

Terror Stalks the Storm-Lashed

Tower of Darkness



Neptune's Grotto was a gay dancing place in the summer. Now it was dark, empty. And from its desolate, storm-swept beach came a scream of horror. Coast Guardsman Carey found a girl there, a girl he knew well. He knew her well enough to know that she never touched liquor. Yet her lips reeked with booze. She told of seeing her murdered brother. And her hands were wet with warm blood.

By
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IN the howling blackness of the gale-swept beach the faint cry sounded eerie, ghostlike. Ben Carey held his lantern high and tried vainly to peer through black sheets of rain. His long slicker whipped like a sail against his high-booted legs.

The beach was a pitch-black smear. For an instant a jagged streak of lightning hung like a forked branch in the midnight sky, then it was gone, leaving the coast guardsman's eyes dazed and blinking.

He listened for the cry again. It had sounded like the terrified wail of a woman. Was it only his

imagination, a trick of the screaming wind? Or did it come from Neptune's Grotto?

High up on the landside, Carey could barely see the half-invisible frame structure of Neptune's Grotto, with its tall lighthouse tower pointed like a darkened finger against the sky. No woman would be there—no one but Sam Keller, the watchman. The glassed windows of the rambling dancehall were closed now and boarded up. The summer season was over. Like a crusted, empty shell, Neptune's Grotto would loom there through the coming Autumn and Winter, till the first warm days of Spring brought back again the rhythm of

dance music, the clink of liquor glasses, the laughter of gay couples. But tonight it was black and empty, except for the drowsing watchman and the tiny glow of his lamp in the distant kitchen.

Suddenly Carey swore uneasily. The light—it wasn't there. Not a sign of Sam Keller's lamp.

The coast guardsman turned sharply toward the deserted dance pavilion. But his rubber boots had barely scuffed the sand when he stopped short, mouth agape.

"Help! . . . Help, help!"

A woman's voice. It was wailing with shuddering terror from the open beach ahead of Carey.

Like a tall rubber-sheathed ghost himself, Carey rushed up the beach, kicking the sand in dark, soggy spurts. His eyes, shielded by the stiff visor of his waterproofed hat, peered grimly ahead. There was no further cry to guide him, but he knew instinctively where the woman would be. She must be huddled under the bathing sheds in a feeble effort to get away from the wild lash of the storm.

With swinging haste he threw the yellow flare of his lantern on the dry sand under the tight flooring of the bathing shed.

A girl—he saw her. Carey recognized her with a groan of deep concern. It was Marion Keller, the sister of the watchman of Neptune's Grotto.

He dropped to one knee in the sand and pillowed her slack head in his dripping lap.

"Marion! Are you all right? Marion!"

She lay there limp, speechless, like a corpse. Her tangled golden hair was like a wet halo; her soaked dress clung to her inert body. She was alive. But what had happened to her? Why was she out here in the midnight darkness of a storm-drenched beach?

As he bent toward her face his nostrils quivered suddenly. He could smell the faint reek of liquor on her lovely red lips. He shook his head with dull puzzlement. He had known Marion from childhood. He knew that she never touched the stuff. What did it all mean?

The thought of Sam Keller, her brother, crossed his mind and made his face darken with a grim anger. Was Sam behind this? Sam, her sullen and erratic brother, whom she had mothered and cared for and defended almost as long as Carey could remember?

Gently the coast guardsman began chafing the ice-cold cheeks. The pale eyelids quivered; stark

eyes stared up at him with glazed incomprehension.

"Marion!" he whispered. "What happened?"

"Ben!" Weakly her arms crept around his neck. "Oh, Ben, Ben! I don't know what I—I—"

Suddenly she pushed him away from her. Her eyes went stony with a look of blind horror.

"Blood," she whispered. "I saw Sam's dead face—covered with blood. Have I been dreaming it?"

Lightning streaked the sand with a sudden purple flare. It lit up for an instant the driving sheets of rain and the white tumble of roaring surf, smashing itself in wild spray on the beach.

"How did you get here?" Carey asked with gentle insistence.

"I—I don't know. I woke up in the sand under the timbers here. I was all alone and terribly frightened. Then I remembered—and I think I screamed—"

"What did you remember, Marion?"

"My brother," her lips trembled with sick horror. "Blood all over his face and his—his hair. I dreamed I—I killed Sam . . ."

The girl's white-faced sincerity sent a tingle of unbelieving horror coursing through the body of the staring young coast guardsman.

"This is madness. You've been drugged, poisoned. What did you drink?"

"I—I came over to the Grotto tonight to—to bring Sam his coffee and sandwiches. I was soaking wet from the storm—it's almost a mile from the cottage. He made me take a drink to warm me up."

"Hmm. Where did Sam get the liquor?" Carey's voice was a growl.

"He said he found a bottle in the pantry. I was terrified. You know what my brother is when he gets hold of whiskey. Sam was so ugly and insistent—that I took a drink, hoping to quiet him."

"What happened then?"

"I don't know, Ben. I seemed to go to sleep, to dream. I—I think we quarreled. I could hear Sam's voice, thick and sleepy and—horrible. It seemed to come to me out of a queer drowsy cloud. He was boasting about money—heaps and heaps of money, he said. He said he was going to be rich, that I was going to be rich, too—if I was a sensible sister and kept my mouth shut."

"And then?"

"Then I—we seemed to quarrel. It was like a dream. I saw Sam's face; he was on the floor. He

was covered with blood and—and I saw a broken bottle beside him, the jagged edges all soaked with blood. I don't know what happened after that!"

CAREY'S eyes were fixed with a shrinking fascination on the slim hands that lay limply on the sand under the yellow flare of his lantern. The palms were smeared with crimson. Blood—it was fresh blood.

"I've killed him," Marion moaned. "I've killed my own brother!"

"You've killed no one," Carey said harshly. His lean jaw tightened. "We're going back to Neptune's Grotto and find out what has happened."

He picked up the girl with a sudden muscular heave and threw her lightly across his shoulder. With the lantern swinging in his left hand like a windblown spark he fought his way across the black expanse of beach.

The wooden steps that led shoreward across the huge stone boulders of the breakwater gushed under his boots like dark miniature waterfalls. Ben Carey clumped doggedly past the boarded windows of Neptune's Grotto, oblivious of the limp weight across his shoulder. In front was a concrete parking space for the automobiles that thronged to the Grotto in summer; but now it was black emptiness where the wind howled and rain danced and spat with wild fury.

The girl moaned and stirred faintly in Carey's tight grasp. Hurriedly, he lengthened his stride and raced for the door of the wide, boarded-up porch. The door was partly open.

Instantly, he let the girl slide gently downward till her feet touched the topmost step of the porch. There was no sign of life or movement within, but Carey had a queer, warning feeling that a living human being was inside there, watching him from impenetrable blackness. His gun jerked swiftly from beneath his streaming slicker. He held the weapon screened from the rain but ready for instant action.

"Come out!" he ordered grimly. "Walk out here to the door—with your hands up!"

There was no reply.

"If you don't come out," Carey whispered evenly, "I'll spray this porch with lead!"

A voice began to whimper faintly. "It's me, Ben. Don't shoot!"

The alert coast guardsman saw a figure take shape and loom closer. To his surprise the figure

was familiar. It was Tim, the local carpenter who did odd jobs down in the village. He was unarmed, his hands high above his head, and he was trembling with stark terror.

"I—didn't kill him, Ben! I didn't have nothin' to do with it. I came in here this afternoon to board up them winders in the rear and—"

"Who told you to?"

"Mr. Ridley hired me—the owner. Last thing he told me before he left yesterday on his boat for Miami was: 'Tim, I want you to board up the rest of them winders.' It looked stormy this afternoon, so I figgered—"

"What are you doing here at this hour of the night?"

"I—I been doped, I think," Tim quavered. He kept glancing back fearfully over his shoulder toward the darkness of the dancehall. "I found a bottle o' hooch in the pantry an' I took a slug or two—an' I musta gone out like a light. When I woke up, it was pitch-dark, so I come up to the front—the big room where they dance in summer. I switched on the light and—"

"Well?"

"I seen him! Sam Keller, the watchman. Dead on the floor." He glanced queerly at Marion Keller and gulped. "His face all caved in, blood all over him."

Carey stepped forward and the trembling carpenter clawed at his rubber sleeve with sudden terror.

"Don't go in," he babbled. "There's a—a ghost in there. I heard it. It put out the light."

Carey grunted and stuck the barrel of his gun in the shivering carpenter's ribs. "Were the lights on when you first saw the body?"

"I put 'em on. I looked down and seen it was Sam Keller with his head all smashed. And then, without no warnin', the lights went out. For a second I was too scared to move; then I heard the— the ghost. It was upstairs. It walked like a dead man—*clump, clump, clump*. I heard it come straight to the top of the stairs and start to come down. I ran out to the front porch here and got the door open—an' then I seen you comin' with the lantern. I was afraid to show myself for fear you might think I was the one who killed Sam Keller. But I didn't, Ben. I swear I didn't!"

Carey brushed past the cowering man, threw his lantern light into the bare interior of the deserted dance floor. His hand jerked to the wall and he

threw the light switch.

Instantly the lights came on.

"I thought you said you didn't turn 'em off?" Carey snapped.

"I didn't." Tim peered at him, white-faced. "I never touched the lights."

"Where's the body?"

"Over there at the foot of the stairs." His pointing finger wavered and dropped. "It's—it's gone! The body's gone."

Carey eyed him with cold suspicion. "You're either drunk or lying. Bodies don't get up and walk and turn out lights. There was no corpse here."

"He's not lying, Ben," Marion Keller said in a thin whisper. "I saw my brother at the foot of the stairs. He was dead and—" Her voice broke with horror.

Carey's hand closed tightly on hers for an instant. There were a couple of dusty folding chairs near one of the boarded windows and he forced Marion gently downward on one of them. She stared at him dully, like a tragic sleepwalker.

THE coast guardsman strode across the dance floor to where Tim had pointed. He bent over the bare boards and his breath sucked sharply in his throat. There was a darkly irregular spot on the floor where someone had very recently made a hasty effort to wipe up something. In the dust the circular marks of a rag were clearly visible.

There was a tiny blood smear a foot or so away. Beyond it was another—and another. Spaced a foot or so apart, the telltale smears showed the path a man's bloody shoe had taken.

The trail led straight toward the foot of the stairs.

"Is there a telephone line still open here?" Carey snapped at the trembling carpenter.

Tim nodded, pointed. "Under that hunk of painter's canvass in the corner. The phone men was comin' in tomorrer to disconnect it."

Carey uncovered the instrument with a quick gesture. He called a number, his eyes steadily on the silent staircase and the blackness above. In a moment he had the cottage of Sheriff Wallace. He spoke a few terse sentences to Wallace and hung up.

"Stay here with Marion," he told the cowering Tim.

With the lantern swinging from his hand, he went slowly up the stairs. The gun in his right paw

was like a steady, upslanting rock.

In a moment, there was a faint click and the upper floor bloomed with sudden illumination. The feet of Ben Carey made a slow creaking sound as he padded about on the uncarpeted boards. Tim heard a sudden muttered exclamation. In another moment Carey was hurrying down the staircase.

His eyes were narrowed, puzzled looking. "The smears ended right in the center of the hallway. Whoever made the tracks went no farther than the center of the hall—and he didn't come down the stairs again."

"It's a ghost," Tim groaned. "The dead man got up and—and walked into thin air."

"Ghost nothing," Carey snapped. "There's a killer in this dance pavilion right now. He's upstairs somewhere—trying to hide the corpse, to get rid of the evidence of his crime."

His eyes fastened grimly on the carpenter.

"Is there any way to get up to that attic above the second floor?"

"There's a trapdoor," Tim muttered uneasily. "But—but nothing human could have climbed up there tonight. The ceiling is twelve feet high and the only ladder in the place is—"

"Quick! Where's the ladder?"

"Downstairs here. In the pantry. Behind the cellar stairs."

"Go get it!"

Tim shuddered. "Not me! I ain't anxious to meet no ghost."

Carey's gun muzzle swung ominously. "Go get that ladder—and get it here fast!"

The frightened Tim disappeared with the speed of a small boy passing a graveyard. In a moment or two he was back, dragging a long, light ladder.

"Take one end of it," Carey ordered. "We're going upstairs and have a look at that attic."

Tim backed away. Beads of sweat glistened on his pale forehead. He looked startled as a sudden sound echoed outside in the driving rain. It was the harsh squeal of an automobile braking swiftly to a stop.

"The sheriff," Tim gasped. "It's Sheriff Wallace."

Marion Keller's face never moved. She sat in the dusty chair where Carey had placed her and her face was waxen with a dulled horror. Her bloodstained hands hung limply in her lap and her gaze stayed riveted on them as though they were snakes.

Sheriff Wallace hurried in with a quick, nervous step. He was wearing a wrinkled yellow slicker thrown hastily over his pajamas. The laces of his shoes dangled loosely as he walked. He was a short, paunchy man with a bristly brown mustache. He looked ill at ease. In the twelve years he had served as sheriff in the little seaside village, he had never yet been brought face to face with the specter of murder.

He eyed the ladder on the floor. The coast guardsman explained briefly what he had already discovered and Wallace blinked. He was obviously nervous as he picked up one end of the ladder.

"I'll lead the way," Carey said evenly. "Unless I'm crazy, the corpse of Sam Keller is hidden in that attic—and his murderer is hidden up there with him. There's no possible chance that he could have escaped downstairs again."

"Couldn't he have sneaked out the back door?" the sheriff asked.

"Impossible," Carey said. "He went up the stairs—but he never came down again. He's up in that attic right now."

THE trapdoor in the second floor ceiling was directly above the last visible stain in the smeared trail that the killer had left. Carey blessed the mischance that had caused the cunning murderer to smear his inattentive shoe in the blood of his victim.

The height of the trapdoor puzzled the eager coast guardsman. It was fully twelve feet above the floor. How could the vanishing murderer have scaled that height and carried a dead man with him? There was no sign of chair, table, anything on which he could have climbed.

Wallace steadied the ladder that Tim had found on the lower floor. Carey went swiftly up the shaky rungs. The trapdoor was fastened on its upper surface, but a couple of well-aimed shots from Carey's gun shattered the light wood and he was able to rip a board away. Reaching up, he unhooked the fastening and the trapdoor swung open.

No pistol shot roared in the dark attic as Carey's head lifted cautiously through the square opening. His long legs snaked upward out of sight. The faint rasp of a match sounded and there was a yellow gleam of light above the opening.

"See anything?" Wallace called.

Carey's muffled voice sounded queerly

triumphant.

"Come on up, Wallace! Hurry it up! There's more than murder to this."

His hands caught the arms of the ascending sheriff and yanked him in one strong heave through the opening.

"Look!" he called. "See here?"

The flame of his match showed a dark, wet patch on the bare dusty boards of the attic flooring.

"Blood," Wallace muttered. "Fresh blood."

"Right. And there's the ladder he used. See it? Over there alongside the chimney wall. See how he managed it? He came down from the attic to make his kill. He left the ladder standing under the open trap while he sneaked downstairs. That's how he was able to get himself and the corpse back so neatly."

"Where the devil could he have gone?" Wallace whispered, his eyes stabbing alertly through the gloomy light from the burning match.

"He went through that little door at the end of the eaves," Carey said softly. "He couldn't have gone anywhere else. He's hiding up there in the Grotto tower—that tall lighthouse tower that Ridley built for his fool searchlight display every summer."

The match in Carey's fingers sputtered out and he lit another. Wallace struck one and held the flame forward. He was tiptoeing toward the small door in the eaves when the sharp whisper of Carey recalled him.

"Look at those piled bales in the corner, sheriff. I ripped one of 'em open. Do you see now what may be behind all this mystery?"

The sheriff looked. "Silk!" he gasped in a low voice.

He stared at the gaping bale that Carey's knife had slitted open. The name of the silk mill was plainly decipherable: *Patterson Raw Silk Corporation*. The bales were piled four deep almost up to the roof.

"Stolen silk," Wallace breathed. "Four truckloads of it hijacked on the roads of this county in the last month. Vanished into thin air—stolen and no trace of it ever found. And hidden here all the while, every last ounce of it."

Carey's face looked pale in the yellow glow of the matches that he kept striking with monotonous regularity.

"That's what Sam Keller must have meant," he muttered, "when he told Marion that he was going

to make money—heaps and heaps of it. The filthy swine! He took advantage of his job here as watchman in order to store the stolen silk until he could dispose of it. Never did like Keller.”

“But who killed him?” Wallace asked. “If Marion didn’t— Could Tim have done it? Was all his terror and ghost talk a clever stunt to—”

“Listen!” Carey whispered suddenly.

A queer scream echoed shrilly high over their heads. It sounded like the high-pitched wail of a woman. Masked by the drum of the rain and the howls of the wind, it whimpered unevenly, horribly.

“The tower!” Wallace gasped. “The roof of the tower!”

Together they rushed to the closed door set flush in the slanting eaves. Carey’s hand threw it swiftly open.

It was pitch-dark inside the steep tower but their eyes, accustomed to the gloom, could make out the shadowy wooden steps that wound aloft in a dusty spiral to the unseen top of the tower, forty feet above their heads.

High above the sound of the gale they could still hear that shrill, screaming wail. It stopped suddenly as Carey raced up the steps, closely followed by the panting form of the bulky Wallace.

A closed door barred their way at the top.

“Stay here,” Carey whispered. “If he gets by me and tries to blast his way down the stairs—blow him apart!”

His own gun jutted grimly in his grasp. With a quick wrench he threw the door open and sprang outside on the open roof of the tower.

“Did you get him, Ben?” Wallace roared. “Is he out there?”

“No!” Carey’s puzzled voice shouted thinly. The wind whipped the sound away and made it hardly audible. “Come on out here for a second.”

WALLACE ducked his head to the wind and sprang out on the parapet. Rain slanted at him in blinding sheets that stung like hail. The wind was a great clutching hand that buffeted at the sheriff, slapped him dizzily sideways, whirled him so that he could scarcely breathe on the exposed platform of the tower.

To his amazement, he could see only the tall figure of the coast guardsman. Except for Ben Carey and himself, there was nothing living or dead on the tower top. Air and beach—even the foaming

surge of the distant surf—was completely blotted out by the driving fury of the storm.

“Could—could he have thrown the body off—and jumped?” Wallace cried, his face streaming with rain. “This thing is madness.” He fought his way back to the shelter of the doorway. His voice roared indistinctly. “Only an angel—or a sailor—could get away from a tower like this, without breaking his neck.”

“Eh? What’s that?” Carey whirled in the blackness, his face a peering blur. “A sailor? Of course! We’ve been blind fools!”

He was staring upward over his head at the steel rigging that held the metal stanchions of the searchlight housing. A wolfish gleam came into his wide eyes. He whirled and dashed for the doorway, almost hurling Wallace down the winding stairs in his fierce eagerness.

“Quick! We’ve got to get downstairs and out—out on the beach!”

“Huh? Did—did you see him?”

“I saw the block,” Carey howled, his voice a mere thread in the roaring wind. “That scream we heard a minute ago was the squeak of a pulley in a block! It’s fastened to the brace-rods of the searchlight housing. The murderer lowered himself and the corpse with a block and tackle. Then he must have shaken his damned sailor knot loose from below. He’s down on the beach right now! He can’t be anywhere else!”

Ben Carey sprang down the tower steps in long, eager strides. The ladder was still propped under the gaping trapdoor but Carey ignored it. He hung for an instant from the trapdoor frame and dropped to the floor below with a lithe thud.

With set face and a gun snout gleaming in his big hand he raced past the startled faces of Tim and the girl. Marion cried out weakly but he didn’t hear her.

The wind and rain slashed at him but he lowered his head and raced straight for the howling blackness of the beach. He took the water-streaming steps across the stone breakwater in two wild leaps.

Above his head the tall tower of Neptune’s Grotto was a dark blot against the inky sky. The beach itself was a smear of impenetrable darkness. Carey ranged slowly seaward in ever-widening circles, his body bent close to the rain-swept sand.

Suddenly he tensed. He was staring at a tangled coil of heavy rope. He saw the trampled tracery of

heavy footsteps in the wet sand. The deeply marked prints disappeared in the darkness in a straggling uneven line toward the rush and tumble of the surf.

Ben Carey had barely taken a half dozen steps when a spurt of flame split the darkness in front of him. A bullet whistled shrilly above his head.

He threw himself grimly forward—and fell headlong over an inert something in the sand. It was a battered body lying flat on its face. Fiercely he heaved at the shoulders. It was the dead Sam Keller.

Again, the snarling spurt of flame crashed from the darkness ahead. Carey bent his knees instantly and went flat on the sand. But only for an instant. The coast guardsman wiggled sideways and leaped to his feet. The killer was at bay. Hemmed in between the coast guardsman and the roaring fury of the Atlantic, he could depend no longer on stealth and evasion. He would have to kill now—or be killed.

Carey could make out more clearly the dark blob of the fugitive fleeing form. The man was running drunkenly, humped low above the sand like an enormous frog. A sudden flash of lightning illuminated him for a dazzling instant as he whirled, his gun streaking flame.

The coast guardsman staked his life on a bold, impetuous rush. He flung himself heedlessly forward. His plunging attack carried him like a thunderbolt against the murderer's hip and knee. They fell in a tangle together, rolling over and over in a fierce thrashing struggle that threw wet sand flying in soggy spurts.

The butt of the killer's gun drove Carey's face into the sand, almost choking him; but he managed to clear his eyes with a desperate sweep of his left hand and to roll clear for an instant.

His own gun swung upward in a swift arc and crashed with stunning impact on the skull of his snarling foe. With a groan of agony, the killer collapsed.

Ben Carey rolled the limp body over. He stared intently into the unconscious face a few inches under his.

"A sailor," he muttered. "Wallace's guess was right."

Out of the darkness, a cautious figure came creeping closer. It was the sheriff. He eyed the murderer and seemed to nod faintly.

"Ridley. It's—it's Ridley himself!"

"It sure is," Carey said. "Ridley himself—the foxy owner of Neptune's Grotto. That boat trip of his to Miami was just a blind. He never left the Grotto. He was hidden up in the attic—waiting for the chance to kill Sam Keller and protect himself—from blackmail, probably."

"A sailor," Wallace muttered. "I said the killer was a sailor to get away from the tower like that."

Carey nodded sternly. "And if you know of a better amateur seaman along this coast, I'd like to know his name. Here, give me a hand with him."

They carried Ridley into the bare dancehall of the Grotto and flung his unconscious body sprawling to the floor.

"There's your murderer," Carey told Marion Keller very gently.

The girl was silent, white-faced.

"Ridley himself planted that drugged liquor here," the coast guardsman said slowly. "He pretended to sail on his boat for Miami, but he sneaked back here with the cold-blooded determination to kill your brother and retain all the profits from a half-dozen stolen silk shipments. There's a big mortgage on Neptune's Grotto and he must have been desperately hard up for money."

Ridley's black, snakelike eyes were wide-open, staring with a quiet, devilish hatred at his alert captors. Wallace's gun muzzle was a steady promise of what the law held in store for Mr. Richard Ridley.

Ben Carey turned toward the girl.

Marion Keller's eyes were streaming suddenly with tears. She began to sob brokenly as the coast guardsman's brown hands tightened protectively over hers.

"I—I know now that my—my unfortunate brother was a—a thief," she whispered. "Knowing that, I can bear somehow the thought of his—death. But it terrifies me, Ben, to feel so utterly alone, so—"

"Alone?" Ben Carey said shortly.

His arm crept about her slim, shaking shoulders and tensed with a proudly possessive gesture.

"You'll never be alone, Marion," he said huskily. "Not if you—don't want to be."

Marion Keller sighed. Her body swayed against Ben's and went lax.