



THE PSYCHOMORPH

by E. A. GROSSER

**A very pleasing personality, the Psychomorph.
Always the person you most wanted to see—**

Illustrated by M. Isip

Two men sat in front of the entirely useless fireplace, watching the flames. They were roughing it in a centrally heated mountain lodge. Suddenly two words quavered on the crisp spring evening air: "I'm co-old!"

Baker, a few years older and heavier of build, mumbled at him around the stem of his pipe, "Well, move closer to the fire then, Manning. But don't cry about it."

Manning looked up. "What's the matter with you?" he asked resentfully. "I didn't say anything."

Baker sucked noisily at his pipe, got a drink, and made a wry face.

"Imagination, maybe," he said doubtfully after a

moment. "I thought I heard someone say, 'I'm cold!'—almost crying."

"I was thinking," Manning replied indifferently; intimating that he hadn't said anything, hadn't heard anything, and didn't give a damn.

Baker grinned. "Thinking of Elaine?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. Peggy shouldn't have insisted. Elaine didn't want to go to town."

"And you didn't want her to go," Baker completed with a laugh. "It'll be different in a few years. Peggy was damned glad to get away from me for a while, and I was just as glad to have her go."

"Don't you . . . uh . . . love her?"

“Sure! Don’t be silly. But a change is good for anyone. She wouldn’t look at another man—I hope!”

“I’m so cold. Let me in.”

Both men tensed. The sound seemed to have come from outside.

“By God!” Baker exploded. “I didn’t imagine that! Did you hear it, too?”

Manning nodded. Baker laid his pipe on the table and went to the door. Hand on the latch, he waited, listening.

“I’m so-o-o-o—” There was the sound of something falling.

Baker snatched open the door. Then he knelt beside the crumpled figure on the doorstep.

“You little fool! Don’t you know enough to knock on a door?”

Smooth, silken blond hair had cascaded forward, hiding the face but exposing a satin-skinned neck. The unconscious girl wasn’t wearing a coat—just a light jacket over a colorful frock. Something about them struck Baker as familiar.

He grasped the soft shoulders and half lifted her, then brushed her hair from her face. The flesh was cold and puttylike beneath his hand, and the hair tangled his fingers as though alive. But he hardly noticed. His eyes were fastened on the quiet face.

“Peggy! Oh, God! They must have had an accident with the car!” He lifted the still form in his arms and started toward the bedroom. “Manning! You go down the mountain and find Elaine.”

But Manning was staring at the figure in his arms like a man hypnotized. “Pat—Patricia,” he mumbled. “You shouldn’t have followed.” He stepped forward with arms out, as though to take Baker’s burden.

“Manning! You fool! Can’t you hear? I’ll take care of Peggy. You go down and find Elaine!”

THE TELEPHONE started to ring, one or two short, sharp yelps and then a continuous strident alarm, as though the girl at central had grown tired and were resting on the switch.

Baker shouldered Manning aside. “Then answer that phone, and I’ll get Elaine myself after I’ve taken care of Peggy.”

He looked back as he went through the door and saw Manning moving toward the phone like an automaton. He kicked open the bedroom door and gently laid Peggy on the bed. Then hurried out to get the electric blanket. The coldness of her flesh

frightened him.

Manning was standing at the table, telephone receiver dangling in his fingers. His eyes were pale and frightened as he looked up at Baker’s entrance.

Baker started across the room toward the closet. Manning held out the telephone to him.

“Here,” he said tonelessly.

Baker brushed him aside again. His lips curled as he looked at the younger man. “Aren’t you a little curious about Elaine?”

Manning looked toward the door leading to the bedroom, then back at Baker. “Here,” he said again.

“Hang up!” Baker said. “I haven’t got time to talk to anyone now. Do you think it’s within your capabilities to phone for a doctor?”

“Here,” Manning insisted, offering the phone again. “It’s Peggy. She wants to talk to you.”

“Huh!” Baker ceased burrowing in the closet and faced Manning with questioning eyes.

“You’re crazy,” he said, but nevertheless he took the telephone from the younger man’s hand.

“Hello!” he barked.

“O-o-oh! What a nasty voice you have!”

“The better to—” he started from habit, then halted. “Is that you, Peggy?”

“Uh-hm-m-m,” she replied. “Who were you expecting?”

Baker ignored her question, though he couldn’t doubt her words. Her voice was too familiar. But Peggy was in the bedroom!

“Are you sure?” he asked inanely.

“Yes, certain!” Peggy snapped. “And you leave the liquor alone for the rest of the evening.” She stopped then, seeming to regret her words. “Listen, darling,” she continued, “Drew Pierce’s new picture, ‘Sands of Flame,’ is playing here tonight and Elaine and I want to see it. Do you mind?”

“Put it off! Will you, Peg? Somebody just wandered in and fainted on our doorstep.”

He waited for her to speak, but she hesitated doubtfully. He knew what she was thinking. He hurried on: “She looks just like—” He stopped short. He had intended to tell her that the stranger looked just like her, but under the circumstances he knew that to be inadvisable. “She looks just like a queen—a beauty!”

“And you want me to come home?” Peggy teased.

“Yes! This is straight goods, Peg. Come on and give me a hand. There’s something wrong. It’s only

pleasantly cool out tonight, yet she's as cold as an iceberg."

"Oh," Peggy said understandingly. Then she was serious. "I'll come, and bring a doctor."

"Thanks, baby. 'By."

He started to hang up, but a call from the phone made him put it back to his ear.

"George, darling," Peggy said.

"Yes?"

"If you're tight, I'll help him use a stomach pump on you."

"And I'll let you. It's a deal! Now, hurry!"

HE PUT the phone back in its cradle and turned to face Manning. Manning was gone! Baker listened and thought he heard a voice from the bedroom. He cursed and dug hurriedly in the closet until he located the electric blanket, then started back to the bedroom.

Manning was on his knees at the side of the bed. He held one of the strange girl's nearly frozen hands in his, pressing it to his lips.

"Patricia! Don't die! You must live! We have so much to live for—so much to do! We were silly to quarrel, and I was a beast to marry Elaine. I don't know why I did. I was mad! I wanted to hurt you!"

Baker stepped into the room. Manning looked up, flushed guiltily, but didn't leave the bedside.

"There's more to you, kid, than I thought," Baker grumbled, then smiled bitterly. "And to think I was giving you advice. Come on! Give me a hand!"

Together they wrapped the strange girl in the heating blanket, then watched. Gradually color came back to her face. Baker had to admit she was pretty; as pretty as Peggy had been on their wedding day. And so much like her that they might have been twin sisters.

"How is it you never mentioned knowing a girl who looks so much like Peggy?" he asked.

Manning looked at him oddly. "What do you mean—so much like Peggy? Patricia doesn't look anything like your wife."

Baker stared at him. "One of us is nuts," he said at last, and the stare left no doubt as to who, in his opinion, was the one.

Manning shrugged, and his eyes went back to the girl as though drawn by a magnet. Baker looked, too. Her cheeks, counterparts of Peggy's, were flushing with returning life. The tightness had left the mouth and it appeared soft and inviting.

"It's going to be rough on Elaine," he said.

"Don't say anything," Manning pleaded. "I'm the one to tell her."

"O.K., but see that you do. Don't be a bigger heel than you are already."

It was as though Manning hadn't heard him. Baker stared at a spot a trifle to one side of the point of the younger man's chin. He considered how nice it would feel to hit that spot with a bunch of knuckles. It was a raw deal he was handing to a young kid like Elaine!

He turned abruptly on his heel and went out the door, growling, "I guess you can keep an eye on her until the girls and the doctor get here."

He went back to his seat in front of the fire and waited. He tried not to think. He listened. From the bedroom came Manning's pleading monotone. The damned young fool had no sense of shame! Baker gritted his teeth.

Then, for something to do, he cleaned and filled his pipe. Manning's pleas had ceased. The house was as silent as a mine, except for the crackling of the fire. He scratched a match to light his pipe.

A door creaked protestingly. Baker leaped to his feet and faced the direction from which the sound had come. Then the tenseness left his muscles.

THE STRANGER was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, smiling, holding onto the door which he had left open as though to support herself. Her smile was infectious. Baker smiled. He looked past her, into the bedroom, expecting to see Manning directly behind her. But he wasn't to be seen.

"You should stay in bed," he reproved. He felt that it was like scolding Peggy. "Where's Manning?"

The strange girl smiled and stepped into the hall. She pulled the door shut and it creaked protestingly again. She walked toward him slowly, glidingly—smiling.

"The poor boy was tired," she said with a queerness in her voice that Baker hesitated to label an accent. "He was so tired that he fell asleep on his knees at the side of the bed with my hand at his lips. Oh, what a nice fire—so warm!"

She tugged at one of the chairs to draw it closer. Baker stooped to help her. His hands touched hers, and he tensed. Her flesh was as cold as a reptile's.

He looked up, and into eyes that were identical with Peggy's. He shook his head and shoved the chair nearer the fire. It was too much for him.

He sat down again in the other chair and struck another match to light his pipe. He puffed contentedly, waiting to see what she would say. He wished he had the nerve to ask how much she cared for Manning—wished he could persuade her to throw him down hard—leave him for Elaine. Elaine—who had been almost pitifully happy for two months.

“You are a strange man,” the girl said at last.

“Yes,” Baker returned. “Yes,” she agreed with a dimpling smile. “The other—Manning—talks all the time. You talk not at all—just puff-puff-puff. And you look so comfortable.”

It seemed to Baker that she moved imperceptibly closer to the fire. He watched her through narrowed eyes. “You speak as though you don’t know Manning very well,” he sparred.

She ignored his remark and stared at his pipe. “You look so comfortable,” she repeated. “May I try it?”

“What? My pipe?”

She nodded, and Baker laughed.

“Anybody’d think you’d never seen a pipe before,” he chuckled.

She was silent, so silent that Baker felt that he must have hurt her feelings. He held out the pipe to her. “Here, take a puff if you want to. But look out—it’s strong.”

He had to lean toward her to give her the pipe. She took it with a smile, looked at it strangely, then placed the stem between her lips. She breathed deeply.

Baker grinned, expecting her to cough. But she blew the smoke from her throat with an expression of disgust and returned the pipe. He took it, staring at her, and it was a moment before he became aware that their hands were still in contact.

An aura of power seemed to emanate from her, surround him, sap his will. Anyway, what was the difference? It would be like making love to Peggy, this stranger was so much like her. And he knew from the blue eyes so near his that she was willing. He leaned forward—and seemed to catapult into a mist-filled pit.

Cold fingers of fog curled around him, searching for—life. And sucking away all his warmth. It seemed hours that he shivered and trembled, then a voice reached him.

“No. Not all—now! Come back!”

He lifted his head. He had fallen sideward over the arm of his chair. He shook his head to clear his

sight. He looked at the other chair. It was empty!

HE HEARD feet on the stairs and a moment later the door opened to admit Peggy, Elaine, and a wizened doctor. Baker lumbered to his feet, staggered to meet them. Peggy watched him critically, then slipped her jacket off and laid it over the back of a chair.

“All right, doctor,” she said, “the stomach pump.”

“Wait! Peggy, I haven’t been drinking.”

“I didn’t say you had. I just know you’re higher than a kite.”

“But she was here a minute ago,” Baker said. He cursed the thickness of his tongue and the dullness of his mind. He couldn’t seem to think.

Then he saw that they were staring past him. He turned. Peggy’s replica was standing in the hall, watching them.

“Drew Pierce,” Peggy breathed. “How did he get here?”

“Martha!” the doctor exclaimed. “Why didn’t you stay home?”

Elaine ran across the room and threw herself into the strange girl’s arms—kissed her. “It’s been six hours since I left you, Fred, but it seems like a century.”

“That’s her!” Baker shouted, thinking of the stomach pump. “That’s the patient.”

“Her?” repeated Peggy. “Now I know you’re drunk. Calling Drew Pierce ‘she,’ or, rather, ‘her!’”

She looked at him disgustedly, then started toward the hall, carefully going aside for Elaine and the strange girl. “It’s a neat trick, Elaine. I never knew you had the nerve. Get ready Mr. Pierce. I’ll be back in a moment like a flash.”

She opened the bedroom door. The hinges squealed, then she screamed.

“George! George! Is he dead?”

Baker staggered toward her. He put his arm around her shoulder and guided her back into the hall. The doctor kneeled beside the sprawled body on the floor.

Baker halted at the door of another bedroom and looked back to see Elaine huddling fearfully in the arms of the stranger. The stranger was walking slowly, almost gliding, toward the door of the room where the body lay. He waited to see what would happen.

The strange smile was still curving the unknown’s lips. And there was no change when she

looked into the room and saw the wizened doctor working over Manning.

But Elaine looked, started violently. She looked up into the face of the stranger, peered closely as though searching for something, then pressed closer.

Baker turned away and helped Peggy into the extra bedroom.

WHEN they were inside, Peggy's hands gripped the lapels of his coat. "George," she whispered hoarsely, "did you kill him?"

He stared at her.

"Tell me! Tell me!" she insisted, still in a low voice and trying to shake him. "Did you kill Fred? Quick! Maybe we can get away! We'll rip out the phones and disable all the cars but ours. Maybe we could make it to an airport and get out of the country."

His lips twitched as he held her away from him. "Listen, baby! I didn't kill anybody. I think your 'Drew Pierce' did! But don't you say a damned thing. There's something queer about 'him,' or 'her,' and they might pin it on me. You keep quiet, see?"

Peggy was quieter and looking at him with penetrating eyes. Then she said: "You needn't be afraid to tell me, if you did. I hated the dirty little stinker. I knew Patricia and why he married Elaine."

"Does Elaine know?"

"Certainly. 'Friends' saw to it that she found out. But she didn't care."

Baker hesitated. It was as though he were afraid to ask a question, but at last he forced it out: "What kind of a looking person was she?"

"Pretty—red hair, very fair skin with just enough freckles on her nose to make her pert. Oh, *she* was all right! And she had sense enough to see that Fred was a heel."

She stopped speaking and stared at Baker.

"What's the matter, George? You look sick!"

"I am! God! I wonder what it is."

"Wonder what what is?"

"That . . . that thing! To you it looks like Drew Pierce, the actor; to me it looks like you; to Elaine it is Fred; and the doctor thinks it is someone by the name of Martha."

"George! Haven't you been drinking?" There was an hysterical note in Peggy's voice as though she hoped he would say "Yes."

"No! I haven't had a drop since three o'clock this afternoon."

She believed; she had to. There was no reason for him to lie, and she knew he hadn't. Something very like an unconscious whimper came from deep within her throat.

Baker looked down at her. Her rouge showed like two bloody spots on her bloodless cheeks. There was a whiteness around her mouth that was only accented by the vividness of her lips. He drew her closer.

"Let's get out of here," she begged. "Let's go back to town."

"We can't, honey," he said, and kissed her. "That thing, whatever it is, is deadly. It killed Manning!"

"What do we care?" she demanded. "He was a dirty little rat. It served him right!"

"Peggy! He's dead!"

"What difference does that make? It doesn't make him a better man. I hope he roasts in hell!"

"Peggy! You're hysterical! You need rest."

"I do not! I want to leave here!"

He forced her toward the bed. "You lie down and rest for a while. I'll figure out some way to fix Peggy-Pierce-Fred-Martha, and then we'll leave."

She fought him, silently, determinedly. But in the end his superior strength prevailed. She was on the bed. He held her hands so she couldn't scratch. In a moment she ceased struggling and lay still, glaring up at him.

"Listen, baby," he pleaded. "We can't let that thing loose on the world. It isn't human! I know it—feel it!"

He waited, searching her face to see if he had made any impression. Her lips trembled and she caught the lower one between her white teeth. Her eyes filled with tears. She turned her head away.

"I want to go away."

He watched her. He knew the depths of her fear. Only the memory of those cold, searching mists made him resolve to stay and kill the thing. But that was no reason why Peggy should have to stay!

"The doctor will be going back before long. You can go with him."

"I want you to come."

"I have to stay," he burst out.

"I won't go unless you do."

He released her hands and stood up. "We'll see," he said. "Anyway, you must rest for a while."

She said nothing as he went out the door and

closed it silently behind him. Then he stopped short. Peggy was standing in the hall.

IT TOOK a moment for him to realize that he wasn't seeing Peggy, but the stranger. Then he smiled bitterly and let his hand fall from the doorknob. The stranger smiled, too. And moved toward him.

It pressed close to his side and attempted to lift his arm over its shoulders. He shuddered and pushed it away. It staggered across the hall and brought up against the wall with a thump, and regarded him with sorrowful eyes.

Baker felt conscience-stricken. That bump must have hurt. The eyes were still on him, gentle and reproachful. He went to its side and helped it to its feet. Together they started down the hall toward the living room. His arm was around the stranger.

They came to the door of the room he had occupied with Peggy before the stranger had come, the room to which he had carried the stranger and in which it had killed Manning. He looked inside. Manning's body was gone. There was nothing unusual about its being gone; the doctor had probably moved it. But the fact seemed for a moment to thrust back the mists that were surrounding his mind.

With sudden determination he shoved the stranger from him and into the empty room. Then he slammed the door shut and tried to lock it. Futilely he cursed the maker of the lock. There was no key! It could only be locked from the inside!

He held the door tight while the stranger wailed, "Let me out! Please!"

After a moment he wondered why the thing didn't try the lock, try to pull the door open. It never touched the door; it only pleaded to be freed.

He released the doorknob and stepped back, waiting. Still the stranger didn't open the door. Baker grinned. Was it possible that it didn't know anything about doors; had never seen one before? Not if it were a creature of this Earth, he decided. But was there any proof, or even indication, that the stranger was of this planet? Might it not be a wanderer from some other hellish sphere?

He shivered and hurried to the living room, through it to the library, and opened the table drawer. A small-caliber automatic lay atop some papers. He took it out, checked to see that it was loaded, then shoved it into his pocket.

When he went back to the living room the

doctor had returned and was bending over a body on the floor near the fireplace that he hadn't noticed when he had passed through the room a moment ago. The doctor heard him and looked up. His wrinkled face and scrawny neck seemed to personify disapproval.

"See here!" he commanded. "What's going on here? I no sooner get one stiff into the car than I come back and find another one waiting for me. Why?"

He scrambled to his feet and stalked over to Baker like a bantam rooster. Baker tried to go around him, but the little dried-up fellow quickly blocked him. Baker looked down into the wizened doctor's eyes.

"Think it over for a while," he invited. "Maybe you'll come to the conclusion that they died."

"I think they were poisoned, and in my capacity as coroner I intend to hold post mortems. I'm gonna warn the sheriff to keep an eye on you to see that you don't try to pull a sneak."

"O.K., go to it," Baker agreed. "But if you'll wait a while, we'll go to town with you."

The little doctor peered at him intently, then turned away to maneuver the additional body out to his car. It was characteristic of his insolent independence that he asked no help of anyone.

BAKER watched him lift Elaine in his skinny arms and go out the door. Then his hand closed over the pistol in his pocket. He started forward again, then halted when Peggy came to meet him.

She was quieter, more self-composed. She smiled up at him wanly.

"Well?" she asked.

He pulled the pistol from his pocket. She looked at it curiously. He waited for her to speak, but she said nothing.

"That ought to take care of it," he offered grimly.

She hesitated, still staring at the pistol. "But it's so small," she objected at last.

"It'll blow her insides right out her back. That is, if it has any insides," he amended doubtfully. "We've never seen it as it really is, and I'm glad we haven't. We see only what we want to see—our ideal!" Then he grinned. "And you don't see me, do you? I ought to take you to court for that. It's incompatibility. Any judge would agree."

He waited for the answering smile he was trying to arouse, but none came.

“But, don’t you think you ought to make sure?” she asked, seriously. “If you don’t kill her, she’ll follow us. Why don’t you use fire? Fire is clean, and hot.”

He considered. “By God, Peggy! That’s a good idea! There are some five-gallon tins of gasoline in the garage. I’ll get one. You keep an eye on that cocky little doctor while I go out the side door and bring one back.”

He shoved the gun back into his pocket and ran to the garage. Then returned at a slower pace with a five-gallon can of the flammable fluid under his arm. At the door he halted, listening. He could hear nothing, so he went in.

Peggy was at the front window, watching the doctor.

“O.K.?” he asked.

She nodded and stayed at the window while he went to the kitchen for a can opener. It took a few minutes to cut the top away and expose the liquid. He looked up, anxious about the doctor.

Peggy was looking at him, and she nodded reassuringly. He looked back at the gasoline and at his arms where it had slopped.

“Peggy!” he called. “You’ll have to help. Do you think you can?”

She came to him immediately, and he felt a surge of admiration for her courage. Then he outlined his plan:

“I can’t touch it off because I got it all over me. I’ll carry it to the door and set it on the floor. You carry a lighted candle and stay a couple of feet away from me. I’ll swing the door open and take a couple of shots at it for luck, then I’ll kick the gasoline over so it’ll go into the room, and jump back out of the way. Then you throw the candle into the room to touch it off.”

“All right,” Peggy said, and Baker admired her calm determination.

HE LIFTED the can and started down the hall. Again the mists were swirling around him. The stranger must realize her peril and was trying to kill him before he could injure her. He staggered and the can of gasoline almost slipped from his hands.

It splashed over his clothes.

Then he straightened and grasped the can tighter. He had to! He must! That horrible thing must not be turned loose on the world.

He set the can down in front of the door and put his left hand on the knob. In his right he held the pistol. He hoped that the thing hadn’t discovered how to open doors. If it had—well, their scheme was wrecked.

He twisted the knob and opened the door, silently. He looked in. It was on the bed. He flung the door open—fired two shots at it.

And he hit it, he knew. For it reared upward in the bed, arched its body stiffly with pain.

Baker leaped back out of the way and the candle flew through the doorway and into the room. There was an explosive puff, then the room was a mass of flames. One scream came from the room and froze him with its anguish.

Then he and Peggy were stumbling down the hall and out of the house. The doctor had just finished his task and was coming toward the door. When he saw them he halted and turned back. Baker knew that he hadn’t heard the shots and was glad that the pistol was of small caliber.

Baker stood at the side of the car, looking back at the house. Flames were beginning to flicker at the windows. He was eager to get going.

“Come on, come on. Let’s go!” he said impatiently.

“Keep your shirt on,” the wizened doctor advised. “Is your wife staying here? Here, Martha, you sit in the middle. It will be warmer.” He slapped the seat beside him.

Baker stared as Peggy got in.

“That will be nice,” she said. “Warmer! And I’ve been so cold.”

The pistol was still in Baker’s pocket. He wanted to snatch it out and shoot—he willed himself to. But he climbed meekly into the car and sat down. He was enthralled by the stranger!

His face was serene—expressionless. But inside was a boiling mess of fear, hate, and grief. He knew now that he had been deluded into opening the wrong door.