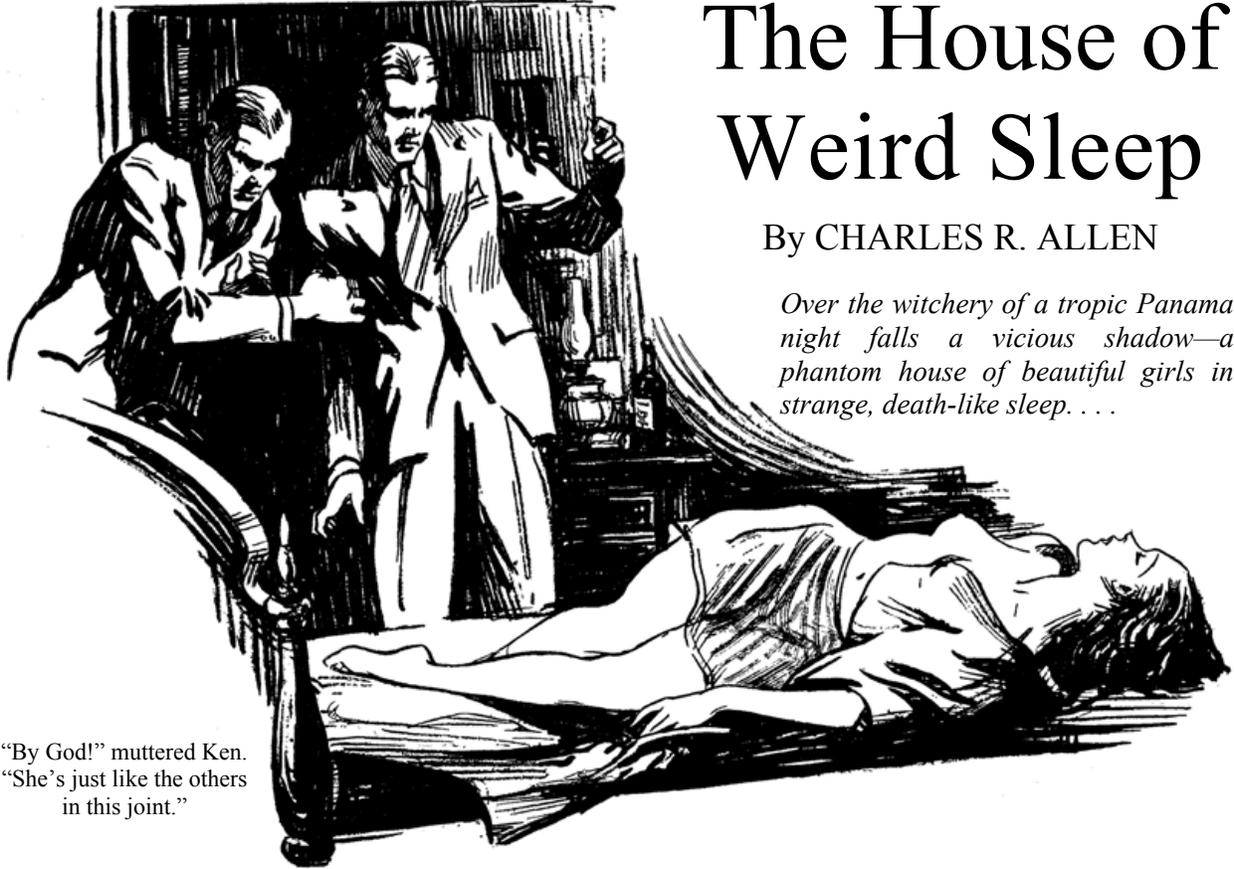


The House of Weird Sleep

By CHARLES R. ALLEN

Over the witchery of a tropic Panama night falls a vicious shadow—a phantom house of beautiful girls in strange, death-like sleep. . . .



“By God!” muttered Ken.
“She’s just like the others
in this joint.”

THE house itself stood beyond the rice fields, just outside of Panama City, and as Nick Carson crept cautiously around its black looming pile he sensed a sinister menace.

Black as the night the vacant windows stared back at him as he paused to reflect, while hot, tropical rain lashed across his brown face. At the sound of footsteps sloshing through the mud behind him, he turned abruptly and saw Ken Newman, reporter for the joint *Herald* and *L’Estrella de Panama*.

“I’ve just paid off the taxi driver,” announced Ken. “And I told him to wait for us back off the road there. D’ye see any way we can break in?”

Nick Carson pulled out a penknife. “I’ll try to force one of these windows. Get set for trouble! Got a gun?”

“No—worse luck!”

“Neither have I, so watch your step!”

Nick fell silently to work on the sash of the nearest window while his mind reviewed swiftly the odd events that had led them, at midnight, to this weird place.

Two weeks before, having completed his enlistment with the Marine Corps, he had walked out with his discharge and started a campaign to land a job with the Panama police force.

Rejected firmly by the latter, it was in a glum state of mind he had wandered, that very night, into the *Café La Fortuna* and discovered Ken Newman drinking *tequila*.

Ken laughed when he heard of his friend’s attempt to win to the police force. “The police!” he grunted. “You oughta be damn glad you didn’t get it! The police here are in a turmoil. Five wealthy girls disappeared within a month, and they haven’t found a trace of them!”

It had been perhaps an hour later, while Nick was finishing his third anisette that the reporter had noticed the man with the scar leading a pretty girl toward the door of *La Fortuna*.

“That girl!” Ken muttered, gripping Nick’s arm. “That’s Doris Chamberlin, niece of the private banker Henry Carmody in Panama City! Worth millions, they say!”

Nick eyed the girl, noticed that her summery

dress was disarrayed, hanging so low in front as to reveal the swelling curve of one creamy breast. Her slightly unsteady gait spoke, too, of *tequila*.

"There's something queer about that," ruminated Ken. "That thug she's with couldn't be a friend of hers. Let's follow them!"

And acting on sudden impulse the two men had picked up a taxi and trailed the big Packard the scar-faced one drove. The chase had led through the seething rain across Panama City and out into its black environs ending at last before this forbidding structure.

"THEY must be in there," whispered Ken. "Yet the place is black as hell. I wonder—"

A grunt from Nick cut him short. He snapped the penknife shut and began gingerly to raise the window.

Nick hauled out a flask of *tequila*. "Take a shot of this first. We're liable to get malaria tonight, if nothin' else!"

Pocketing the flask, Nick swung one leg over the windowsill and pulled himself in. Like a cat he dropped noiselessly to the floor in the darkness while Ken struggled in after him.

"Whew! This place smells like a tomb," whispered the latter.

"Whatever their game is," muttered Nick, "they're using this empty house as a blind and not even showing so much as a candlelight. Come on."

Nick led the way down the hallway of Stygian blackness feeling his way along the wall and testing carefully every step he took. After several minutes of torturous caution the passageway ended abruptly and Nick's probing foot encountered the bottom of a staircase. He turned to the reporter, whispered in his ear, "How about it? Coming up with me?"

"Sure, let's go. If Doris Chamberlin is in some sort of jam in here and we get her out, old man Carmody will come across with a big reward."

But the ex-marine had already started up the stairs, one fist extended ready for trouble while his other hand slid along the wide banister.

At the top they found another carpeted hallway and a closed door, at their right. Careful manipulation of the knob proved it was unlocked and a minute later the two men slid into the room like disembodied shadows and closed the door behind them.

Nick struck a match and what its flickering light revealed caused him to stare in amazement.

On a huge bed lay the white body of a beautiful girl, clad only in frilled step-ins. Her bare, jutting breasts rose and fell symmetrically in apparent sleep. The nude, shapely legs gleamed whitely as Nick, holding the match, approached her.

"That's not Doris Chamberlin," whispered Ken, as he peered down on the tumbled mass of black hair and the slightly parted, full red lips. "She's dark—Doris is a blonde—golden hair and blue eyes."

Nick placed a rough hand on the soft bare shoulder and shook her gently, getting no response. He tried again, shaking her vigorously but the only result was to cause her exquisite breasts to quiver disturbingly.

Striking another match he pushed back the girl's eyelids. "Doped!" he said.

"By God!" muttered Ken. "I'm beginning to see light. I wonder if there's any more around?"

NICK crept out to the black hall again. A little further down they discovered another room and forced a similar entry. There, in a similar bed lay a second girl, even prettier than the first whose only garment was a pair of silk pajama pants.

The voluptuous curves of this sleeping girl caused Nick's hand to tremble as he felt for the throbbing heartbeat.

As in the first case, the girl was not Doris Chamberlin and proved, too, to be heavily drugged.

Nick passed a huge hand across his perspiring brow. "By God!" he growled, "I'd like to get my hands on the rats behind this!"

The door of the bedroom swung open with a crash, a white ray of light pierced the darkness and centered on Nick's face. "Done!" grated the intruder.

Nick saw the snarling features of the scar-faced man reflected behind the light and in the same glance saw the muzzle of an automatic that was pointed ominously in his direction. Other men were sliding past the scar-faced one into the room, one of them a huge black negro, stripped to the waist.

They reached Ken first. One of them swung something through the air in a vicious arc that crashed on Ken's head with a sickening thud. Nick watched his friend slump to the floor while the negro, doubling up his colossal fists, rapidly approached him.

"Wait a minute!" ordered their leader. "Don't put him out yet." Then turning to Nick: "Who the

hell are you? And how did you get in here!”

The face of the ex-marine hardened. “I’m after Doris Chamberlin. I’m taking her with me.”

“Oh, yeah? You’re takin’ nobody—but yourself, and you’re goin’ on a long journey. Who put you wise to this?”

“What’s it to you?” Nick stalled.

“So that’s the way it’s gonna be, eh?” The man with the gun turned to the huge black. “Tie him up,” he directed, “and take him down the cellar. Give him the works—then maybe he’ll talk!”

The black lashed a leather belt tightly around Nick’s wrists then jerked him out of the room and down the stairs. “See that you keep the door shut, too!” bawled out scar-face. “If he screams, cut his tongue out!”

Into a dank moldy cellar Nick descended with his captor. Rats scampered away before their approach and as the black switched on a light Nick saw the tail of a snake slithering out of sight.

NICK’S manacled wrists were tied high above his head to a rope that was suspended from a rafter. As he dangled helpless, the black ripped the shirt from his back and produced a rawhide whip, tipped with steel prongs.

“Ah’m gawn to tear yore skin off with this here whip,” came the guttural voice from behind him. “Then ah’m gawn to rub salt in the cuts an’ leave you hyar on the floor. Dey’s snakes that will find you. Dat is, onless you tell the boss what he wants to know!”

Nick’s lips tightened. “Go to hell you black b——!”

An instant later the whip sang through the air and slashed the white man’s bare back. Nick stiffened in agony while the steel prongs came around again and seared his flesh.

His brain raced at top speed. The grunts from the black, as he wielded the whip, told him his torturer must be standing not more than two feet behind him.

Nick gathered the muscles of his legs tightly together, pressed his toes on the ground, then in one motion lifted both his feet high and lashed out savagely behind him.

With a savage joy he felt his heavy boots sink into the negro’s stomach, as the latter with an agonized gasp hurtled back to the floor. Frenzied with desperation Nick steeled his arms and gave a mighty wrench on the half-rotten rope from which

he dangled. It snapped and he tumbled to the ground tearing madly with his teeth on the belt that held his hand together.



Nick drew back savagely with the whip—his only weapon. But let the devils come!

Before he could get the belt loose, however, he saw the gigantic black crawling to his feet. Nick took a quick step forward and as a football player kicks the ball from a tee, so Nick’s foot came up and smashed the negro on the mouth.

As the black stretched his length on the ground again, Nick tore the belt from his wrists and seized the whip. In a white heat of fury he pursued the creeping man, lashing him savagely on the head until he collapsed, a battered mass of unconsciousness.

The ex-marine straightened up, breathing hard. He had a weapon now, he told himself, but what he needed for that gang upstairs was an automatic.

Clutching the whip he ascended the stairs quietly and came out in the kitchen only to face a rat-faced man that whirled about as he opened the door. “Well, I’ll be—” grunted the latter and dived for his gun.

The automatic belched fire just as Nick threw himself forward in a low dive. The slug whined

past his head and Nick fastened his fingers on the other's trousers.

The gunman, however, was a little too swift. He kicked out viciously, caught Nick on the chin, then backed rapidly away raising his gun for another shot.

For an instant Nick stared up that smoking muzzle and read death while a sudden shout and the sound of running feet coming down the hallway told him another killer was approaching to pump lead in him from behind.

LIKE lightning Nick moved. A single electric bulb that served to light the room, hung suspended from the ceiling a dozen feet from him and a little above his head. The long whip in his hand shot out like a striking snake, its steel prongs smashed the bulb, and in the darkness Nick lunged to the floor again, and rolled toward the door.

The gun roared but the bullet plowed harmlessly through the woodwork, and Nick gained his feet as two men brushed past him and went on, cursing the sudden darkness.

He found himself once again in that black narrow hallway. Racing along it on his toes he gained the stairs and bounded up three at a time. At the top, he ran lightly down the corridor while from the floor below he heard the muttered imprecations and moving feet of his pursuers, coming after him with flashlights and guns.

At the far end of the hallway he spotted a door and without further consideration pushed it open and slid in. A startled exclamation behind him brought him around abruptly, his whip raised for action.

Nick grunted in astonishment. Before him, a girl sat on the edge of a bed staring at him with wide-open blue eyes. Nick's glance roved swiftly over her lithe young body, clad in a white silk chemise. Two firm curving breasts pushed the frilled edge of the chemise prominently outward, while her exquisitely shaped legs, bare from her thighs downward made his blood tingle even in that moment of danger.

The curly golden hair that clustered about her pretty face stirred a memory in Nick. "You're Doris Chamberlin?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Nick Carson. I've come to get you out of this!"

Relief flooded the girl's face. "They put something in my drink," she murmured excitedly.

"Got me out here and took all my clothes away. They're going to send me to South America—as a white slave!"

"They are like hell!" growled Nick.

"They've got other girls here!" Doris went on, fear creeping back into her eyes. "They lure them here, steal their clothes and dope them to keep them quiet. They try to collect ransom from their parents. If they don't get it, they send them to South America. The man with the scar told me—"

"Yeah I know," interrupted Nick hurriedly. His ear had caught the tramp of feet coming up the staircase. "Those babies are after me right now! If they find me here, it's curtains!"

HE GLANCED around hastily. Except for the bed the room was devoid of furniture. The girl, watching him with panic-stricken eyes as the steps in the hallway grew nearer, saw him calculating the space under the bed.

"You can't hide under there," she told him. "You're too big. They'd see you. Here, get in bed behind me. They won't think to look there!" And she threw the covers wide.

Nick slid his aching body in beside the soft, white body of the girl. Outside, doors were slamming.

"They're searching the other rooms first," he whispered.

Gradually as the minutes passed and no one came in their room Nick relaxed and realized for the first time that the warm feminine body beside him was wedged tightly against his, seeking comfort and protection.

He could feel the warm flesh of her legs against his while her soft breasts snuggled warmly at his chest. She moved slightly and threw a white arm about his neck. The sudden twist of that lithe, living body so close to him, sent the blood pounding in his temples.

Nick's arm went suddenly around the slim waist, pulled her throbbing body tightly to him, while his lips found her warmly-red ones in a passionate kiss.

Clinging to the girl, Nick failed to hear the door open softly.

"So!" hissed a voice. "Here you are!"

Nick raised his head and stared again into a flashlight and a gun muzzle. The scar-faced man that held it had murder in his black eyes. He turned to two hard-faced men who stood just behind him

with drawn guns. "Pull that girl out of the way," he ordered. "I'm gonna shoot this bird right now."

The two henchmen moved forward, seized Doris and dragged her roughly from the bed. Scar-face moved his weapon up on a level with Nick's eyes. "One right in the center," he grinned viciously. "And I never miss!"

HIS long finger curled about the trigger, began to squeeze. Nick had risen to a sitting posture in bed, one hand behind him clutching a pillow. With one desperate heave he brought the pillow around and flung it on the killer's gun hand, a split second before the gun barked.



"You little fool!" cried the man with the gun. "You've signed your death warrant—both of you!"

The deflected bullet ripped through the bed beside Nick as he tensed his muscles and made a flying leap for scar-face. His lowered head butted like a battering ram into the other's solar plexus while one brown hand shot out and wrenched the gun away.

The two men struck the floor together while scar-face's two henchmen who had pocketed their guns to hold the struggling Doris, released her and dived for their hip pockets.

Four years of target practice in the Marine Corps was behind the muzzle of the gun Nick

wielded. It belched livid fire in two straight streams and two men slumped to the floor, dead.

Scar-face squirmed out from under Nick just in time to receive a crashing blow on the skull from the butt of Nick's gun.

Nick ripped the bed sheets in strips, bound up the killer hand and foot and left the room with Doris Chamberlin clinging to his arm. "I don't think there's any more rats left in this place," he muttered. "That black gent in the cellar won't come to for a long while yet, if ever. Let's look for Ken Newman."

Down the dark hallway Nick found the room where Ken had been knocked out. It was empty. He swore softly. "The skunks!" he muttered. "I wonder what they did with him?"

He whirled and with the girl at his heels, started down the stairs. Before he was halfway down the light in the lower hall was switched on suddenly and Nick stared down at a tall, gray haired man elegantly clothed who had whipped out a gun and aimed it at him.

Doris Chamberlin uttered a little cry and stepped back, clutching at Nick, "Henry Carmody!" she gasped.

"Henry Carmody?" reiterated Nick. "Carmody, the banker? Your uncle?"

"Uncle!" cried Doris. Words tumbled from her terror-stricken lips. "I used to call him uncle, but he's not. He's my guardian. He tried to force his way in my bedroom the other night! I ran away. He had those men pick me up and bring me here. He's the head of all this! I tried to tell you before—he's a—fiend!"

Nick's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"You little fool!" cried the man at the foot of the stairs. "You've signed your death warrant! And that lunatic with you too! If you think I'm going to let you go free after that, you're crazy!"

The girl backed off screaming as Carmody drew a steady cool bead on her. Nick stepped swiftly in front of her and as he did so caught a glimpse of a man creeping out of the living room into the hall, just behind Carmody's back.

AS THE banker's hand tightened on the trigger, Nick saw an arm steal around him and with one swift motion knock aside the gun.

All the reserve strength left in the ex-marine's body went into that last leap as he flew down the stairs and swung a hard fist to Carmody's jaw.

As the man's knees sagged, Nick swung again and the gun dropped from unconscious fingers, while across the fallen banker Nick stared into the grinning face of Ken Newman.

"Well, that's that!" announced the latter. "I came to up in that room a while ago during the excitement—while they were all chasing you, I guess. I started out to look for you, came down here, then I heard the gun shots and started upstairs again.

"Before I got far I heard a car stop outside, and

someone came running upon the porch. I thought I'd better hide in that room and see who it was."

"Well done!" grunted Nick.

"Say," went on Ken, "That police job you wanted—they'll welcome you with open arms for cleaning up this gang, not to mention the reward that's posted for rounding up these lugs!"

Doris Chamberlin's arm encircled Nick tightly. In the warm caress of her body Nick felt the promise of a reward that would prove far more interesting than that offered by the police.