness stealing over me which kept me rooted to the spot. Not a physical weakness so much as something insidious inside of me which robbed me of the power of action. It was fear for what this creature of hell might do to Helen, and at the same time it was something else. Through my mind flickered the thought that the cocktails I had drunk might have been drugged. That must have been it, in part, because like myself none of the others uttered a word or made a movement. We stood bunched like statues.

Tala Mag was speaking again. "Tell them, Roland Cuyler, how completely they are in my power."

Cuyler shuddered. "You cannot escape. There are two walls, neither of which can be surmounted. And then those terrible servants. Believe me, I didn't want to lure you here. But she would have found another way and – and they whipped Clara."

Clara Cuyler moaned and swayed against her husband. She was wearing a sleeveless dress, and sunlight, streaming through a window, glinted on a bare white shoulder, and I saw an ugly welt, like a ragged finger, mar her flesh and disappear under the dress.

The sight of that whip mark brought vividly home to me the torment I myself had suffered and

what mercy Helen and I and the others could expect from Tala Mag; and I snapped out of my trance and hurled myself at her. My hands were on her at the moment when she cried out. My fingers closed about her throat. I felt her body thrash against me; I saw her gray eyes almost pop from their sockets as I bore her down to the floor. And all about me voices screamed in fear and horror, but I ignored them, conscious only that I could save Helen from hell only by ridding the world of this creature.

Suddenly my fingers were torn away from Tala Mag's throat, and I was plucked off her as if I were a child in a strong man's grip. I was lifted high in the air and tossed down to the hard floor. Stunned, I lay there, trying to clear the fog from my brain.

The screams went on. Painfully I sat up and looked about at a nightmare scene.

Emil, Tala Mag's huge servant, had torn me away from his mistress, and there were three other men in the room, as big as Emil or nearly as strong. One was Si, the squat servant who had brought us the drinks, and his massive shoulders gave him the power of Emil. And there were two others, hulking brutes, against whom our average human strength was puny.

THREE of the servants were each holding Bord and Spaulding and Rooney, while the fourth had a whip in his hand with which he kept our four wives in a screaming huddle in a corner of the room. Tala Mag had risen to her feet and was holding her throat where my fingers had bruised her and her body trembled with excitement. Roland Cuyler offered no resistance; he stood holding his wife to his chest, both their spirits utterly broken.

I bounded to my feet and hurled myself at Si, who was holding Bob Spaulding. My fist drove into his face. The blow hadn't the slightest effect. He dropped Spaulding, whom he had knocked unconscious, and turned to me. He crushed me in a bear's hug, pinning my arms to my side, and he lifted my thrashing body and carried me into another room. There he shoved me against a wall and held me with one hand in spite of my most violent struggles, while with his free hand he fumbled with something. I heard the rattling of chains, felt gyves snap about my wrists. He left me there more helpless in the chains than ever I had been in his tremendous grip.

I noticed then that I was in a bare stone room. On either side of me other chains were imbedded in the wall. One by one the other men were brought in and their wrists were fastened to chains, Even Roland Cuyler who had no resistance left in him.

When we were all chained, our wives were driven in by the servant who had the whip. I cried out when I saw the murderous tip bite into Helen's back as she stumbled; futilely I tore at the chains. Then the five women cowered moaning against the wall on the opposite side of us, not making a motion for fear of the whip.

"Les!" Helen wailed. "Oh, God, Lester!"

And terror tore from the throat of each woman the name of her husband, and none of us men could do anything to help them.

Tala Mag entered the room. Triumphantly she ran her eyes over all of us and laughed. In my despair I saw a fragmentary hope to save Helen and the others.

"Tala!" I cried. "You wanted me once. Let them go and I will be your slave."

Her lips curled. "You are too late by several weeks, Lester Marlin. I could have loved you more than any man was ever loved. Now I hate you." She turned to one of the servants. "Wick, bring in Portia Teele."

There was an interval of suspense, during which the wailing of the women continued and the groan of the men. And then Portia Teele, the writer of sentimental love stories, was led into the room by the servant called Wick.

She was a plump woman, past the bloom of youth. She stopped in her tracks when she saw us and a moan passed her lips. Wick closed a big hand over the back of her neck and thrust her forward so that she came stumbling to the center of the room.

Tala Mag stood there waiting for her. Portia fell on her knees before her and clawed at her dress.

"Tala, for God's sake, haven't I always been your friend?"

"Friend!" Tala Mag sneered. "Yes, you helped me with my literary style, but would you publish my masterpiece under your name?"

"I couldn't, Tala. My reputation."

"Let the fact that your reputation remains unblemished console you now," Tala Mag chortled. "Clops, attend to her."

THE fourth servant lifted Portia. Wick stretched a hand toward the ceiling and pulled down two chains on pulleys, like those to which I had been fastened in Tala Mag's library. Portia shrieked wildly as she struggled in that powerful grip. Wick secured her wrists to the chains and pulled a rope over the pulleys, lifting Portia's writhing body from the floor. And she hung there, her face frightful with terror, her eyes pools of impending madness.

"Tala!" she shrieked. "In the name of heaven! I'll do anything you ask."

Tala Mag shrugged her bare shoulders. "The time for mercy is past. Besides, my dear Portia, I require somebody to be made an example of for my other guests, and you have been selected."

I knew then that her statement that she hated us because we had not helped her advance her literary career was a lie. She hadn't cared about that at all. Her manuscript, at least where I was concerned, had been simply an excuse to thrust herself at me. Her literary pretensions had been simply an act to inculcate in herself hatred for us. Because she wanted to hate and find expression for hatred. Something subhuman and diabolical in her demanded that it be sated by the torment of others.

She stepped to where Portia Teele hung. "You are about to experience sensations which are denied to most of us. For long, long minutes you are going to live as fully as any person has ever lived, with every nerve quivering and throbbing, every atom of your being fully alive."

And with her own hands she ripped the clothing from Portia Teele. Then she stooped and pulled off Portia's shoes and stockings, and Portia hung naked from the chains, sobbing and shrieking and writhing.

"All right, Clops," Tala Mag said.

All heads turned to the door through which the giant Clops was coming. Before him he wheeled a brazier in which irons glowed white-hot in burning coals.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL'S DAUGHTER

IT is said that there is no pain as great as the pain inflicted by fire. Seeing how Portia Teele suffered, I can believe that. The whipping I had received from Tala Mag was nothing compared to

what the servant Clops did to Portia with those hot irons.

We all turned our eyes away, of course, and our wives sank to the floor and buried their faces in their arms, but we couldn't shut out her inhuman screams. Some of us had to look now and then, as if invisible wires drew our gazes.

After a while one of her large breasts melted away under the iron as if it had been ice. There was no blood, for the heat cauterized as it burned. Clops shifted the iron to a fresh spot; momentarily it sizzled as it touched the clammy perspiration covering agonized flesh. Then the stench of burning flesh grew heavier.

And Tala Mag watched intently with bosom heaving and nerves twitching under her high cheekbones, her stare missing no detail of the torture.

Minutes or hours may have passed before the screams stopped. Horror drags time out to its utmost. But I do know that night had fallen when Clops wheeled the brazier to a corner of the room.

The thing dangling from the chains was no longer a woman. Its skin had been replaced by a mantle of smoldering scar tissue. The head hung forward with long hair cascading over fattened chest where breasts had been. Nausea churned in all of us.

I glanced across at Helen and saw that she had mercifully fainted. So had two of the other women, but they were not permitted that method of escape. One of the servants threw water on them, reviving them.

What now? What new hellishness would the degenerate mind of that she-fiend conceive? Would she serve Helen and the other women the same way as she had Portia Teele? God!

There was a sudden silence as Tala Mag started to speak. Even the women ceased moaning, for it was plain that she was to announce the fate of the rest of us. She stood next to that dangling horror, and she was tall and beautiful in that blue evening gown that revealed more of her golden-skinned body than no clothes at all would have.

"You have seen how this foolish woman suffered," she said. "You realize that at a word from me each of the other five women will share her experience and worse." A cry went up from our wives. Tala Mag lifted a hand and continued: "But I am magnanimous. I shall spare you on one condition – that you follow to the letter every command I utter. If you refuse –" She waved significantly to the dangling corpse.

We all held our breaths, knowing that whatever she would propose would be more fiendish than what had been done to Portia Teele, yet daring to hope that somehow what passed for her heart had been softened.

"Clara Cuyler, come to the center of the room," Tala Mag ordered.

As if in a dream, Clara rose and moved away from the group of women. Her face was ugly with fear.

"Remove your clothing."

"No!" Clara screeched. "Please!"

"You will follow my order without protest."

Clara glanced at the hideous corpse and began frantically to undress. Clara had been selected first because she had been longest under the domination of Tala Mag and feared her most. Her husband sobbed like a child. When she was utterly nude, she was allowed to return to the other women. I saw now the cruel whip marks which crisscrossed her white skin.

"Helen Marlin," Tala Mag called. "Come here and strip."

I ground my teeth with helplessness. One by one she would make each woman undress before her four servants and four other strangers while the woman's husband was forced to look on. And that would be only the beginning.

THE modesty in Helen's nature dominated the fear which must have gibbered within her. She stood up, straight and proud and defiant, but did not come forward.

"I refuse," my wife declared firmly.

Tala laughed with glee. "The same stubborn streak as your husband, I see. Well, it will be all the more fun breaking you. You realize that you will be stripped anyway – not only of your clothing but of your skin as well.... Clops, the brazier. Emil, put her in the chains."

Helen chewed on her knuckles as she saw Clops start wheeling the brazier from its corner and Emil advancing toward her. A whimper trickled from her throat, rising higher and higher. As for me, I was shouting something, but I cannot remember what it was. Perhaps I was cursing Tala Mag; perhaps urging Helen to give in rather than suffer the inevitable torment of fire.

When Emil actually had his hands on her and was dragging her forward, Helen cracked. The memory of what Portia Teele had endured was still too vivid in her mind to make resistance possible.

"I'll do it!" she cried. "Please tell him to let me go."

God, if I could have strangled Tala Mag then and there for the smug smile on her lips as she told Emil to release my wife! The giant stepped away and Helen was left alone on the floor with all eyes in the room on her.

Slowly, as if her hands were obeying a will divorced from her own, Helen pulled down the zipper in the side of her dress and drew the dress over her head. It fluttered to the floor. Momentarily she hesitated as she stood clad only in strips of silk about hips and breasts; then her hands went behind her back to the snaps of her brassiere. She removed it and it followed her dress to the floor and, her entire body suffused with pink, she cupped her palms over her splendid bared breasts.

"Continue," Tala Mag said.

Helen tugged at the elastic of her step-ins, changed her mind and kicked off her shoes instead. Bending over, she rolled down her stockings and straightened up again, her arms once more coming up to cover her breasts. Choking whimpers of shame came from her lips.

The four mighty servants of Tala Mag had carnal eyes fixed on my wife and their ugly features were slack with degenerate lust. And even the husbands of the four other women became suddenly quiet as they stared avidly at her.

"I said strip completely," Tala Mag rasped.

And so Helen had to remove the last wisp of silk from her hips, and that too joined the rest of her garments. Completely naked she stood there, while four sub-human creatures and four other men feasted their eyes on her loveliness which had never before been exposed to any man's gaze but mine. She was truly magnificent as she stood there, with pride returning to her; and she faced Tala Mag defiantly, knowing that however beautiful Tala Mag might be, it faded before the beauty of her own body. And Tala Mag knew that also and venom twisted her face.

"You may return," Tala Mag ordered savagely. "Next, Lillian Bord."

One by one the three remaining women came to the center of the room and, thoroughly covered, removed their clothing. When they were all naked, Tala Mag looked the crouching women over coldly and said:

"Before the night is over, one of you five will endure the same fate as Portia Teele. Which one that will be depends on your husbands."

THE women were wailing again, their eyes drawn against their wills to where the thing that had been Portia Teele still hung from the chains. Which one was it to be? She had said that it depended on us men. Would she make us draw lots? No, her diabolical brain would think of something infinitely more horrible.

Tala Mag turned to us. "We shall have a hunt," she said with that completely dissolute smile of hers. "It will be great fun, I promise you. You men will be the hunters, your wives the hunted. The women will be let loose in the grounds, and then you men will be given guns. Not real guns, of course, shooting lead bullets; they will contain tiny pellets which will dissolve when striking the naked skin, leaving a blue mark. The game will last for two hours. At the end of that time you will all be rounded up and the blue marks on the bodies of the women will be counted, and she who has been hit the most times will be handed over to Clops for the caress of his hot irons."

We gaped at her, finding it hard to understand that even this woman could have conceived of anything so diabolical.

"It will be a fascinating game," she went on. "Those of you who win, and there will be only one loser, will be permitted to depart unharmed."

"We won't do it!" Victor Rooney shouted. "You can't make us!"

Tala Mag shrugged. "That is entirely up to you. You are all completely in my power, yet I am making a magnanimous gesture by promising freedom to all five of you men and four of the women. If all of you prefer to die unpleasantly instead, very well. But I think that you will all play the game with no further protest."

What could we do? It was all our lives or the life of only one. We had no choice.

"As in all games, there are rules in this one," Tala Mag said. "You women, you hunted, will use all your skill, all your ingenuity, out there in the grounds to avoid being shot by the hunters. Not for a moment will you forget the terrible price you will have to pay if you are shot more times than the others. And you men, you will do your best to shoot and hit any woman but your wife, because the more times the others are hit, the greater chance your own wife will have of bearing the fewest marks on her skin. There will be but one bullet in your pistol; when you have shot that, you will return to the terrace where I will hand you another. We must play fair, gentlemen; if I gave

you a supply of bullets in advance, you might be unsporting enough to hold a woman and fire repeatedly at her. You must realize that it will be futile to attempt to escape over the walls. One more rule: you may not attempt to protect your own wife from the others. My servants will be everywhere with flashlights, and there will be severe penalties for unsportsmanship."

Almost it was funny, her talk of sportsmanship. It was when she had finished speaking that the full diabolical cunning of the "game" became clear. Each of us men would have to do our best to condemn one of the other women to appalling torture in order to save his own wife.

"We are ready," Tala Mag announced. "You women hide yourselves well before we release the men. You know what is at stake."

They did not move. They crouched there against the wall in a frozen mass of naked flesh. One of the servants went to them with a whip, and then, shrieking, they leaped to their feet and scampered across the room.

WE were released from our chains and led out to the terrace. We moved with slow, shambling steps, with our eyes fixed on the floor, not one of us looking at the others whose wives each of us would hunt like wild beasts in order to save the woman we loved. And although we were no longer in chains, we made no attempt at resistance, because we knew that our strength was that of babies as compared to that of the monstrous servants. We needed our energy – for the hunt.

A full moon hung above the estate, so that we could see the waterless pool and the overgrown lawn and the hedges and the trees and sections of the wall topped with barbed-wire. On a table on the terrace lay five toy-like pistols. One was handed to each of us. It was like a child's BB gun, with a small hole on top of the barrel where the pellets were inserted. Tala Mag seated herself at the table. At her right hand was a cardboard box filled with tiny blue pellets, the size of a BB shot. She gave one to each of us and we loaded our pistols and were ready.

Across the track of the moon a white figure ran. Moonbeams flashed on blonde hair and Bob Spaulding cried out, calling frantically to his wife to hide herself. She threw a glance at us over her shoulder, then stumbled among some trees. There was silence out there now and no sight of any of the five women.

"Go," Tala Mag said.

And we five hunters of naked women set out.

CHAPTER V

HUNT OF THE DAMNED

I AM certain that the drinks we had several hours before must have been drugged. However much our minds had been affected by the sight of Portia Teele's horrible fate and fear of the giant servants and the frenzied urgency to keep our wives from frightful torment, all of that would not have been sufficient to make of us the relentless savage hunters which we became. Yes, it must have been drugs which stripped of us the last veneer of civilization. Without mercy we hunted the wives of our friends, the little pellets in our guns crueler in the end than leaden bullets would have been.

We set out when Tala Mag gave the command. It struck me that most of the women would have run around to the other side of the house. And as soon as I turned the corner, I glimpsed moonbeams dancing on a white arm. The rest of the body was hidden behind a rose bush.

Swiftly I ran up to the bush. When I had almost reached it, the woman behind the bush uttered a terrified cry and leaped to her feet. I saw the blond hair of Inez Spaulding. She put out her hands as if to ward off the pellet. Deliberately I shot at the smooth expanse of her abdomen.

She screamed shrilly then and fell to the ground, writhing and clawing at the blue spot which had appeared on her white skin. God, the pellets consisted of acid which burned the skin! Even those four women who would, in the end, be spared the torture of the white-hot irons, would still suffer untold agony from numerous acid burns.

Feet pounded behind me. Victor Rooney came up, gawked for a moment at Inez Spaulding, then bent close to her and shot a pellet against her thigh. Her screams rose higher. In spite of her pain, she bounded up and stumbled off.

I had said we were not quite human. We raced back to the terrace to get more pellets to inflict more pain on other men's wives. As I inserted a pellet Tala Mag handed me into my pistol, I heard a shriek from the swimming pool. Whirling, I saw that a naked woman had fallen or jumped over the side and she was crouching there on the dry bottom, trapped, while Spaulding and Cuyler were taking aim at her.

The woman was Helen.

Shrilly I cursed those two men, although a minute before I had shot at Spaulding's wife as he was now shooting at mine. They both shot and Helen's body leaped erect, spun, and then she was trying to clamber over the side, her voice hoarse with pain. Rooney had reloaded his pistol and was racing toward where she was trying to climb out. Thinking only that Helen must not be hit again, I threw myself at his feet, and we went down together.

The next moment fire burned across my back. One of the servants stood over me, lashing me with a whip.

He let up at last and I lay there in a welter of anguish. Helen was no longer in the dry swimming pool. None of the men and women were in sight, but from other parts of the grounds I could hear screams.

"I mentioned sportsmanship," Tala Mag's voice came from behind me. "I trust you have learned your lesson."

I managed to push myself up to my feet. Bord and Cuyler were coming around the side of the house. They snatched pellets from Tala Mag and dashed off again. I had to go on, to inflict pain on other women so that Helen could be saved.

I became crafty – a hunter. Instead of rushing about wildly, I chose what appeared to be the best hiding places and went to them. In a copse of birch trees I came across Jane Rooney and let her have it. I ran back to reload and returned to the hunt. I got Clara Cuyler and then Inez Spaulding. I had Lillian Bord trapped against a corner of the wall when her husband appeared suddenly and threw himself at me.

As we struggled there in the moonlight, a sharp beam of light spread over us and one of the servants pulled us apart. Now it was Frank Bord who received a lashing. Lillian had fled. I rose and went in search of a fresh victim.

Time lost all meaning. Two hours the hunt was to last, and five minutes or an hour might have passed. The night air was shattered by the occasional shrieks of the women; and now and then across my vision would flash a naked running woman, or a clothed man in pursuit or returning to the terrace to reload, or a huge servant with whip in one hand and flashlight in the other to impose "sportsmanship" on us.

Running across what had been a lawn, I almost stumbled over a white body which lay pressed flat, hidden in the tall grass. The woman leaped to her feet with breasts bobbing crazily and flesh quivering as she realized that she could not escape and waited with shrinking body for the searing pain of the acid pellet.

I lifted my pistol. Then for the first time I saw her face and my arm dropped to my side.

"Helen!"

She stumbled to me and my arms closed about the sweet, abused body of my wife.

"Helen, perhaps we can get out of here or hide before it's all over. Let's try to get into the house. They'll never think of looking there for us."

We ran across the lawn. We had almost reached the rear of the house when the form of Roland Cuyler came running toward us.

"Let him shoot you," I whispered. "We mustn't become separated again, and if I try to stop him they'll tear us apart."

She nodded and waited for him, setting her teeth. I swung a short distance away from her. In spite of the blue marks which pitted her skin, she looked breathtakingly lovely as she stood there in the moonlight. Cuyler came up to her, and glanced at me, then went close to her so that he would not miss. His lips were pressed tightly together and his eyes glistened with the joy of the hunter who had cornered his quarry. He was no longer quite human, and neither were the rest of us.

He shot a pellet at her sleek hip and raced off. Helen winced, but did not cry out. Then we were holding each other's hands again and continuing toward the house.

The sight of the windows shattered my scheme. They were all barred. Doubtless the front door was locked. There had to be another way. I had counted the blue acid marks on her and there seemed to be eight or ten. And the hunt was still young.

"Perhaps the wall," I said desperately. "I might be able to lift you to the top. The barbed-wire will tear you, but it will be no worse than the pellets and what might follow. Somehow you might manage to get over the second wall."

We ran across to the wall. For a while we were in the open and she was seen by Rooney, so we had to stop while she submitted to being shot again. I went through a hell of helplessness watching. Then we were at the wall.

I had hoped that there might be a tree close enough, but Tala Mag had taken care of that.

Sticking my pistol in my belt, I pressed against the wall while Helen climbed up to my shoulders. She could just about reach the top of the wall with her fingers. I grasped her ankles and, exerting every ounce of strength, lifted her slowly. She got her elbows on the wall, was pulling herself up –

A flashlight beam covered us. With a groan of despair I knew that I had failed. The whip curled around my back. I stumbled and Helen lost her hold and we both dropped to the ground. Panting under the pressure of Helen's soft body, I lay waiting for the whipping.

But what happened then was worse than any whipping would have been. The servant Wick dropped his whip and flashlight and plucked Helen from the ground. Holding her with one hand, he pulled from a pocket a pistol containing a number of the acid pellets, and five times he shot at various parts of Helen's body.

HER screams of agony formed a maddening din in my brain. This was our punishment for attempting to escape. Not only did the five pellets at once cause her unendurable anguish, but, counting the two other marks she might have avoided if she had not met me, she was seven marks behind the others. God, what a fool I had been! She had had one chance in five of losing. Now her handicap was terrific.

She writhed there on the ground, clawing at her flesh, and her screams attracted other hunters.

"Run!" I shouted.

With an effort she managed to stumble to her feet and choke off her voice. She cast a frantic glance over her shoulder and plunged in among a nearby copsis. Frank Bord and Bob Spaulding raced after her.

Wick picked up his whip and flashlight and strode off. It struck me that I was wasting valuable time, that the only way to make up for those marks on Helen was to redouble my own efforts. And so I became a hunter again.

Several times more I came across Helen, and each time I kept my distance. With despairing heart I saw that her skin was literally pitted with those cruel, damning marks.

And so the nightmare continued. Running to the terrace to reload, shooting the pellet at a naked body, returning to the terrace. And always Tala Mag was behind that table, holding out the pellets one by one, that unholy smug smile fastened to her lips. Sometimes none of her servants was near, and

it did not occur to me or to any of the others to strangle her then and there. We were too thoroughly cowed; too thoroughly savages intent only upon the hellish hunt.

Toward the end the five of us were so exhausted that we could scarcely stumble along, and our wives were weaker still, so that they made hardly any effort at flight any more.

Finally, after the passing of an eternity, the two hours were up. When we came to reload, two of the servants were waiting for us. We were taken into the chamber where Portia Teele had been tortured, and we were chained once again. The corpse had been removed.

Next the women were rounded up. They entered the room on legs which could scarcely bear them up, and they flopped on the bare floor and lay there, their bodies twitching with pain.

Then one by one they were dragged to the center of the floor and the blue marks on their skin were counted by Tala Mag while Emil kept a record. We men dared hardly breathe. Looking at Helen, my heart stopped within me. She seemed to have marks more than any of the others.

She was the third to be counted, after Clara Cuyler and Jane Rooney. Yes, she had many more than the others. And then Lillian Bord, and Helen was still the first.

Clops was at the brazier, blowing on the coals to heat the irons.

CHAPTER VI

PASSION IN HELL

INEZ SPAULDING saved Helen's life. Because she had two more of the tiny blue acid dots on her skin than Helen, it was she who was suspended by her wrists from the ceiling.

I leaned back against the wall, feeling like a wrung out rag. Bob Spaulding went stark raving mad, and his shrieks as he tore against his chains mingled with those of his wife. Helen sat on the floor with head buried in her arms, shoulders quaking.

The brazier was wheeled from its corner by Clops. Inez watched him with eyes which were no longer those of a human being. Tala Mag placed a hand on Inez' quivering flesh and whispered words to her which I could not hear, but I knew by the sadistic light in her face that she was taunting the

poor girl, telling her in detail which she was soon to endure.

Then Tala Mag stepped back and Clops set to work with the glowing irons.

It was a repetition of what happened to Portia Teele. For a long time Inez' statuesque body jerked in midair like a marionette and her screams rasped against our eardrums. Then little by little the screams turned to moans and her body grew still save for involuntary spasms which shook it. The acrid smell of burning flesh clogged our nostrils.

It was over at last, and what hung from the chains was a grotesque caricature of Inez Spaulding.

Frank Bord's voice came weakly: "And now, for God's sake, let us go, You promised."

Tala Nag faced him and laughed. "Soon," she said. "You will have to be patient."

It was odd that it had occurred to none of us until that moment that Tala Mag could not keep her word to us – even if she had wanted to. The drugs, perhaps, and the mental tension under which we had been, had obscured the fact that our release would send the police of the nation after her and her servants. She did not have to take that risk.

So that hideous degrading hunt had been in vain!

Despair clouded our faces. We were helpless to do anything but wait for whatever fate Tala Mag announced.

Tala Mag gestured to Emil. He released me from the chains. Was I the next to be tortured? It did not matter, greatly. I was beyond caring.

Holding my arm, Emil dragged me up a flight of stairs and into a bedroom. In a dresser mirror I saw myself for the first time since I had entered the estate. My eyes were wild, my face grimy, and my shirt, ripped by whips and bushes, hung in tatters from my shoulders.

A minute later Tala Mag entered. She stood regarding me critically, with a strange excitement in her face and her practically bared breasts panting.

She said: "You are still very handsome, Lester Marlin. You shall be my lover, and after that you and your wife may leave. Emil will be outside the door, so do not attempt violence. And I may add that if you touch me, that if you attempt to harm me in any way while we are alone, your wife will suffer ten times the agony of those two other women.... Emil, you may go."

WE were alone then, that creature of hell and myself. I looked at her provocative, voluptuous body in that blue gown which did not hide it from my gaze. Many a man would have given his soul to possess her, but my hatred of her made her repulsive in my eyes.

I went to her, saying: "You promise we shall be released – after?"

"I promise," she said, moving into my embrace.

I had to restrain myself to laugh the lie back into her face. I brought my mouth down to her red lips, and she was vibrant against me. For a moment she stepped away from me; the blue gown fluttered to the floor. I swung her nude body up in my arms and bore her to the bed while she moaned words of passion into my ear. I fondled her golden flesh, my hands moving up her body. She lay purring with ecstasy. My angers reached her throat, caressing – then tightened.

She made the mistake of believing that threats of torturing my wife could any longer affect me. Threats can be effective only if there is a choice. Whatever I did or did not do, Helen and I would die. Perhaps we could expect a quicker or more merciful death from her monstrous servants than from her.

She writhed under me and her fingers clawed up at my face. Grimly I held on until her struggles ceased. But I did not quite kill her. A ray of hope flickered across my mind – a plan.

When she was unconscious I ripped a bed sheet into strips and tied her hands and feet and crammed a gag into her mouth.

Silently I moved to the door. There was no lock. Listening against the panel, I could not hear Emil. I ventured to open the door several inches and peered down the hall. No sight of anybody.

A woman cried out hoarsely. Not downstairs in the torture chamber, but in one of the rooms along the hall. And then I knew. Four naked women down there, guarded by four monsters! Without Tala Mag there to hold them back, the result was inevitable. That was why Emil had for once disobeyed her orders.

I shut the door and returned to the bed. As I thought of Helen in the embrace of one of those hideous servants, I went frantic with impatience. But I had to take my time if I wanted to save Helen and the others at all.

In my pocket I found a couple of matchbooks and a package of crumpled cigarettes. I lit a cigarette, then went into the adjoining bathroom

and got water and revived Tala Mag. She glared up at me with all the fury of hell.

I sat down on the bed. "Listen," I said. "Somewhere in this house there must be weapons. Perhaps also an extra key to the chains downstairs. You will tell me where they are."

Her eyes were contemptuous.

I puffed on the cigaret and then crushed the lighted tip against her abdomen. Her torso arched and fell back on the bed. I lit another cigaret and kept the match alive, letting the tiny flame trail between her heaving breasts. And when that match died, I lit others, and I also kept a cigaret constantly glowing.

I had not thought that I could so calmly torture any woman, no matter how evil she may be; but she had made me into a creature akin to herself, and Helen's life, and more than her life, was at stake.

THE contempt in her face gave way to fear – and pain. She squirmed and thrashed on the bed, but could not escape the steady torment of the matches and cigaret tips. And at last she indicated that she was ready to talk.

I kept one hand about her throat while with the other I removed the gag. Even then she thought to betray me, as I had expected, but my ready fingers choked off her shriek before it could get started.

"Don't raise your voice," I said. "Now start talking."

"The third door to the right down the hall," she gasped. "There are guns in the desk drawer, and the key."

I shoved the gag back between her teeth. Noiselessly I let myself out into the hall and stood there. She was lying, of course; her first attempt would be to lead me into a trap. I heard sounds come from down the hall which froze my blood. No doubt the third room on the right was where the monsters had taken the women.

When I returned to the bedroom, Tala Mag's eyes widened with surprise. She had imagined that by now I would have walked into the monster's den.

I dropped down on the bed and struck a match. Her head wagged frantically, signaling that this time she would tell the truth. I ignored her; I could not afford to take another risk. I let the flame lick the bare soles of her feet. Her body tied up in a knot and whimpers dribbled through the gag.

Present I said: "If you fool me once again, I will return and set fire to the mattress."

I pulled out the gag. She had to clear her throat several times before words would come through. "In that dresser – a bunch of keys. One for the chains – another unlocks the room – across the way – a gunroom. It's the truth. Please, don't – don't torture me again."

"So you can't take it yourself!" I said, replacing the gag.

The bunch of keys were in the dresser drawer all right. I had to take the chance that they were the right ones. I stood over her and pointed to each key in turn. She nodded when I indicated the one for the chains and the one for the gunroom.

This time she hadn't dared to lie. No sound came through the door of the room across the hall. The key worked and I found myself in a cozily furnished den. Stuffed animals and fish were on the walls and on a rack were a dozen hunting rifles and shotguns. I selected five rifles, found cartridges to fit, and, burdened with the guns, went downstairs.

All the servants were occupied with the women. In the torture chamber I found the four men still in their chains and the horrible corpse of Inez Spaulding dangling from the ceiling. The men, knowing what was happening to their wives upstairs, seemed more dead than alive.

For a while they refused to believe the testimony of their eyes. But when I at last had them all free and was distributing the rifles, their expressions changed from hopeless to relentless thirst for vengeance.

"God, I want just one shot at them!" Victor Rooney exclaimed, stating what all of us felt.

"Hurry!" Frank Bord urged. "Our poor wives up there!"

We had to leave Rob Spaulding behind, because he would be no use to us. He crawled over to the dangling corpse of his wife and jabbered up at it. He was utterly mad.

I led the way to the upstairs room and kicked in the door. The other three crowded behind me, and momentarily we froze with horror.

THE four huge creatures were on the floor, each with one of our wives. In order to whet their bestial appetites they were toying with them, slobbering over their quivering bodies. And the women were still going through the futile motions

of struggling, so that I knew, with a lifting of my heart, that we had not arrived too late.

Emil was with my wife, and it was he who first became aware of our presence. Bellowing, he rose to his feet and charged at me like an enraged bull. I was ready and put a bullet in his massive chest before he was halfway across the room. And still he came on!

We had prepared our strategy while coming up the stairs. I slid away from the doorway and Cuyler took my place. His bullet dropped Emil. Then Rooney was in the doorway, his gun ready.

The servants were unarmed, and as they plunged toward the door one of us was always there to meet him with a bullet. By the time four bullets had been fired, it was again my turn at the door. In the interim I had reloaded my rifle. Two were dead and one wounded. The fourth, Wick, was crouching behind Lillian Bord, using her as a shield.

Our tactic had been calculated to keep our wives out of the line of our bullets. I dropped the wounded servant, then we advanced into the room. Wick screeched as we moved around his living shield. Then he reared up and got his mighty hands on Bord. He would have snapped Bord's head like a twig if Rooney hadn't jabbed the bore of his rifle up under Wick's chin and blasted away. The discharge almost lifted the monster's head off.

Each of us went hysterical then, snatching up his wife and crushing her to him. Suddenly Frank Bord cried out.

Naked, Tala Mag stood in the doorway. She had managed to free herself. In her hands was a

double-barreled shotgun. Her face was contorted with hate.

We had dropped our rifles. Both barrels of that shotgun could do frightful damage in the confines of the room. The final triumph, was, after all, Tala Mag's.

Her lips curled back over pointed white teeth. Her finger tightened on the trigger.

We did not notice the shape that loomed up behind her. We saw only an arm whip about her neck and yank her backwards. The gun thundered; the discharge tore into the ceiling. And then Tala Mag was on the floor, thrashing in the grip of Bob Spaulding.

He had come up after all, and now he was repaying, to some measure, for the horrible death of his wife. We did not interfere. I doubt if all of us could have torn away the hands of the madman from Tala Mag's throat.

Her face turned blue. The thrashing of her body ceased. And still Bob Spaulding held on.

In the end we had to pull him away from the dead woman. He struggled with us, raving that he wanted to tear Tala Mag's body apart, but at last we quieted him and led him downstairs.

Our wives waited out on the terrace while we went for the last time into the torture chamber and took down Inez Spaulding's body and gathered up the clothing. While the women dressed we found the switches which controlled the ponderous gates. Then silently we got into our cars and drove away in the night from that living hell.