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GASLIGHT

I, the Vampire

By Henry Kuttner

WEIRD TALES, FEBRUARY 1937

yesterday, if you had sunk that knife into my heart, she would be free now." He glanced at the windows again. "The sun will rise soon."

Then he went quickly to Jean's side. He looked down at her for a moment.

"She is very beautiful," he murmured. "Too beautiful for hell."

The Chevalier swung about, went toward the door. As he passed me he threw something carelessly on the table, something that tinkled as it fell. In the portal he paused, and a little smile twisted the scarlet lips. I remembered him thus, framed against the black background of the doorway, his sleek blond head erect and unafraid. He lifted his arm in a gesture that should have been theatrical, but, somehow, wasn't.

"And so farewell. I who am about to die——"

He did not finish. In the faint grayness of dawn I saw him striding away, heard his footsteps on the stairs, receding and faint—heard a muffled clang as of a great door closing. The paralysis had left me. I was trembling a little, for I realized what I must do soon. But I knew I would not fail.

I glanced down at the table. Even before I saw what lay beside the knife, I knew what would be there. A silver key . . .

■ ■ ■

I, THE VAMPIRE

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Cover: The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (El sueno de la razon produce monstruos), from The Caprices (Los Caprichos), plate 43, Goya (Francisco de Goya y Lucientes), 1799, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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"Through the ages I have come, since first I fell victim to another vampire—for thus is the evil spread. Deathless and not alive, bringing fear and sorrow always, knowing the bitter agony of Tantalus, I have gone down through the weary centuries. I have known Richard and Henry and Elizabeth of England, and ever have I brought terror and destruction in the night, for I am an alien thing. I am the undead."

The quiet voice went on, holding me motionless in its weird spell.

"I, the vampire. I, the accursed, the shining evil, *negotium perambulans in tenebris* . . . but I was not always thus. Long ago in Thurn, before the shadow fell upon me, I loved a girl—Sonya. But the vampire visited me, and I sickened and died—and awoke. Then I arose.

"It is the curse of the undead to prey upon those they love. I visited Sonya. I made her my own. She, too, died, and for a brief while we walked the earth together, neither alive nor dead. But that was not Sonya. It was her body, yes, but I had not loved her body alone. I realized too late that I had destroyed her utterly.

"One day they opened her grave, and the priest drove a stake through her heart, and gave her rest. Me they could not find, for my coffin was hidden too well. I put love behind me then, knowing that there was none for such as I.

"Hope came to me when I found—Jean. Hundreds of years have passed since Sonya crumbled to dust, but I thought I had found her again. And—I took her. Nothing human could prevent me."

The Chevalier's eyelids sagged. He looked infinitely old.

"Nothing human. Yet in the end I found that I could not condemn her to the hell that is mine. I thought I had forgotten love. But, long and long ago, I loved Sonya. And, because of her, and because I know that I would only destroy, as I did once before, I shall not work my will on this girl."

I turned to watch the still figure on the couch. The Chevalier followed my gaze and nodded slowly.

"Yes, she bears the stigmata. She will die, unless"—he met my gaze unflinchingly—"unless I die. If you had broken into the vault

1. The Chevalier Futaine

The party was dull. I had come too early. There was a preview that night at Grauman's Chinese, and few of the important guests would arrive until it was over. Indeed, Jack Hardy, ace director at Summit Pictures, where I worked as assistant director, hadn't arrived—yet—and he was the host. But Hardy had never been noted for punctuality.

I went out on the porch and leaned against a pillar, sipping a cocktail and looking down at the lights of Hollywood. Hardy's place was on the summit of a hill overlooking the film capital, near Falcon Lair, Valentino's famous turreted castle. I shivered a little. Fog was sweeping in from Santa Monica, blotting out the lights to the west.

Jean Hubbard, who was an ingenue at Summit, came up beside me and took the glass out of my hand.

"Hello, Mart," she said, sipping the liquor. "Where've you been?"

"Down with the *Murder Desert* troupe, on location in the Mojave," I said. "Miss me, honey?"

I drew her close. She smiled up at me, her tilted eyebrows lending a touch of diablerie to the tanned, lovely face. I was going to marry Jean, but I wasn't sure just when.

"Missed you lots," she said, and held up her lips. I responded.

After a moment I said, "What's this about the vampire man?"

She chuckled. "Oh, the Chevalier Futaine. Didn't you read Lolly Parsons' write-up in *Script*? Jack Hardy picked him up last month in Europe. Silly rot. But it's good publicity."

"Three cheers for publicity," I said. "Look what it did for *Birth of a Nation*. But where does the vampire angle come in?"

"Mystery man. Nobody can take a picture of him, scarcely anybody can see him. Weird tales are told about his former life in Paris. Going to play in Jack's *Red Thirst*. The kind of build-up Universal gave Karloff for *Frankenstein*. The Chevalier Futaine"—she rolled out the words with amused relish—"is probably a singing waiter from a Paris café. I haven't seen him—but the deuce with

him, anyway. Mart, I want you to do something for me. For Deming."

"Hess Deming?" I raised my eyebrows in astonishment. Hess Deming, Summit's biggest box-office star, whose wife, Sandra Colter, had died two days before. She, too, had been an actress, although never the great star her husband was. Hess loved her, I knew—and now I guessed what the trouble was. I said, "I noticed he was a bit wobbly."

"He'll kill himself," Jean said, looking worried. "I—I feel responsible for him somehow, Mart. After all, he gave me my start at Summit. And he's due for the D. T's any time now."

"Well, I'll do what I can," I told her. "But that isn't a great deal. After all, getting tight is probably the best thing he could do. I know if I lost you, Jean——"

I stopped. I didn't like to think of it.

Jean nodded. "See what you can do for him, anyway. Losing Sandra that way was—pretty terrible."

"What way?" I asked. "I've been away, remember. I read something about it, but——"

"She just died," Jean said. "Pernicious anemia, they said. But Hess told me the doctor really didn't know what it was. She just seemed to grow weaker and weaker until—she passed away."

I nodded, gave Jean a hasty kiss, and went back into the house. I had just seen Hess Deming walk past, a glass in his hand.

* * *

He turned as I tapped his shoulder. "Oh, Mart," he said, his voice just a bit fuzzy. He could hold his liquor, but I could tell by his bloodshot eyes that he was almost at the end of his rope. He was a handsome devil, all right, well-built, strong-featured, with level gray eyes and a broad mouth that was usually smiling. It wasn't smiling now. It was slack, and his face was bedewed with perspiration.

"You know about Sandra?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm sorry, Hess."

* * *

The night dragged on. Futile struggles had convinced me that it was useless to attempt escape—I could not even force a whisper through my lips. More than once I felt myself on the verge of madness—thinking of Jean, and remembering Futaine's ominous words. Eventually agony brought its own surcease, and I fell into a kind of coma, lasting for how long I could not guess. Many hours had passed, I knew, before I heard footsteps coming toward my prison.

Jean moved into my range of vision. I searched her face with my eyes, seeking for some mark of a dreadful metamorphosis. I could find none. Her beauty was unmarred, save for the terrible little wounds on her throat. She went to a couch and quietly lay down. Her eyes closed.

The Chevalier came past me and went to Jean's side. He stood looking down at her. I have mentioned before the incongruous youthfulness of his face. That was gone now. He looked old—old beyond imagination.

At last he shrugged and turned to me. His fingers brushed my lips again, and I found that I could speak. Life flooded back into my veins, bringing lancing twinges of pain. I moved an arm experimentally. The paralysis was leaving me.

The Chevalier said, "She is still—clean. I could not do it."

Amazement flooded me. My eyes widened in disbelief.

Futaine smiled wryly. "It is quite true. I could have made her as myself—undead. But at the last moment I forbade her." He looked toward the windows. "It will be dawn soon."

I glanced at the knife on the table beside me. The Chevalier put out a hand and drew it away.

"Wait," he said. "There is something I must tell you, Mart Prescott. You say that you know who and what I am."

I nodded.

"Yet you cannot know," he went on. "Something you have learned, and something you have guessed, but you can never know me. You are human, and I am—the undead.

Futaine led the way upstairs. It was not yet dark, although the sun had gone down. I followed him into a room, and at his gesture dropped into a chair. At my side was a small table. The Chevalier touched my arm gently, and something like a mild electric shock went through me. The knife dropped from my fingers, clattering to the table.

Jean was standing rigidly near by, her eyes dull and expressionless. Futaine moved to her side, put an arm about her waist. My mouth felt as though it were filled with mud, but somehow I managed to croak out articulate words.

"Damn you, Futaine! Leave her alone!"

He released her, and came toward me, his face dark with anger.

"You fool, I could kill you now, very easily. I could make you go down to the busiest corner of Hollywood and slit your throat with that knife. I have the power. You have found out much, apparently. Then you know—my power."

"Yes," I muttered thickly. "I know that. You devil—Jean is mine!"

The face of a beast looked into mine. He snarled, "She is not yours. Nor is she—*Jean*. She is Sonya!"

I remembered what Futaine had murmured when he had first seen Jean. He read the question in my eyes.

"I knew a girl like that once, very long ago. That was Sonya. They killed her—put a stake through her heart, long ago in Thurn. Now that I've found this girl, who might be a reincarnation of Sonya—they are so alike—I shall not give her up. Nor can anyone force me."

"You've made her a devil like yourself," I said through half-paralyzed lips. "I'd rather kill her——"

Futaine turned to watch Jean. "Not yet," he said softly. "She is mine—yes. She bears the stigmata. But she is still—alive. She will not become—*wampyr*—until she has died, or until she has tasted the red milk. She shall do that tonight."

I cursed him bitterly, foully. He touched my lips, and I could utter no sound. Then they left me—Jean and her master. I heard a door close quietly.

He drank deeply from the glass, wiped his mouth with a grimace of distaste.

"I'm drunk, Mart," he confided. "I had to get drunk. It was awful—those last few days. I've got to burn her up."

I didn't say anything.

"Burn her up. Oh, my God, Mart—that beautiful body of hers, crumbling to dust—and I've got to watch it! She made me promise I'd watch to make sure they burned her."

I said, "Cremation's a clean ending, Hess. And Sandra was a clean girl, and a damned good actress."

He put his flushed face close to mine. "Yeah—but I've got to burn her up. It'll kill me, Mart. Oh, God!" He put the empty glass down on a table and looked around dazedly.

I was wondering why Sandra had insisted on cremation. She'd given an interview once in which she stressed her dread of fire. Most write-ups of stars are applesauce, but I happened to know that Sandra did dread fire. Once, on the set, I'd seen her go into hysterics when her leading man lit his pipe too near her face.

"Excuse me, Mart," Hess said. "I've got to get another drink."

"Wait a minute," I said, holding him. "You want to watch yourself, Hess. You've had too much already."

"It still hurts," he said. "Just a little more and maybe it won't hurt so much." But he didn't pull away. Instead he stared at me with the dullness of intoxication in his eyes. "Clean," he said presently. "She said that too, Mart. She said burning was a clean death. But, God, that beautiful white body of hers—I can't stand it, Mart! I'm going crazy, I think. Get me a drink, like a good fellow."

I said, "Wait here, Hess. I'll get you one." I didn't add that it would be watered—considerably.

He sank down in a chair, mumbling thanks. As I went off I felt sick. I'd seen too many actors going on the rocks to mistake Hess's symptoms. I knew that his box-office days were over. There would be longer and longer waits between pictures, and then personal appearances, and finally Poverty Row and serials. And in the end maybe a man found dead in a cheap hall bedroom on Main Street, with the gas on.

* * *

There was a crowd around the bar. Somebody said, "Here's Mart. Hey, come over and meet the vampire."

Then I got a shock. I saw Jack Hardy, my host, the director with whom I'd worked on many a hit. He looked like a corpse. And I'd seen him looking plenty bad before. A man with a hangover, or a marijuana jag, isn't a pretty sight, but I'd never seen Hardy like this. He looked as though he was keeping going on his nerve alone. There was no blood in the man.

I'd last seen him as a stocky, ruddy blond, who looked like nothing so much as a wrestler, with his huge biceps, his ugly, good-natured face, and his bristling crop of yellow hair. Now he looked like a skeleton, with skin hanging loosely on the big frame. His face was a network of sagging wrinkles. Pouches bagged beneath his eyes, and those eyes were dull and glazed. About his neck a black silk scarf was knotted tightly.

"Good God, Jack!" I exclaimed. "What have you been doing to yourself?"

He looked away quickly. "Nothing," he said bruskly. "I'm all right. I want you to meet the Chevalier Futaine—this is Mart Prescott."

"Pierre," a voice said. "Hollywood is no place for titles. Mart Prescott—the pleasure is mine."

I faced the Chevalier Pierre Futaine.

We shook hands. My first impression was of icy cold, and a slick kind of dryness—and I let go of his hand too quickly to be polite. He smiled at me.

A charming man, the Chevalier. Or so he seemed. Slender, below medium height, his bland, round face seemed incongruously youthful. Blond hair was plastered close to his scalp. I saw that his cheeks were rouged—very deftly, but I know something about make-up. And under the rouge I read a curious, deathly pallor that would have made him a marked man had he not disguised it. Some disease, perhaps, had blanched his skin—but his lips were not artificially reddened. And they were as crimson as blood.

There was a little crimson stain on the white linen where his lips had brushed.

4. I, the Vampire

Jean walked past me as though I didn't exist. But the Chevalier Futaine paused, his eyebrows lifted. His black eyes pierced through me.

The handle of the knife was hot in my hand. I moved aside to block Futaine's way. Behind me came a rustle of silk, and from the corner of my eye I saw Jean pause hesitatingly.

The Chevalier eyed me, toying negligently with his handkerchief. "Mart," he said slowly. "Mart Prescott." His eyes flickered toward the knife, and a little smile touched his lips.

I said, "You know why I'm here, don't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I—heard you. I was not disturbed. Only one thing can open this door."

From his pocket he drew a key, shining with a dull silver sheen.

"Only this," he finished, replacing it. "Your knife is useless, Mart Prescott."

"Maybe," I said, edging forward very slightly. "What have you done to Jean?"

A curious expression, almost of pain, flashed into his eyes. "She is mine," he shot out half angrily. "You can do nothing, for——"

I sprang then, or, at least, I tried to. The blade of the knife sheared down, straight for Futaine's white shirtfront. It was arrested in midair. Yet he had not moved. His eyes had bored into mine, suddenly, terribly, and it seemed as though a wave of fearful energy had blasted out at me—paralyzing me, rendering me helpless. I stood rigid. Veins throbbed in my temples as I tried to move—to bring down the knife. It was useless. I stood as immovable as a statue.

The Chevalier brushed past me.

"Follow," he said almost casually, and like an automaton I swung about, began to move along the passage. What hellish hypnotic power was this that held me helpless?

face. Trepidation assailed me as I watched.

The flashlight he had placed beside him grew dim. He inserted another battery, got out unfamiliar-looking apparatus. He buckled on dark goggles, and handed me a pair. A blue, intensely brilliant flame began to play on the door.

It was useless. The torch was discarded after a time, and Ferguson returned to his tools. He was using a stethoscope, taking infinite pains in the delicate movements of his hands.

It was fascinating to watch him. But all the time I realized that the night was coming, that presently the sun would go down, and that the life of the vampire lasts from sunset to sunrise.

At last Ferguson gave up. "I can't do it," he told me, panting as though from a hard race. "And if I can't, nobody can. Even Houdini couldn't have broken this lock. The only thing that'll open it is the key."

"All right, Axel," I said dully. "Here's your money."

He hesitated, watching me. "You going to stay here, Mr. Prescott?"

"Yeah," I said. "You can find your way out. I'll—wait awhile."

"Well, I'll leave the light with you," he said. "You can let me have it sometime, eh?"

He waited, and, as I made no answer, he departed, shaking his head.

Then utter silence closed around me. I took the knife out of my coat, tested its edge against my thumb, and settled back to wait.

Less than half an hour later the steel door began to swing open. I stood up. Through the widening crack I saw a bare, steel-lined chamber, empty save for a long, black object that rested on the floor. It was a coffin.

The door was wide. Into view moved a white, slender figure—Jean, clad in a diaphanous, silken robe. Her eyes were wide, fixed and staring. She looked like a sleep-walker.

A man followed her—a man wearing impeccable evening clothes. Not a hair was out of place on his sleek blond head, and he was touching his lips delicately with a handkerchief as he came out of the vault.

He was clean-shaved, wore impeccable evening clothes, and his eyes were black pools of ink.

"Glad to know you," I said. "You're the vampire, eh?"

He smiled. "So they tell me. But we all serve the dark god of publicity, eh, Mr. Prescott? Or—is it Mart?"

"It's Mart," I said, still staring at him. I saw his eyes go past me, and an extraordinary expression appeared on his face—an expression of amazement, disbelief. Swiftly it was gone.

I turned. Jean was approaching, was at my side as I moved. She said, "Is this the Chevalier?"

Pierre Futaine was staring at her, his lips parted a little. Almost inaudibly he murmured, "Sonya." And then, on a note of interrogation, "Sonya?"

I introduced the two. Jean said, "You see, my name isn't Sonya."

The Chevalier shook his head, an odd look in his black eyes.

"I once knew a girl like you," he said softly. "Very much like you. It is strange."

"Will you excuse me?" I broke in. Jack Hardy was leaving the bar. Quickly I followed him.

I touched his shoulder as he went out the French windows. He jerked out a startled oath, turned a white death-mask of a face to me.

"Damn you, Mart," he snarled. "Keep your hands to yourself."

I put my hands on his shoulders and swung him around.

"What the devil has happened to you?" I asked. "Listen, Jack, you can't bluff me or lie to me. You know that. I've straightened you out enough times in the past, and I can do it again. Let me in on it."

His ruined face softened. He reached up and took away my hands. His own were ice-cold, like the hands of the Chevalier Futaine.

"No," he said. "No use, Mart. There's nothing you can do. I'm all right, really. Just—overstrain. I had too good a time in Paris."

I was up against a blank wall. Suddenly, without volition, a thought popped into my mind and out of my mouth before I knew it.

"What's the matter with your neck?" I asked abruptly.

He didn't answer. He just frowned and shook his head.

"I've a throat infection," he told me. "Caught it on the steamer."

His hand went up and touched the black scarf.

There was a croaking, harsh sound from behind us—a sound that didn't seem quite human. I turned. It was Hess Deming. He was swaying in the portal, his eyes glaring and bloodshot, a little trickle of saliva running down his chin.

He said in a dead, expressionless voice that was somehow dreadful, "Sandra died of a throat infection, Hardy."

Jack didn't answer. He stumbled back a step. Hess went on dully.

"She got all white and died. And the doctor didn't know what it was, although the death certificate said anemia. Did you bring back some filthy disease with you, Hardy? Because if you did I'm going to kill you."

"Wait a minute," I said. "A throat infection? I didn't know——"

"There was a wound in her throat—two little marks, close together. That couldn't have killed her, unless some loathsome disease——"

"You're crazy, Hess," I said. "You know you're drunk. Listen to me: Jack couldn't have had anything to do with—that."

Hess didn't look at me. He watched Jack Hardy out of his bloodshot eyes. He went on in that low, deadly monotone:

"Will you swear Mart's right, Hardy? Will you?"

Jack's lips were twisted by some inner agony. I said, "Go on, Jack. Tell him he's wrong."

Hardy burst out, "I haven't been near your wife! I haven't seen her since I got back. There's——"

"That's not the answer I want," Hess whispered. And he sprang for the other man—reeled forward, rather.

Hess was too drunk, and Jack too weak, for them to do each other any harm, but there was a nasty scuffle for a moment before I separated them. As I pulled them apart, Hess's hand clutched the scarf about Jack's neck, ripped it away.

And I saw the marks on Jack Hardy's throat. Two red, angry little pits, white-rimmed, just over the left jugular.

"Can you get me a butcher-knife?" I measured with my hands. "About so long? A sharp one?"

Accustomed to strange requests, he nodded. "Right away, Mr. Prescott."

As I followed him out, Hardy said weakly, "Mart."

I turned.

"Good luck," he said. The look on his wrecked face robbed the words of their pathos.

"Thanks," I forced myself to say. "I don't blame you, Jack, for what's happened. I—I'd have done the same."

I left him there, slumped on the couch, staring after me with eyes that had looked into hell.

* * *

It was past daylight when I drove out of Culver City, a long, razor-edged knife hidden securely inside my coat. And the day went past all too quickly. A telephone call told me that Jean had not yet returned home. It took me more than an hour to locate a certain man I wanted—a man who had worked for the studio before on certain delicate jobs. There was little about locks he did not know, as the police had sometimes ruefully admitted.

His name was Axel Ferguson, a bulky, good-natured Swede, whose thick fingers seemed more adapted to handling a shovel than the mechanisms of locks. Yet he was as expert as Houdini—indeed, he had at one time been a professional magician.

The front door of Futaine's isolated canyon home proved no bar to Ferguson's fingers and the tiny sliver of steel he used. The house, a modern two-story place, seemed deserted. But Hardy had said *below* the house.

We went down the cellar stairs and found ourselves in a concrete-lined passage that ran down at a slight angle for perhaps thirty feet. There the corridor ended in what seemed to be a blank wall of bluish steel. The glossy surface of the door was unbroken, save for a single keyhole.

Ferguson set to work. At first he hummed under his breath, but after a time he worked in silence. Sweat began to glisten on his

were really as beautiful as they seemed. His eyes were hungry as he listened to me, Mart.

"Then one night I had a fearful nightmare. A monstrous, black horror crept in through my window and attacked me—bit me in the throat, I dreamed, or thought I did. After that——

"I was in his power. He told me the truth. He made me his slave, and I could do nothing. His powers—are not human."

I licked dry lips. Hardy continued:

"He made me bring him here, introducing him as a new discovery to be starred in *Red Thirst*—I'd mentioned the picture to him, before I—knew. How he must have laughed at me! He made me serve him, keeping away photographers, making sure that there were no cameras, no mirrors near him. And for a reward—he let me live."

* * *

I knew I should feel contempt for Hardy, panderer to such a loathsome evil. But somehow I couldn't.

I said quietly, "What about Jean? Where does the Chevalier live?"

He told me. "But you can't do anything, Mart. There's a vault under the house, where he stays during the day. It can't be opened, except with a key he always keeps with him—a silver key. He had a door specially made, and then did something to it so that nothing can open it but that key. Even dynamite wouldn't do it, he told me."

I said, "Such things—can be killed."

"Not easily. Sandra Colter was a victim of his. After death she, too, became a vampire, sleeping by day and living only at night. The fire destroyed her, but there's no way to get into the vault under Futaine's house."

"I wasn't thinking of fire," I said. "A knife——"

"Through the heart," Hardy interrupted almost eagerly. "Yes—and decapitation. I've thought of it myself, but I can do nothing. I—am his slave, Mart."

I said nothing, but pressed the bell. Presently the proprietor appeared.

2. The Cremation of Sandra

It was the next day that Jean telephoned me.

"Mart," she said, "we're going to run over a scene for *Red Thirst* tonight at the studio—Stage 6. You've been assigned as assistant director on the pic, so you should be there. And—I had an idea Jack might not tell you. He's been—so odd lately."

"Thanks, honey," I said. "I'll be there. But I didn't know you were in the flicker."

"Neither did I, but there's been some wire-pulling. Somebody wanted me in it—the Chevalier, I think—and the big boss phoned me this morning and let me in on the secret. I don't feel up to it, though. Had a bad night."

"Sorry," I sympathized. "You were okay when I left you."

"I had a—nightmare," she said slowly. "It was rather frightful, Mart. It's funny, though, I can't remember what it was about. Well—you'll be there tonight?"

I said I would, but as it happened I was unable to keep my promise. Hess Deming telephoned me, asking if I'd come out to his Malibu place and drive him into town. He was too shaky to handle a car himself, he said, and Sandra's cremation was to take place that afternoon. I got out my roadster and sent it spinning west on Sunset. In twenty minutes I was at Deming's beach house.

The house-boy let me in, shaking his head gravely as he recognized me.

"Mist' Deming pretty bad," he told me. "All morning drinking gin straight——"

From upstairs Hess shouted, "That you, Mart? Okay—I'll be down right away. Come up here, Jim!"

The Japanese, with a meaning glance at me, pattered upstairs.

I wandered over to a table, examining the magazines upon it. A little breath of wind came through the half-open window, fluttering a scrap of paper. A word on it caught my eye, and I picked up the note. For that's what it was. It was addressed to Hess, and after one glance I had no compunction about scanning it.

"Hess dear," the message read. "I feel I'm going to die very soon. And I want you to do something for me. I've been out of my head, I know, saying things I didn't mean. Don't cremate me, Hess. Even though I were dead I'd feel the fire—I know it. Bury me in a vault in Forest Lawn—and don't embalm me. I shall be dead when you find this, but I know you'll do as I wish, dear. And, alive or dead, I'll always love you."

The note was signed by Sandra Colter, Hess's wife. This was odd. I wondered whether Hess had seen it yet.

There was a little hiss of indrawn breath from behind me. It was Jim, the house-boy. He said, "Mist' Prescott—I find that note last night. Mist' Hess not seen it. It Mis' Colter's writing."

He hesitated, and I read fear in his eyes—sheer, unashamed fear. He put a brown forefinger on the note.

"See that, Mist' Prescott?"

He was pointing to a smudge of ink that half obscured the signature. I said, "Well?"

"I do that, Mist' Prescott. When I pick up the note. The ink—not dry."

I stared at him. He turned hastily at the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Hess Deming was coming down, rather shakily.

I think it was then that I first realized the horrible truth. I didn't believe it, though—not then. It was too fantastic, too incredible; yet something of the truth must have crept into my mind, for there was no other explanation for what I did then.

Hess said, "What have you got there, Mart?"

"Nothing," I said quietly. I crumpled the note and thrust it into my pocket. "Nothing important, anyway. Ready to go?"

He nodded, and we went to the door. I caught a glimpse of Jim staring after us, an expression of—was it relief?—in his dark, wizened face.

* * *

The crematory was in Pasadena, and I left Hess there. I would have stayed with him, but he wouldn't have it. I knew he didn't want anyone to be watching him when Sandra's body was being in-

and a gleam of realization came into his sunken eyes.

"Prescott," he said, "can't you leave me alone?"

I leaned close to him, articulating carefully so he would be sure to understand me. "I know what the Chevalier Futaine is," I said.

And I waited for the dreadful, impossible confirmation, or for the words which would convince me that I was an insane fool.

Hardy looked at me dully. "How did you find out?" he whispered.

An icy shock went through me. Up to that moment I had not really believed, in spite of all the evidence. But now Hardy was confirming the suspicions which I had not let myself believe.

I didn't answer his question. Instead, I said, "Do you know about Hess?"

He nodded, and at sight of the agony in his face I almost pitied him. Then the thought of Jean steadied me.

"Do you know where he is now?" I asked.

"No. What are you talking about?" he flared suddenly. "Are you mad, Mart? Do you——"

"I'm not mad. But Hess Deming is."

He looked at me like a cowering, whipped dog.

I went on grimly: "Are you going to tell me the truth? How you got those marks on your throat? How you met this—creature? And where he's taken Jean?"

"Jean!" He looked genuinely startled. "Has he got—I didn't know that, Mart—I swear I didn't. You—you've been a good friend to me, and—and I'll tell you the truth—for your sake and Jean's—although now it may be too late——"

My involuntary movement made him glance at me quickly. Then he went on.

"I met him in Paris. I was out after new sensations—but I didn't expect anything like that. A Satanist club—devil-worshippers, they were. The ordinary stuff—cheap, furtive blasphemy. But it was there that I met—him.

"He can be a fascinating chap when he tries. He drew me out, made me tell him about Hollywood—about the women we have here. I bragged a little. He asked me about the stars, whether they

danced and wavered before my eyes. Over and over I was telling myself, "It can't be true! Such things can't happen!"

I didn't mean Sandra Colter's terrible resurrection during the cremation. That, alone, might be plausibly explained—catalepsy, perhaps. But taken in conjunction with certain other occurrences, it led to one definite conclusion—and it was a conclusion I dared not face.

What had poor Forrest said? That the Chevalier was taking Jean to the Cocoanut Grove? Well——

The taxi was still waiting. I got in.

"The Ambassador," I told the driver grimly. "Twenty bucks if you hit the green lights all the way."

3. The Black Coffin

All night I had been combing Hollywood—without success. Neither the Chevalier Futaine nor Jean had been to the Grove, I discovered. And no one knew the Chevalier's address. A telephone call to the studio, now ablaze with excitement over the Hess Deming disaster and the Forrest killing, netted me exactly nothing. I went the rounds of Hollywood night life vainly. The Trocadero, Sardi's, all three of the Brown Derbies, the smart, notorious clubs of the Sunset eighties—nowhere could I find my quarry. I telephoned Jack Hardy a dozen times, but got no answer. Finally, in a "private club" in Culver City, I met with my first stroke of good luck.

"Mr. Hardy's upstairs," the proprietor told me, looking anxious. "Nothing wrong, I hope, Mr. Prescott? I heard about Deming."

"Nothing," I said. "Take me up to him."

"He's sleeping it off," the man admitted. "Tried to drink the place dry, and I put him upstairs where he'd be safe."

"Not the first time, eh?" I said, with an assumption of lightness. "Well, bring up some coffee, will you? Black. I've got to—talk to him."

But it was half an hour before Hardy was in any shape to understand what I was saying. At last he sat up on the couch, blinking,

cinerated. And I knew it would be easier for him that way. I took a short cut through the Hollywood hills, and that's where the trouble started.

I broke an axle. Recent rains had gullied the road, and I barely saved the car from turning over. After that I had to hike miles to the nearest telephone, and then I wasted more time waiting for a taxi to pick me up. It was nearly eight o'clock when I arrived at the studio.

The gateman let me in, and I hurried to Stage 6. It was dark. Cursing under my breath, I turned away, and almost collided with a small figure. It was Forrest, one of the cameramen. He let out a curious squeal, and clutched my arm.

"That you, Mart? Listen, will you do me a favor? I want you to watch a print——"

"Haven't time," I said. "Seen Jean around here? I was to——"

"It's about that," Forrest said. He was a shriveled, monkey-faced little chap, but a mighty good cameraman. "They've gone—Jean and Hardy and the Chevalier. There's something funny about that guy."

"Think so? Well, I'll phone Jean. I'll look at your rushes tomorrow."

"She won't be home," he told me. "The Chevalier took her over to the Grove. Listen, Mart, you've *got* to watch this. Either I don't know how to handle a grinder any more, or that Frenchman is the damnedest thing I've ever shot. Come over to the theater, Mart—I've got the reel ready to run. Just developed the rough print myself."

"Oh, all right," I assented, and followed Forrest to the theater.

I found a seat in the dark little auditorium, and listened to Forrest moving about in the projection booth. He clicked on the amplifier and said, "Hardy didn't want any pictures taken—insisted on it, you know. But the boss told me to leave one of the automatic cameras going—not to bother with the sound—just to get an idea how the French guy would screen. Lucky it wasn't one of the old rattler cameras, or Hardy would have caught on. Here it comes, Mart!"

I heard a click as the amplifier was switched off. White light flared on the screen. It faded, gave place to a picture—the interior of Stage 6. The set was incongruous—a mid-Victorian parlor, with overstuffed plush chairs, gilt-edged paintings, even a particularly hideous what-not. Jack Hardy moved into the range of the camera. On the screen his face seemed to leap out at me like a death's-head, covered with sagging, wrinkled skin. Following him came Jean, wearing a tailored suit—no one dresses for rehearsals—and behind her——

I blinked, thinking that my eyes were tricking me. Something like a glowing fog—oval, tall as a man—was moving across the screen. You've seen the nimbus of light on the screen when a flashlight is turned directly on the camera? Well—it was like that, except that its source was not traceable. And, horribly, it moved forward at about the pace a man would walk.

The amplifier clicked again. Forrest said, "When I saw it on the negative I thought I was screwy, Mart. I saw the take—there wasn't any funny light there. Look——" The oval, glowing haze was motionless beside Jean, and she was looking directly at it, a smile on her lips. "Mart, when that was taken, Jean was looking right at the French guy!"

I said, somewhat hoarsely, "Hold it, Forrest. Right there."

The images slowed down, became motionless. Jean's left profile was toward the camera. I leaned forward, staring at something I had glimpsed on the girl's neck. It was scarcely visible save as a tiny, discolored mark on Jean's throat, above the jugular—but unmistakably the same wound I had seen on the throat of Jack Hardy the night before!

I heard the amplifier click off. Suddenly the screen showed blindingly white, and then went black.

I waited a moment, but there was no sound from the booth.

"Forrest," I called. "You okay?"

There was no sound. The faint whirring of the projector had died. I got up quickly and went to the back of the theater. There were two entrances to the booth, a door which opened on stairs leading down to the alley outside, and a hole in the floor reached

by means of a metal ladder. I went up this swiftly, an ominous apprehension mounting within me.

* * *

Forrest was still there. But he was no longer alive. He lay sprawled on his back, his wizened face staring up blindly, his head twisted at an impossible angle. It was quite apparent that his neck had been broken almost instantly.

I sent a hasty glance at the projector. The can of film was gone! And the door opening on the stairway was ajar a few inches.

I stepped out on the stairs, although I knew I would see no one. The white-lit, broad alley between Stages 6 and 4 was silent and empty.

The sound of running feet came to me, steadily growing louder. A man came racing into view. I recognized him as one of the publicity gang. I hailed him.

"Can't wait," he gasped, but slowed down nevertheless.

I said, "Have you seen anyone around here just now? The—Chevalier Futaine?"

He shook his head. "No, but——" His face was white as he looked up at me. "Hess Deming's gone crazy. I've got to contact the papers."

Ice gripped me. I raced down the stairs, clutched his arm.

"What do you mean?" I snapped. "Hess was all right when I left him. A bit tight, that's all."

His face was glistening with sweat. "It's awful—I'm not sure yet what happened. His wife—Sandra Colter—came to life while they were cremating her. They saw her through the window, you know—screaming and pounding at the glass while she was being burned alive. Hess got her out too late. He went stark, raving mad. Suspended animation, they say—I've got to get to a phone, Mr. Prescott!"

He tore himself away, sprinted in the direction of the administration buildings.

I put my hand in my pocket and pulled out a scrap of paper. It was the note I had found in Hess Deming's house. The words