



New Fiction from:

Paul Ryan O'Connor

Robert Walton

Ben Williams

Steven Mathes

Elisabeth Ring

Pulp Asylum

February 2025

PULP ASYLUM

Issue Five

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Pulp Asylum is created in Columbus, Ohio, by Billy Ramone.

Issue 5/February 2025

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Editor's Note: February News

'25 is starting out pretty good here at *chez* Billy. I've got a lot to be grateful for, so I thought I'd start the year off with some thank yous.

Thanks first and foremost to the **writers** whose work makes this place bang and hum. Not just the outstanding group in the February issue, but everyone who has contributed to the first five issues. Obviously enough, without your creativity and generosity, there wouldn't be anything going on here. I'd also like to thank **everyone** who has sent me work so far: even if your work has not been published here, all those submissions keep me reading and keep me interested, so I hope y'all keep them coming. I would also like to thank the **artists** who put forth the time and effort to submit artwork for issue five. Not many people came forward, but I appreciated seeing the work of those who did. And lastly, a special thanks to my friend **Jean Wills** who came forward somewhat unexpectedly and provided the illustrations for the front cover and the contents page/back cover. I'm always happy for the help.

Jean has agreed to stick around for a while, so for the moment I am not looking for additional artwork. As for fiction, anyone interested in submitting for future issues please check out the guidelines, as there have been a few small updates there.

In issue five, I've been trying to cast a wide net here in terms of genre, and I hope that you appreciate the mix of stories. In addition to some fantasy and science fiction this time around, we have some crime, some strangeness, and a bit horror, too. As a fan of pre-pulp-era pulp, I was especially pleased to serve up some Mary E. Wilkins Freeman this time around, and I'm looking forward to digging back even further into the dark past in future issues.

I hope you enjoy this issue. See you again in April for #6

Keep rocking and rolling,

Billy

PS. Coming in April to the publications page, a true-crime rarity!

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AGUA FANTASMA

Paul Ryan O'Connor

Paul Ryan O'Connor is a frequent contributor to Ellery Queen Mystery Magazine, where his debut short story, "Teddy's Favorite Thing," was voted a 2023 Readers Choice Award and nominated for a Derringer by the Short Mystery Fiction Society. He has also been published by Mystery Magazine and Shotgun Honey. He is an active member of the Mystery Writers of America, and lives with his family and a borrowed dog in Carlsbad, California, where he perpetually re-writes his first novel. Visit him online at www.paulryanoconnor.com.

The guy with the jack-o'-lantern smile had more teeth than IQ points. But with the business end of his shotgun aimed at me, I was the dummy.

"Keep your hands where I can see 'em."

No problem with that. I didn't have a gun. It was the map I worried about.

"What's the idea, pointing that at me?"

"You're on my land," he growled. "That barbed wire you crossed didn't cut itself."

I considered the surrounding weed-dotted desert and wondered at anyone claiming it. Maybe he sublet from Satan.

"Turn around," the old man ordered, then pressed his shotgun against my spine. He patted me down like it was something he'd done before, and often. He ignored the map sticking from my pocket.

When I turned back he'd lowered his gun and was biting off a chunk of chewing tobacco. I'd earned the benefit of the doubt.

I didn't deserve it.

"You're gonna need a tow," he said, squatting in front of my '32 Ford. Water from my holed radiator drained onto the rocky trail.

He hooked a thumb toward his truck.

"Won't be free," he said.

I shrugged.

He cabled my car to his truck and we rode side-by-side in the cab, the shotgun in his lap, angled roughly my way. I gritted my teeth at every bump.

“Your registration said Los Angeles,” he said, then spit tobacco out his window and made it, mostly. “What brings you to Agua Fantasma?”

A Spanish treasure map to a river of gold beneath the Mojave desert, I thought, mumbling something about getting lost.

“Saw a shovel in your car,” he said. “Prospecting?”

I heard the smile in his voice.

Go ahead and laugh, you jack-o'-lantern. I had it coming.

I'd found the treasure map behind the endpaper of a rummage sale bible. Desperate from nine months without work – later we called that time the Great Depression, but I didn't see what was so great about it – I convinced myself it would be easy to go where X marked the spot and put a spade in the ground.

What a sucker.

Near sunset we crested a rise and bounced into a yard dotted with wrecked cars. The old man's lean-to was built from scavenged lumber, with coyote skulls on the walls. It was a good place to get murdered, but I relaxed when he introduced his wife, a mousy Mexican woman named Lucía. She regarded me with friendly eyes that signaled her husband often brought home strays.

The old man said he'd scrounge parts for my car from his wrecking yard, but it was too dark to start. Lucía set a little table and served beans and tea, whispering to me to save the bags for her crafts. More likely she wanted them to steep another dozen cups of tea. But times were tough and I was grateful for the meal.

Dinner was mostly silent aside from the old man complaining Roosevelt was packing the courts. But after dinner he brought out a bottle and we tied one on.

“You ever hear of the Silver Lake Cutoff?” the old man asked. “Highway was supposed to run through here, Los Angeles to Las Vegas, but then they built the cutoff.”

He belched and I smelled Lucía's beans.

“Broke my daddy’s heart,” the man said. “He never had any luck. First he bought this place, believing the Agua part of Agua Fantasma. Then he hung on figurin’ he could make a living from the highway. One thing leadin’ to another and none of it amountin’ to nothin’. That’s what he left me. No water, no highway, no nothin’.”

There was more grousing before he staggered off to bed. By the end I was drunk enough to feel a kinship with the guy. Two suckers, each dealt a bad hand.

I woke to the old man passing me an itemized repair bill. It even included Lucía’s beans. There was no credit for saving her tea bags, but there was a big number at the bottom.

“You don’t have it, do you?” he said.

I frowned, and shook my head.

“Give me what you have,” he grumbled.

I passed over a couple sad bills.

“I should call the sheriff,” the old man said. “But my missus likes you, so I’ll make you a deal instead.” He brought out a cardboard carton, packed with books. “You can even call it a partnership. For every soul you save, I’ll mail ya a dollar. Spread these around when you get back to the city.”

The carton was filled with old family bibles, like the one I’d found in that rummage sale. I didn’t need to open one to know the artfully-torn endpapers would conceal fake Spanish treasure maps pointing toward Agua Fantasma, aged by crafty dabs from Lucía’s leftover tea bags.

He stuck his hand out and gave me his jack-o’-lantern grin. I sighed, then shook on it. Lucía gave me a peck on the cheek before I loaded the box in my Ford. I watched the two of them in my mirror, waving goodbye as I pulled away.

It was a good swindle, luring suckers to the desert, then emptying their pockets. It was an old man’s revenge for the highway deal that wrecked his father’s fortune. I’d fallen for it and I was eager to stick it to the next guy. I laughed.

But by the time I was halfway home I thought it wasn’t so funny after all, getting a shotgun in my face and losing my last buck. Maybe it would go worse for the next guy, or worse for Lucía.

Maybe you can’t beat the cards you’re dealt, but you don’t have to dump them on another sucker. It’s got to stop someplace.

I burned the books in a ditch.

Back in my car, I looked in the rear-view mirror and counted my teeth. Thirty-two, wisdom teeth included, with no gaps.

Laps ahead of that jack-o'-lantern.

I smiled. A fella had to start someplace.

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ELSPETH'S DOWRY

Robert Walton

Robert Walton is a retired middle school teacher, rock climber and mountaineer with ascents in Yosemite and Pinnacles National Park. Walton is an experienced writer. His novel Dawn Drums won the 2014 New Mexico Book Awards Tony Hillerman Prize for best fiction. His "Joaquin's Gold", a collection of Joaquin Murrieta tales, was published on Amazon last year. Most recently, Quarry, a novella, was published by Alien Buddha Press.

"Bah!" Sheila the Hook slammed her pewter mug down on a battered tabletop stained by edibles, drinkables, and things that were neither. Cheap red wine splattered across a plate heaped with rubbery pieces of cheese and onto her drinking companion. "Can you kill a dragon, wizard?"

The wizard — one Ubbe Grimdark — flicked scarlet drops from his scraggly beard. "I can."

"So!" Mollified, Sheila looked at the puddle of spilled wine with some regret. "Tell me more." She quaffed her half-full cup.

"I'll show you." Ubbe produced a tiny spear with a silver blade.

Sheila guffawed, spraying wine across the table, again drenching the questionable cheese.

"The secret to killing dragons," Ubbe again mopped his beard, "is that you must do it from the inside out."

"I'll be glad . . ." chuckling like a large pot of boiling soup, Sheila poked him, "to watch you stroll into our dragon's mouth."

Ubbe carried on unruffled. "Once the dragon has swallowed it, my spear will enlarge to the size of tree."

"How will you get it inside him?"

Ubbe pursed his lips. "We need a fool to carry my magical spear talisman and then be ingested."

“A fool indeed!” Sheila frowned. “There are plenty of fools, but is there one who would be stupid enough to do that?”

“I know such a man.”

“Do you?”

“Come with me to The Unicorn’s Hoof.”

*

Sheila’s eyes wandered uneasily from mauve silk curtains draping entrances to private booths to the approaching waiter wearing pink tights and a burgundy cape. “This isn’t my kind of bar.”

Ubbe held up a dismissive finger. “We won’t be here long.”

“So where’s the fool?”

Ubbe inclined a shaggy eyebrow to his left. “There, by the fire.”

Sheila’s head swiveled casually and then froze in shock. Standing in a half circle of young women was a golden-haired man, the very image of Prince Valiant. He wore a blue silk tunic, white pantaloons, and scarlet slippers. Jeweled rings gleamed on his fingers and a gold chain hung from his collar.

“Him?”

“Viscount Aubergine, the Honorable Richard Hawk of Tewkesbury.”

“But he’s a noble!”

“They make the best fools of all.”

Sheila looked at the wizard. “How’s that?”

“Men like Aubergine believe they are too wonderful to do anything stupid. They’re also insatiably greedy. If we frame our proposal in the right way, he’ll happily march straight into the dragon’s mouth.”

“You’ve had dealings with him before?”

“You could say that,” Ubbe chuckled. “He was beginning to go bald. I enhanced him up top and he’s due a refresher treatment soon. Ah, he’s seen us!”

Aubergine gestured with his right hand, wiggling his fingers slightly, and the young women scattered like leaves on a wind. Smiling, he strode gracefully toward Ubbe and Sheila. “Ah! Herr Doctor Ubbe! Are you seeking me?”

Ubbe bowed obsequiously. “I am, my lord, though perhaps not for the reason you assume.”

“By all means tell me what you wish!” Aubergine’s smile grew wider and even brighter, prompting Sheila to wonder how many teeth a man could possibly possess.

“My wizardly expenses have grown of late. I find myself in need of funds to complete various important projects.”

Aubergine actually frowned. “You wish a loan?”

“No, no, no, dear sir!” Ubbe uttered a fruity chuckle. “I wish only to solicit your partnership in a mutually profitable venture.”

“I’m interested.” Aubergine’s smile returned and the sun shone again. “My lifestyle entails a great deal of overhead. I welcome additional funds — if no inconvenience is involved.”

“None at all!” Ubbe shook his head. “None — merely a day’s jaunt in the country.”

“To where?”

“Allow me to elaborate. You are aware that dragons live exceedingly long lives, are you not?” Aubergine nodded cautiously. “Of course.”

“Well, they often develop irksome maladies — scale rot, throat carbuncles, and the like — for which I have created a curative talisman.”

“Of a magical nature?”

“Of course. It’s miraculously effective in eliminating all dragonish ailments, but I have a delivery problem. Dealings between dragons and wizards have not always been amicable. I need a respected and highly placed person, one such as yourself, to complete the transaction.”

“What’s in it for me?”

“The talisman takes effect immediately, once delivered, but its effects are not long-lasting. For permanent relief, the beast must pay us for an enhancement.”

“How much?”

“Two farm wagons loaded with gold, one for me . . . ”

“And one for me.” Aubergine rubbed his dimpled chin thoughtfully. “Dragons are notoriously touchy. Some, especially the older ones, receive visitors less than hospitably — even noble beings such as I. Might I enquire which venerable dragon with whom you wish me to deal?”

“Certainly!” Ubbe lowered his eyes. “Glaurung the Great.”

Aubergine pursed his lips. “That would be Glaurung the Horrendous?”

Ubbe shrugged. “Some have so named him.”

“Hmmm.” Aubergine flicked a lock of golden hair off his forehead. “A wagon-load of treasure will not benefit me if I am but a cinder upon the floor of Glaurung’s lair.”

Sheila leaned forward and placed the needle-sharp tip of her hook on Aubergine’s adam’s apple. “No amount of gold will do you much good if don’t fall in with our plans, pretty boy.”

Half a dozen beefy bravos rose from tables nearby. The hiss of their blades sliding out of scabbards stopped all conversation in the tavern.

“Meet my personal guard.” Aubergine gazed mildly at Sheila. “I enjoy my life. Because I appear to be a fop and a fool does not mean that I am unaware of my chosen role’s vulnerabilities.”

Ubbe raised both hands. “Enough, Sheila! There is no need for bloodshed!”

“Indeed.” Aubergine pushed Sheila’s hook away from his throat. “I am not averse to a restructuring of your proposal.”

Sheila sat back. “So what’s your plan?”

“We need a virgin.”

“Good idea!” Ubbe nodded, “Glaurung would certainly allow a young girl to approach him with our talisman.”

Sheila sneered, “You keep girls in a cupboard?”

“Not in cupboard, but I keep one handy.” Aubergine shrugged. “You never know when a virgin might be needed.”

Sheila sputtered, “Show me a virgin and I’ll show you a liar!”

The waiter in pink tights arrived with a tray of goblets and a pitcher of wine. He distributed the goblets, plucked up the heavy pitcher and began to pour. His hand suddenly shook with the effort, and wine splashed on the table.

“Idiot!” Sheila’s hook appeared at the end of the young man’s nose. His eyes crossed staring at its shining tip.

Aubergine motioned, “Just leave the pitcher, Herbert. We’ll serve ourselves.”

White with terror, Herbert bowed, whispering, “As you wish, my lord.”

Aubergine sniffed as Herbert departed, “Not the brightest coal in the evening fire.”

“But a handsome lad, nonetheless,” Ubbe nodded to himself.

Aubergine poured and drank, setting his nearly empty goblet down. “Now, shall we collect our virgin?”

“Let’s bring the simpleton, too.” Ubbe leaned forward. “He could be useful.”

*

“Elspeth, my dear, you can be of great service to us, if you wish.” Aubergine smiled his dazzling smile.

Elspeth, her honey-gold locks flowing in gentle waves over her shoulders, opened her violet eyes wide. “I always try to please, my lord.”

“Of course, you do.”

“Young woman,” Ubbe interrupted. “How old are you?”

Elspeth batted her eyes with lashes that surely created a breeze. “Just eighteen, sir.”

Ubbe frowned. “Perhaps a bit old.”

“Virgins, bah!” Sheila glared at the girl.

Aubergine gestured for her to be quiet. “Wizard, Administer your test.”

“As you wish.” Ubbe produced a flask containing a blood-red liquor. Holding it at eye level, he poured three quick dollops into the teacup in his other hand. He turned to Elspeth, handing her the cup. “Drink this.”

Smiling, she took it and drank. When it was empty, she licked her baby's blush lips with a pert tongue and looked at Aubergine.

Aubergine looked at Ubbe. "Well?"

"She passed the unicorn blood virginity test."

Sheila growled, "How do you know?"

"Had she failed, warts would have popped up on her nose and her teeth would have fallen out."

Sheila peered closely at the girl. "No warts. Lots of teeth."

"Now that that is settled . . ." Aubergine turned to Elspeth, "we would like you to accompany us to the Teufelwald."

"Oh, sir!" Elspeth put a distressed hand to her breast. "I'm ever so fearful of that forest! It's where beasts and wild men hide!"

"Fear nothing, dear girl! We shall have an invincible escort." Aubergine leaned close to Ubbe and whispered, "We'll need some minions."

"Why?"

"To serve as an escort."

"Will we have to pay them?"

"I can entice minions." Aubergine produced a golden coin. "But if they die distracting the dragon, we need not pay them."

Sheila nodded her agreement. "Let's plan on it."

*

Elspeth rode a milk white horse led by Herbert, now dressed in a royal-blue tunic, and pantaloons. Twenty tall men carrying spears — ten in front and ten behind — escorted her, silver helmets and hauberks gleaming.

"They make a brave show." Sheila squinted at them. "Do they have a chance against the dragon?"

Ubbe shook his head. "None."

“Are you sure Glaurung will take them out?”

Ubbe, nodding, “It’s likely.”

Aubergine, lines of worry creasing his otherwise pristine forehead, poked Ubbe. “You’re sure we’re safe here?”

“We’re up a hill, hidden among rocks, and a hundred rods distant — as safe as houses.”

Sheila snorted, “What are you jabbering about? I don’t even see a dragon.”

“Look.” Aubergine pointed.

What had seemed to be a hummock at the forest’s edge uncoiled, became Glaurung the Horrendous. He stretched and preened, licking his many-colored scales with a pitch-black tongue.

Elsbeth swallowed and then spoke, her voice scarcely louder than a whisper, “Take me to him, Herbert dear.”

Herbert, shivering like a terrified puppy, obeyed, stopping when his toes nearly touched steely blue claws longer than swords. Elspeth lowered her eyes.

“Greetings, oh great one, I bring you a gift.”

“A gift is it?” Glaurung chuckled, a sound like boulders tumbling down a distant mountain. “You reek of magic, girl.”

Elsbeth quavered. “It is none of my doing.”

“I know this,” Glaurung chuckled again. “But here you are.”

*

Sheila pushed between Aubergine and Ubbe. “What’s happening?”

Glaurung’s right wing rose into the sky like a red cloud and then descended swiftly, curling around Herbert, horse, and Elspeth. The twenty guards in shining armor belatedly roused themselves and raised their weapons. One flung his spear at the dragon’s spikey head. It bounced harmlessly away, but Glaurung was offended by the assault. Glaring at the offender, he opened wide his mouth, inhaled, and breathed fire. Flames whiter than the hearts of stars engulfed the soldiers.

When the three on the hill could see again, they beheld scorched earth with no trace of the guards.

Shelia muttered, “Won’t have to pay those boys.”

“But did he consume the virgin?” Aubergine craned his neck, trying to catch a glimpse of Elspeth, or even Herbert.

“We’ll know soon.” Ubbe plucked at his beard nervously. “If he swallowed it, the monster’s internal fires will quickly trigger the talisman.

Glauring’s midnight tongue snaked across his fangs. He rose then, took a step and staggered, green froth suddenly boiling from his nostrils. Bellowing with rage, he leapt into the air. His wings beat once, twice, and froze. He rolled onto his back and fell into the forest, snapping great pines in half like twigs.

Ubbe’s eyebrows arched high. “It worked!”

“I can’t see him!” Aubergine stood almost on tiptoe, peering at the wall of trees.

Sheila slapped the Viscount on his expensively clad back. “Forget him. He’s croaked like a frog.”

“What,” Aubergine pointed, “is that?”

A golden glow, like the rising of a summery sun, suffused the forest’s edge where the dragon had lain.

“That,” Ubbe sighed, “is Glauring’s horde.”

“Now it’s ours!” Sheila thrust her hook into the air.

Aubergine gulped. “Summon our bravos, our workers, our wagons and beasts!”

Ubbe snapped his fingers and a rocket, trailing blue sparks, shot into the air behind them.

Consider them summoned.”

*

With Sheila leading, Ubbe, Aubergine and their small army approached the golden glow. They slowed as they entered the flat area in front of the treasure.

Taking in the splendor, Sheila stopped. “We need bigger wagons.”

“Fear not.” Aubergine sucked his teeth. “I’ll hire as many as we require. We may want an extra warehouse for all the silver coins, however.”

Ubbe peered warily beyond the treasure. “We should make sure of Glaurung’s fate before we begin hauling loot away.”

“Bah!” Sheila snorted. “There’s nothing to fear now!”

As if in answer, a savage crackling erupted from the ground beneath their feet. Smoke and dirt puffed into the air as the earth opened and swallowed them all. Silence returned with the settling dust.

Glaurung peeked from between two massive trunks, his golden eyes glowing with anticipation. Elspeth stepped from a cave fashioned in the hill of gold. Herbert, still leading the horse, followed her. She walked to the edge of the deep pit and stopped. The dragon soon joined her. They stared down at Ubbe, Aubergine, Sheila and their retinue of beasts and men — still stunned but mostly uninjured.

“Well,” mused Glaurung. “That worked nicely. My larder will be full for a nice long time.”

Elspeth glanced up. “You’ll keep them alive?”

“Of course.” He studied Aubergine. “Several of them will make most entertaining dinner companions — until the main course is served, that is.” The dragon glanced sideways at her. “You should be careful with that wizard’s bauble.”

“This tiny spear?” She lifted the talisman hanging from her neck by its silver chain.

“Keep it well away from feverish children.”

“Right.” Elspeth made a mou with her lovely lips. “I think I shall be leaving.”

“Not without your well-deserved chest of jewels and gold!”

She glanced up at the dragon’s face. “Might you spare us a sturdy horse?”

“Certainly. I’ll pluck one up in a moment.”

Elspeth looked back at some of the now squirming men. “What will you do when your larder is no longer full?”

Glaurung shrugged massively. “I have other ploys.”

“I see.”

“Though this one is my favorite, it will be at least fifteen years before the dust has settled enough for me to try it again.” The dragon smiled unctuously at her. “Might you have a daughter by then?”

Smiling brightly, Elspeth squeezed Herbert's skinny thigh, "It shouldn't be a problem.

Laughter rumbled in the dragon's belly. "Your mother said that, too."

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SHADOWS OF THE MOON GROVE

Ben Williams

Ben Williams lives in Los Angeles, where he can frequently be found outside, observing the ravens in his neighborhood. You can find him online at <https://benthewriter.neocities.org>.

Yovi and Subin moved through the midnight dark of Ash Alley, their hoods up, as they passed clusters of huddled men. They spied the faded sign of the Red Saiga and entered the inn, pushing past a group of burly men by the entrance. Candles burned low in lead glass holders, casting the tavern in red dimness. The two dodged teamsters and toughs, thieves and thugs, and myriad drunks as they made their way to the inn's cramped stairwell.

They ascended the steps to a hallway lined with guestrooms; a single candle burned at each end. They went to the last door on the right and Subin knocked. "Go away," Narsa's voice called from behind the door. Subin knocked again, louder. They heard Narsa get up, mutter expletives, and stomp toward them. She opened the door and stood in the doorway, wrapped in a blanket. Behind her, Armik the Singer lounged shirtless in bed. "Oh, it's you. Why are you here? I'm busy."

Subin glanced down the hallway, making certain no one was within earshot. "We bring news from the Undermarket."

"What, you got robbed?"

"No. A pair of traveling vendors is there who claim to have a page from the Necrologer's Codex," Subin said.

Narsa craned her neck and peered down the hallway. Seeing it was empty, she stepped out and pulled the door to. "Really? Did you see it?"

"No, but we would not know an authentic page even if we did," Yovi said.

"True. Are the vendors there now?" Narsa asked.

"They were when we left and we came straight here," Subin said.

“Good. We should go.” Narsa slipped into her room and shut the door. After what seemed an impossibly short time, she reemerged, fully clothed, her hair neatened and satchel slung about her body. She led them downstairs, where the crowd parted before her, hushing and glancing away as she passed. She joined her sisters in putting her hood up as they exited the inn.

Three traversed the shadows of Ash Alley, out onto Omen Street. Here, the space was wider and better lit. Qandar was as lively by night as by day. Countless traders and their teams arrived in the city everyday, and as night fell, these men of the Carnelian Road flooded the streets in search of libation, entertainment, and mischief. The witches avoided interacting as they ventured to Dragonsmaw Tavern on Crescent Alley, their preferred point of Undermarket ingress.

The Dragonsmaw was aswim in the redolence of sweat and spicewine. Men sat at tables awash in the flickering orange glow of torch lamps, playing games of chance, crowded around by onlookers. The witches proceeded quietly through the tavern, to a darkened alcove where a man with a kilij sheathed at his side stood beside a door carved with a dragon scale pattern. A tattooed spiral of 17 black dots adorned the wrist of his sword arm, showing he was a man of the Dread Company with 17 dead to his blade. Subin removed her hood as the witches approached, revealing her face.

“Back already?”

Subin nodded. The man rapped thrice upon the door. They heard a bolt unlatch, and the door swung open. Another man stood within, his wrist adorned with 13 dots.

“Stay out of trouble, please,” the second man said upon seeing the witches.

Narsa pulled back her hood and grinned at him. “Us? Trouble?” The man sighed and waved them through.

The scent of stagnant water, mold, and arcane admixtures hung in the subterranean air of the Undermarket’s torch-lit tunnels, which widened to a series of rough-dug chambers. Here, traders hawked rarities from beyond steppe and mountain. Poisons and potions, totems and tomes, powders and poultices, and other miscellany of wonderment.

“This way,” Yovi said. She and Subin led Narsa to a remote section of the Undermarket where a man and a woman stood in the corner, a trunk behind them, and a small table in front of them. Both had long braids and wore bearskin vests. Amulets of spinel and garnet hung about their necks on leather cords.

The man smiled at Yovi and Subin. “Did you still wish that page?”

Narsa stepped forward between her sisters. "I must verify its legitimacy first." The braided woman eyed Narsa, then spoke an incantation, and the trunk unlocked. She pulled a vellum page from within, tattered and dirt-stained. She presented it to Narsa. Narsa had, for some years, collected pages from the Necrologer's Codex, and recognized the sharp strokes of the Necrologer's pen. As with the pages she had acquired, it was inked in the Necrologer's own blood. It contained instructions for the forbidden incantation of the Death Touch, capable of laying a warrior low with the mere touch of a finger. "It is real," she spoke.

"Of course it is," the man said. "We do not ship junk."

"What price do you ask?" Narsa inquired.

"We will not accept coin for this. Anyone capable of using it can offer better," the man said.

"What bargain do you propose?" Narsa asked.

"We require the services of someone skilled enough to brave the Blighted Steppe," the man said.

"It is a place of ruin and death. What business could you have there?" Narsa asked.

"Dead men leave treasures," the woman said as she placed the page back in the trunk, which locked of its own accord as she closed the lid.

"What treasure do you wish?" Narsa asked.

"The Silver Blade of Senna," the man answered. "A treasure seeker swore he saw it at the Moon Grove."

"If he is a treasure seeker, why did he not take it?" Subin asked.

The man shrugged.

Subin crossed her arms. "I see. And if we journey there and find the blade he allegedly saw, but it is not the Silver Blade of Senna, what then?"

The man turned and looked at his colleague. "Bring us the blade from the grove and the page is yours," the woman stated. "We remain in Qandar for six days, then we travel to the Dusk Market of Bukira."

"What will it be, sisters?" Narsa asked.

"Let us find this blade," Yovi said. Subin assented.

*

Three exited Dawn Gate onto the Eastern Road, where pink-silver morning rose above grass, hill, and river. They saw ahead Stonesong Bridge, named for the dissonant melodies that arose when wind passed beneath its great arches. It spanned the River Zaf, crossing to the Blighted Steppe. Guards stood atop the bridge's gatehouse on the near bank, and another group stood by the gatehouse's entryway. There was no traffic upon the bridge, nor in the steppe beyond, and as the witches drew closer, they saw the gatehouse's ironshod cedar doors were closed and barred. A guard by the entrance came forward as the three approached. He held up his hand and waved them off.

"We wish to cross," Subin said.

The guard looked them over. "No." A second guard sauntered over to join the first.

"Why not?" Subin asked.

"Go back to the city," the second said.

Narsa glared dread into the two guardsmen. They shrank beneath her gaze as she approached. "You will open the doors and let us through. No more of this obstruction," she commanded.

A third guard rapped hurriedly on a smaller door set into the side of the gatehouse and the sound of footsteps preceded two more men who emerged from the door, both bearing symbols of The Theocracy upon their armor. The first was a holy partizan, and the second was a templar, the commander of the gatehouse. Narsa knew they would be unmoved by her attempts to intimidate them and did not try.

"We would like passage," Subin said to the templar.

He scoffed in response, turned around, and went back through the door.

Subin turned to the partizan. "We would like passage."

The partizan eyed the witches. "Three women, unaccompanied? No."

"We can take care of ourselves," Yovi said, brandishing her cudgel.

The partizan laughed. "Find fighting men to accompany you. You see we have barred the doors, even by day." He motioned to the great doors behind him. "Packs of ghouls roam the steppe. More than usual. It is a bad time to travel to Kashien. Return home."

“Come, sisters, this lot is incapable of reason. We will find crossing upriver,” Narsa said. They traveled a dirt path that continued along the south bank of the Zaf, hoping to encounter a boatman who might ferry them across. Within an hour, they found a fisher in a flat-bottomed boat. They called him over, and while he did not understand their words, as he was a tribesman from the hills, he understood silver. For one piece, he rowed them to the north bank, where three ventured into the illimitable grasses of the steppe.

Yovi led now, for among the three, she knew the wilds best. She listened to the wind, and upon it the distant song of a skylark. She ran her hand atop the high grass and felt its undulations. They traveled north. The trickle of the Zaf faded behind them, and soon it was just Narsa, Yovi, Subin, wind, and grass beneath a dome of cloudless blue. The sun climbed and lowered as the hours passed. But the terrain, with its broad slopes and unending grass, remained unchanging. To Narsa and Subin, it was a trackless expanse. To Yovi, it was the lanes of unseen migration. The byways of saigas and eagles, wolves and tigers, rhinoceroses and cobras. Spiders and scorpions uncountable. But no people, for the ghouls, leftovers from the Pestilence wrought by the Necrologer and his lieutenants, scoured the steppe hungrily for people.

Dusk approached, and a silhouette appeared in the distance. It ambled slowly at first, then sped its pace toward the three travelers. “Yovi, please dispense with that,” Narsa said. Yovi held her palm downward, and with her other hand readied her cudgel. She drew upon the power of life present in each blade of grass, and her cudgel glowed with an emerald hue. The creature growled as it closed, and the witches saw its elongated claws and mottled skin stretched tight over sinew. Yovi moved forward, breaking into a jog, matching the creature’s pace. She slid sideward as it swiped a claw, then swung her cudgel straight into its chest. Green light surged within it, and the creature’s chest exploded in a flash. Its fragmented body fell to the ground.

“Perhaps we would be wise to stop here for the night,” Subin suggested as the sun sank in the west.

“Yes. More will rove as night deepens. They will scent us and swarm,” Narsa said. Subin took a small carving of a hut from her case. She hurled it onto the ground and spoke a word of command. The carving grew into a full-sized hut. They entered, and the door locked shut behind them. They were safe in the hut, since the ghouls could not see or smell them, and were too unintelligent to deduce there could be quarry within.

It was warm inside. The hearth burned, but emitted no smoke into the air outside. A fine rug sat in the center of the space, green and black, patterned with honeysuckle blossoms. Three sleeping mats lay about the rug. Subin’s cat, Nora, was curled up near the fire.

Subin went to the hearth, where a pot of tea was brewing. She poured herself and her sisters each a serving in ceramic piyolas glazed with hawthorn leaf designs. Yovi took a roundbread and some strawberries from her pack, and the witches sat upon the rug, ate, and had tea. Yovi and Subin slept soon after. Narsa sat up studying the handful of pages from the Necrologer's Codex she had already collected, then joined her sisters in slumber.

*

Three stood in the dewy grass under morning's pale. Subin spoke a word of command, and the witchhut shrank again to a small carving. She stowed it in her case, and Yovi led Narsa and Subin further into the Blighted Steppe. As they traversed the grassy expanse midmorning, they heard snarling upon the wind, but saw no ghouls. Clouds gathered as the day wore, and by noon the sky was gray. They glimpsed the willows of the Moon Grove in the distance, down a broad slope. The willows were gnarled and blackened, their drooping leaves ashen. A creek trickled from the grove and snaked into the grasslands. As they drew near, they observed that grass did not grow in the grove's vicinity

Yovi spied footprints. She stooped and studied the bare earth. Directionless tracks made by mangled feet. "Ghouls," she said.

"How many?" Subin asked.

"Dozens."

"Where do they lead?" Subin asked.

"Nowhere. In and out of the grove. Back and forth." Yovi stood and looked toward the grove. The disfigured willows huddled together, obscuring what lay within. A snarl sounded from the darkness, followed by the shuffle of feet. A ghoul emerged, scurrying across the barren ground. Then a second. Then more. Seven in total rushed from the blighted foliage, growling and shrieking.

Subin reached into her case and took out a firejug. She shook it and it grew warm in her hand. Seeing the firejug, Narsa and Yovi retreated. Subin flung it toward the onrushing ghouls, and it landed before them. Its contents burst forth and exploded into a fiery mass. The ghouls were scattered in every direction and fell to the ground, writhing as flames consumed them. One rose from the conflagration, singed and soiled, but spared from obliteration. It scampered toward Subin. Yovi leapt forth to meet it and brought her cudgel down onto its skull, driving the creature to the ground. She whacked it again as it lay squirming, stilling it.

"Could it have been seven sets of tracks you saw?" Narsa asked Yovi.

Yovi shook her head. “There are many more.” Three peered into the grove, but the darkness disclosed nothing.

“Then let us find them,” Narsa said. They proceeded into the grove, where a twisting tangle of brown and brittle briars sprawled beneath warped willows. Yovi led them deeper into the copse. The briars and willows grew thicker, and the darkness deepened. Subin instinctively drew her hollowknife. Narsa felt a pall upon the air. There was no birdsong. No chirp of crickets. No rustle of leaves in the eerie stillness.

The willows gave way to a clearing where nine ancient menhirs stood in a circle. Ochre moss clung to them, partly concealing smooth-worn glyphs. A sword lay half-buried in the center of the stone circle. The witches saw by its curve it was a kilij of an older style, its blade tarnished and dull. Yovi continued into the clearing, inching toward the stone circle. Subin and Narsa followed. The sky above was dim and gray, the surrounding grove suffused with shadow.

Yovi reached the nearest menhir, and a chill spread through the grove. A rasp arose amid the trees. They heard the rustle of briars. Then the snarling began. It was all around them. Ghouls rushed from every direction, filtering through the twisted trees like silt through a sieve.

Subin pressed the third button upon the handle of her hollowknife. White resin leaked onto the blade, shedding pale light. She held the knife aloft, and the ghouls recoiled from the radiance, shielding their eyes, snarling angrily.

“How long will it remain lit?” Yovi asked Subin.

“As much as a minute,” Subin replied.

Yovi turned her palm to the ground and channeled energy into her weapon. Blighted though the grove was, the trees and briars were yet living, and the cudgel glowed green. She stepped to the edge of the white radiance and smashed a ghoul with the cudgel, annihilating it in an emerald flash. Several clawed in retaliation, but she dodged away. The white light burned their claws, and they faltered. Yovi turned to her sisters. “Not enough time. There are too many.”

Narsa pulled back her hood and lifted her arms, palms up and outstretched. The grove swayed, and the space between the trees distorted as she spoke verses of damnation and destruction. Caliginous tendrils appeared, spiraling out from her. Her eyes grew black, and dark veins appeared on her skin. She moved her hands as a puppeteer and took control of the tendrils. She turned her palms out and pushed her hands away from herself with a

lunge. The tendrils shot out toward the ghouls, piercing their bodies, rendering them unto dust. Narsa twirled and swung her arms in an arc. The spiraling tendrils spun with her, impaling ghoul after ghoul, disintegrating them into plumes of dust and ash. Yovi turned her cudgel upon the few ghouls the tendrils missed, dispatching them in flashes of green.

The light from Subin's hollowknife faded as the last of the resin evaporated. The grove was silent again. "What is this place?" Subin asked, looking at the circle of glyph-adorned menhirs.

"A Moongate," Narsa answered. "The Necrologer used them to transport his armies across the steppe."

"The Moongates are far older than the Necrologer," Yovi said.

"They are," Narsa agreed. "Come, let us take the blade and be away from this place." Yovi crept into the center of the stone circle and lifted the ancient sword from the dirt. She handed it to Narsa, who ran her hand along its dull, discolored blade, discerning that no dark curses tainted it, despite its having lain decades in so forsaken a place.

Yovi led them from the grove, back into the steppe. They went west until they came to Eastern Road, then followed it south to Stonesong Bridge. While the guards had not let them cross the bridge and enter the steppe, they were under no orders to disallow people from leaving the steppe. "You were right," Narsa said to them as they passed the gatehouse. "Many ghouls haunt the steppe. Fewer now, though."

The guards shut the gate behind them, and three traveled beneath ultramarine evening toward Qandar's warm lights

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THE FREEDOM OF A GALLEY SLAVE

Steven Mathes

Steven Mathes lives miles from the nearest pavement with a spouse and a dog. When he isn't writing, he tends a garden. He gardens because he likes to cook. He cooks because he is passionate about eating. He is a full member of SFWA, and links to some of his work can be found at stevenmathes.com.

They called me Ishmael. I am not into stories. I did not get the joke.

Soon after I was kidnapped we were all forced onboard a raider boat, and wired in. They shoved me into a seat next to my new friend Patti. After hours of rough handling and training, including the implanting of a brain interface, and then after hours surrounded by yelps of horror from my fellow slaves, we cast off. We rowed, and it hurt.

I could tell that our boat Stinger was cut loose from space-time because of the screeching from the implanted web of wires. That felt a little sickening. Not everyone onboard accepted it. There were groans, and one screamer. The screamer tore the skull connector away and stood. Boss and Freja gave the screamer a quick exit out the reality-lock, straight into abstract void. That made us very quiet.

"The computer taught you how to row," said Freja. "Now row!"

Boss said nothing, needed to say nothing. He was a berserker.

They needed speed, and made us row harder. Galley slaves all had mathematical backgrounds. Stinger's drive did the computations using our not-so-spare neurons, but the calculations were hard work. Thinking against our will made us breathless, sweaty, miserable. Some of us could produce more results for the drive than others, but all of us were whipped with special prods.

Fear is nothing more than hope with trembles. I trembled. I limited my effort whatever would make me survive.

Boss and Freja patrolled the aisle. To me, their prods felt icy. They prodded my nipple it froze solid. Patti felt heat, and got a blister on her shoulder. The difference in the way we felt could have been a gender thing, since the probe worked on the mind. Granted, we were

all sexually de-juiced after they spared our lives. Anyway, no matter what you felt, it jolted to the soul. We both agreed on that.

They let us whisper to each other. There were twenty of us. Patti and I pushed hard, and eventually they stopped whipping us two to concentrate on the weaker ones. Someone started singing in a language I did not know, and they were not prodded. The few lyrics were repeated and simple, though, so Patti and I soon joined in. All of us did. The harmony and rhythm helped us forget the pain, made us more productive. Music felt like one good thing. Its goodness lived on a different plane from the evil of being a galley slave.

"If we come in too slow, we die!" Freja said. "So we strike hard! And fast!"

We popped back into space-time after a couple of hours. Our wires stopped screeching, and the connectors popped free. The top half of the boat was transparent, so we saw the skilled way Freja floated Stinger toward the flank of an enormous ship called The Leviathan. The panicked figures scrambling over our target were human, so The Leviathan had to be a colony ship. I knew it would seem to them like we popped out of nowhere, which technically we did. Here back in space-time we had momentum again. I felt my body pressing as Stinger used all its life-liquor, its life-force fuel, to slow.

Our bowsprit was the needle of a giant syringe. It plunged into The Leviathan, which like our little boat Stinger was a living thing made of cultured, engineered flesh, like everything technological. The hard crash slammed us into our restraints. The impact stunned me for just a moment, but I snapped out of it. My restraints freed me. I grabbed my harpoon, and jumped up second only to Patti. Fear in me gave the illusion of trembling eagerness. Patti pulled me to the opening reality-lock. Freja led us. Boss would cover the rear.

"Pick a clear spot and launch your harpoon!" said Freja. "Spread your targets."

Patti launched a clean hit dead ahead, so I jettied my harpoon wide. I hoped to hit nothing, not even The Leviathan, but one of the running colonists deflected it. My harpoon went clear through the colonist, suit and all, and lodged deep into The Leviathan's hide. The colonist died while another one tried and failed to free my harpoon.

"Great shot!" Freja said.

Before my village was raided, I had never seen a dead person before. People no longer even died where I came from, at least before the raids started. Looking at that skewered colonist, my stomach turned, and I swallowed back my vomitus desperately, fearfully.

Boss the berserker slaughtered and roared.

More harpoons flew. Freja focused on prodding any slave still hesitating, and soon The Leviathan began its death rattle, poisoned by our harpoons. Any surviving colonists ran for their escape pods. Boss had already kidnapped a prisoner to replace the one they shoved out of the airlock. The remaining colonists meant nothing to the raiders. The life-liquor of The Leviathan throbbed through Stinger's bowsprit-syringe. That mattered.

"To the galley! Get your asses back to your places!" said Freja.

The prods stung even harder through our suits. They shocked all over, not just at the point of contact. Patti and I tried to be quick, but being in front before the assault put us in the rear afterwards, while scrambling, jostling to get back to the benches. After two or maybe three shocks I collapsed. Boss growled at me, still berserk. Patti saved my life. She pulled me to my feet, and got me through the reality-lock.

The new prisoner, not knowing better, sat in Patti's spot. I panicked. I could not survive without Patti. I grabbed the prisoner by a strap, and pulled as hard as I could. The poor prisoner flew, slammed against a bulkhead, fell, and had to be picked up. I knew what that felt like, and I knew I was turning evil in my cowardly way.

Again Freja laughed hard, and clapped: "That's the spirit!"

I looked at Patti in apology. I could not look at the prisoner, shamed as I was. I certainly dared not say anything out loud, which would broadcast cowardly thoughts through my suit radio. That would not be "the spirit."

The reality-lock clapped closed. Pressure came back and our suits unfolded. But the prisoner had the wrong kind of suit, one that would not connect to our benches. They strapped the captive with duct tape, pulled off the helmet to reveal a thin, tall male, or at least someone groomed to look male. They gave him a good couple of snaps with the prod.

They de-juiced his sexuals with an injection. They dropped a devil onto his head. The devil chewed through his skull, and spread its wires into the jelly of his brain. The top part of the devil hardened into a connector. Freja plugged him in.

"The computer will teach you to row, educate you on raids, make you feared, and make you truly fear failure. Quick learners survive."

The prisoner shuddered and twitched during his education. He must have had some mathematics in him because he survived. He went limp-exhausted after. Then he yelped at

the screech in his head as Stinger popped out of space-time. He blubbered, but nobody was thrown out through the reality-lock. The rest of us got a little vacation from the prods while Freja concentrated on the new slave, but we rowed hard anyway. Anyone could become an example.

"You have a name?" said Freja.

The exhausted recruit squinted in defiance, saying nothing. Freja whipped him. Still he said nothing. Freja double-whipped and made sparks. The recruit twitched in silence.

"We like tough guys," Freja said. "From now on your slave name is Binkie, bitch."

So much for freedom.

The exhausted Binkie rowed with us. It was to be expected that he did a weak job of it, but he was not the weakest. He understood that we helped each other calculate to help each other survive. With Stinger's tanks filled with life-liquor Freja and Boss let us be. Perhaps they were a little too relaxed with their success. Perhaps we were no longer just galley slaves but now useful raiders. We pulled toward home, and then we popped into space-time in a low orbit around the icy planet of Ismantorp.

"After a good raid, you each get a pint of life-liquor," Freja said. "Not you, Binkie."

Life-liquor conferred health and youth in the long term, but made the drinker punchy and slow in the short term. We ate and drank through tubes, not out of cups. However, I saw that Boss had an enormous stein, two-handled, and that he drank deep. Freja turned away from us and took up her own stein. I glanced at Patti. We would not drink the life-liquor, out of respect for Binkie, who glowered at our two oppressors.

The other slaves began chattering in mild tipsy bliss. Freja and Boss filled their steins a second time, confident that their full hold of life-liquor would bring them riches, confident that no threat could come from us. Our suits could envelop us and be free-moving for battle but otherwise they were part of the bench, and always held us as shackles. We were stuck in place during the revelry. Only silent Boss had the power to free our suits for battle.

But an alarm went off.

"Oh shit!" said Freja.

A constable ship popped into space-time dead ahead of us, and another aft of us. These were frigates, from living flesh like all modern vessels. But these were of snake form, living

space vipers, the fangs in their snapping jaws squirting venom into the vacuum, their long scaly hulls wriggling. They broadcast orders for us to surrender or prepare for boarding. Addled by life-liquor, Boss and Freja bumped into each other as they rushed to prepare for battle. No escape out of space-time was possible while sandwiched between law enforcement frigates. We galley slaves would fight and die.

Poor Binkie was now nothing more than fresh slave-meat. He would be condemned with the rest of us.

Drunken Freja snapped Binkie's helmet over his head and sliced away his tape. As my suit closed around me, I learned regret, regret for not sipping a little life-liquor, for not enjoying few minutes of pleasure before going to my doom. I felt Patti's glove grip my sleeve as we popped free of the bench. She took her harpoon and rushed to the hatch of the reality-lock. She pressed herself against the bulkhead, half-hidden, ready to strike while drunken Freja and Boss still fumbled.

Constables broadcast their last warning, obviously never expecting a surrender.

By now Freja wore a suit and weapons, although she still staggered from life-liquor. Instead of rushing to the hatch, she went along the benches, slaughtering two slaves who had not already taken up their harpoons. I hefted my harpoon, looking toward the hatch, and she passed me by. Boss staggered after her, too slow and sloppy to be berserk.

The fangs of the constable ships clamped onto our little boat. It shuddered from the poison. The hatch on the airlock blasted open, the thick, bony door flapping over Patti, splattering her, sending sloppy pieces of her flying. I cried in rage. I let fly with my harpoon, but it went through Freja and one of the bolder slaves. I ducked between the benches, afraid of Boss's wrath, but saw his figure turn straight to me.

Turning his back to the hatch was his mistake.

Constables poured through the blasted hatch, their tiny sidearms shooting shiny needles of death everywhere. Boss was distracted, drunk, and greatest of stature, the easy target. He was first to fall, the back of his suit bristling with those glistening barbs.

I cowered in my trembles, protected by the benches.

The clumsy harpoons in the closed space of our boat were worse than nothing, as my ill-aimed shot had already proved. Whenever one flew, its razor tip bounced and spun, its tail spraying stinky propellant. More of our own died than did constables. Stinger filled with

globes of blood that boiled away in the vacuum, while our radios filled with screams that soon faded.

The constables would have spared Binkie in his odd colonist space suit. I glimpsed more than one constable aim away from him, but a last wayward harpoon grazed his shoulder. Blood boiled out of him as he turned. Even as the tear in his suit sucked away his life, he raised his own harpoon, and skewered the last standing slave by throwing it like a spear. Then he used the last of his strength to push himself out the ruined airlock.

I cowered while pretending death.

Many constables had fallen, and the angry survivors tossed slave bodies looking for their own, which they carried reverently away. Wedged alone as I was between benches, I was ignored.

"Their boat's dead. It's small. They're in a decaying orbit. Leave it for the scavengers, then let it burn in the atmosphere," said their commander.

"Should we check for survivors?"

"Right? If there's a coward still alive, where will they go?" the commander said. "Ha! Down they go, with the ship!"

As they disappeared back into the reality-locks of their vipers, I felt a different, worse fear. I missed Patti. I had no battle to fight. I had no enemy to hide from. Our small boat, Stinger, dead and filled with the dead, had nothing to offer except the hole that had been the reality-lock.

I waited for the vipers to slither away. I looked for sources of life-liquor, not for drinking, but to fuel my suit. I took my unused pint, then Patti's unused pint, and emptied both into my tank. I had no way to access the poisoned life-liquor stored in the hold of our dead boat, not that I wanted any of that!

Then I launched myself toward the hole that was once the reality-lock. I sailed through. Beautiful icy Ismantorp's gravity would pull, but now I had a little life-liquor for the thrusters on my suit. I could choose to die in a tiny fireball, or I could thrust to a stable orbit, and die of thirst and starvation. So much for freedom.

As the constable said, I was a trembling coward. I chose the feeble hope of stable orbit.

The tossed bodies of my fellow slaves, or parts of their bodies, or other debris, drifted away from our destroyed Stinger. My suit activated its thrusters, calculating to push me into my eternity. Futility did battle with hope, and at least that emotional struggle helped pass the time. I could not look away from the horror, the horror that I had helped cause.

Then came the hopeful surprise.

"Here's what they were talking about," said my radio.

A tattered boat floated into sight. I watched its needle bowsprit jab into the corpse of our old Stinger. Not a raider but a salvage scow, it pumped away Stinger's full hold of poisoned life-liquor, and while it worked, two of its crew came out of their airlock. Salvage boats had anti-toxins, of course. I stopped my thrusters. They floated up to me.

"We'll call you Ishmael," they said. "Because you alone escaped."

"Ishmael?"

"You never read Moby Dick?"

The scow Rachel had found a coward. It had found me. I would work off the price of my rescue because thankfully I already knew how to row. I already had a wired brain with a connector. As salvaged goods go, I amounted to a bonus for them. And from my vantage, indenture was a step up from slavery. The job of simple rowing was a step up from murder. So much for freedom.

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SAFE AND WARM

Elisabeth Ring

Elisabeth Ring (she/her) is a writer and reader of eclectic things. Her fiction has appeared in several publications including Apex and Cast of Wonders. She spends most of her time trying to wear out her energetic dog and keep her cats away from the houseplants. When she has time, she makes progress on her unwieldy TBR pile, and writes reviews on some of those books. You can read them at ringreads.com.

I'm cutting through an old parking lot between school and home when I see it. A rock, smooth and just a little too rounded to be good for skipping across water. When I pick it up, I can wrap my finger and thumb all the way around it and then some. It's got these dark cracks running through it like veins. I roll it in my cold-stiff fingers as I go to drop it, which is when I realize it feels warm. I'm imagining the warmth, I know, but it feels good anyway. *Kevin, you're always bringing junk home*, I can practically hear Mom say, but it feels wrong to drop something so perfect on the ground now. I clutch it tight as I rush home.

*

I wake up with it in my hands, unaware I fell asleep holding it. It's still warm, but I've been holding it all night so it would be weirder if it were cold. I set it on my nightstand by my keys and lip balm, then shuffle to the bathroom to get ready so I won't be late. It's not until I get to school and stick my hand in my pocket to grab my lip balm that I realize I've taken the rock with me, too. I roll it between my fingers, feeling the cracks with the pad of my thumb.

*

The TV is on but I keep zoning out. There's a pokey edge on the rock where I spin it against my fingers, turning it around and around. I swear those cracks are bigger now, and the surface of it is rougher than I remember it being yesterday. I put it in the hollow of my finger and thumb again. This time, my fingertips only almost touch.

There's a whisper at the back of my mind, a memory of that time at my uncle's house when I picked dandelions and touched them to the line running around the horse's pen. That big animal being held at bay by such a thin string? There had to be more to it. *Don't go messing with things you don't understand*, my uncle had said, but he'd watched me tire of dandelions and grab it barehanded anyway. And then he'd laughed as I'd pissed myself from the shock of the electric fence.

Rocks don't change, but I'm sure this one has since yesterday. But what's more likely, that this rock is not a rock, or that I'm remembering wrong? I spin it between my fingers again,

replacing my faulty memory of the small, smooth thing with the reality that I'm holding now.

*

I'm going to be late for school and I know I'm going to be late for school, but I can't find the rock and for some reason this makes me panic. It's not on my nightstand, it's not in my pockets, it's not in my bed. I mutter things Mom would ground me for if she heard as I toss my room to pieces. Clothes fly; the lamp falls and probably cracks, which I'll catch hell for, too, but it doesn't matter. When I finally find the rock, fallen to the side of my bed, I hold it so tight the rough edges around the wide cracks leave imprints on my palms. It's safe now.

*

In fifth period, it starts shaking. I think it's an earthquake at first, but no one else seems to notice and the pencil on my desk is still. When I pull it out of my pocket and steal a look at it under my desk, I see the cracks aren't just widening—it's splitting apart. At the front of the class, Mr. Larsen is going over—I don't know, triangles, it looks like—but he's a notorious stickler about hall passes so I don't think I can run for the bathroom to figure out what's happening with the rock. I cover it with my hands as pieces of the rock fall to the ground. When I look again, what I have now is dark and segmented and coiled tight. It straightens and sinks tiny fangs into my wrist. In the time it takes me to gasp and clutch at the spot, it's gone, a dark vein in my arm.

“Is there a problem, Kevin?” Mr. Larsen asks. “Kevin, are you all right?”

“Fine,” we say.

*

We huddle deep in the covers, a safe, warm place to grow stronger. The sun rises, then falls. When it hides, we lay our eggs, letting them roll up our throat and up our tongue and land, cool and smooth and perfectly round, in our hands. By the time it shines again, we hold a full clutch, almost twenty. We are proud of our eggs, proud of their number and that they are ready to spread across this planet for more hosts to find. To incubate. To bring to life.

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**TWICE TOLD TALE:
THE SOUTHWEST CHAMBER**

Mary E. Wilkens Freeman

Pulp fiction existed before pulp magazines...just look at 19th century dime novels or penny dreadfuls. The pulps of the early 20th century were just one market in which pulp fiction burgeoned. That this particular market-type gave the fiction its enduring name is incidental, and while pulps may have helped drive the popularity of an already popular form of entertainment for a new generation, they had little do to with the origins of the fiction itself.

What I mean by pulp is simply the exploration of the most fundamental human drives—hunger, curiosity, fear, anger—through an unflinching (and often sensational) storytelling impulse. It's been around at least as long as Shakespeare . . . or perhaps the seven deadly sins.

*New-England-born of strict Congregationalist parents, Mary Wilkins seems on the surface an unlikely candidate for inclusion in the pulp cannon. The product of a rigid upbringing and strong religious sensibilities, she only began writing for publication in 1883 at the age of thirty-one, when the death of her father left her unmarried, alone, and without income. At first a writer of stories and verse for children, she became popular as a writer of stories, most especially ghost stories that combined the supernatural with realistic domestic detail. "The Southwest Chamber," originally published as part of her 1903 collection *The Wind in the Rose-Bush and Other Stories of the Supernatural*, is a good example of the kind of work that helped make her famous and respected.*

"That school-teacher from Acton is coming to-day," said the elder Miss Gill, Sophia.

"So she is," assented the younger Miss Gill, Amanda.

"I have decided to put her in the southwest chamber," said Sophia.

Amanda looked at her sister with an expression of mingled doubt and terror. "You don't suppose she would—" she began hesitatingly.

"Would what?" demanded Sophia, sharply. She was more incisive than her sister. Both were below the medium height, and stout, but Sophia was firm where Amanda was flabby. Amanda wore a baggy old muslin (it was a hot day), and Sophia was uncompromisingly hooked up in a starched and boned cambric over her high shelving figure.

"I didn't know but she would object to sleeping in that room, as long as Aunt Harriet died there such a little time ago," faltered Amanda.

"Well!" said Sophia, "of all the silly notions! If you are going to pick out rooms in this house where nobody has died, for the boarders, you'll have your hands full. Grandfather Ackley had seven children; four of them died here to my certain knowledge, besides grandfather and grandmother. I think Great-grandmother Ackley, grandfather's mother, died here, too; she must have; and Great-grandfather Ackley, and grandfather's unmarried sister, Great-aunt Fanny Ackley. I don't believe there's a room nor a bed in this house that somebody hasn't passed away in."

"Well, I suppose I am silly to think of it, and she had better go in there," said Amanda.

"I know she had. The northeast room is small and hot, and she's stout and likely to feel the heat, and she's saved money and is able to board out summers, and maybe she'll come here another year if she's well accommodated," said Sophia. "Now I guess you'd better go in there and see if any dust has settled on anything since it was cleaned, and open the west windows and let the sun in, while I see to that cake."

Amanda went to her task in the southwest chamber while her sister stepped heavily down the back stairs on her way to the kitchen.

"It seems to me you had better open the bed while you air and dust, then make it up again," she called back.

"Yes, sister," Amanda answered, shudderingly.

Nobody knew how this elderly woman with the untrammelled imagination of a child dreaded to enter the southwest chamber, and yet she could not have told why she had the dread. She had entered and occupied rooms which had been once tenanted by persons now dead. The room which had been hers in the little house in which she and her sister had lived before coming here had been her dead mother's. She had never reflected upon the fact with anything but loving awe and reverence. There had never been any fear. But this was different. She entered and her heart beat thickly in her ears. Her hands were cold. The room was a very large one. The four windows, two facing south, two west, were closed, the

blinds also. The room was in a film of green gloom. The furniture loomed out vaguely. The gilt frame of a blurred old engraving on the wall caught a little light. The white counterpane on the bed showed like a blank page.

Amanda crossed the room, opened with a straining motion of her thin back and shoulders one of the west windows, and threw back the blind. Then the room revealed itself an apartment full of an aged and worn but no less valid state. Pieces of old mahogany swelled forth; a peacock-patterned chintz draped the bedstead. This chintz also covered a great easy chair which had been the favourite seat of the former occupant of the room. The closet door stood ajar. Amanda noticed that with wonder. There was a glimpse of purple drapery floating from a peg inside the closet. Amanda went across and took down the garment hanging there. She wondered how her sister had happened to leave it when she cleaned the room. It was an old loose gown which had belonged to her aunt. She took it down, shuddering, and closed the closet door after a fearful glance into its dark depths. It was a long closet with a strong odour of lovage. The Aunt Harriet had had a habit of eating lovage and had carried it constantly in her pocket. There was very likely some of the pleasant root in the pocket of the musty purple gown which Amanda threw over the easy chair.

Amanda perceived the odour with a start as if before an actual presence. Odour seems in a sense a vital part of a personality. It can survive the flesh to which it has clung like a persistent shadow, seeming to have in itself something of the substance of that to which it pertained. Amanda was always conscious of this fragrance of lovage as she tidied the room. She dusted the heavy mahogany pieces punctiliously after she had opened the bed as her sister had directed. She spread fresh towels over the wash-stand and the bureau; she made the bed. Then she thought to take the purple gown from the easy chair and carry it to the garret and put it in the trunk with the other articles of the dead woman's wardrobe which had been packed away there; *but the purple gown was not on the chair!*

Amanda Gill was not a woman of strong convictions even as to her own actions. She directly thought that possibly she had been mistaken and had not removed it from the closet. She glanced at the closet door and saw with surprise that it was open, and she had thought she had closed it, but she instantly was not sure of that. So she entered the closet and looked for the purple gown. *It was not there!*

Amanda Gill went feebly out of the closet and looked at the easy chair again. The purple gown was not there! She looked wildly around the room. She went down on her trembling

knees and peered under the bed, she opened the bureau drawers, she looked again in the closet. Then she stood in the middle of the floor and fairly wrung her hands.

"What does it mean?" she said in a shocked whisper.

She had certainly seen that loose purple gown of her dead Aunt Harriet's.

There is a limit at which self-refutation must stop in any sane person. Amanda Gill had reached it. She knew that she had seen that purple gown in that closet; she knew that she had removed it and put it on the easy chair. She also knew that she had not taken it out of the room. She felt a curious sense of being inverted mentally. It was as if all her traditions and laws of life were on their heads. Never in her simple record had any garment not remained where she had placed it unless removed by some palpable human agency.

Then the thought occurred to her that possibly her sister Sophia might have entered the room unobserved while her back was turned and removed the dress. A sensation of relief came over her. Her blood seemed to flow back into its usual channels; the tension of her nerves relaxed.

"How silly I am," she said aloud.

She hurried out and downstairs into the kitchen where Sophia was making cake, stirring with splendid circular sweeps of a wooden spoon a creamy yellow mass. She looked up as her sister entered.

"Have you got it done?" said she.

"Yes," replied Amanda. Then she hesitated. A sudden terror overcame her. It did not seem as if it were at all probable that Sophia had left that foamy cake mixture a second to go to Aunt Harriet's chamber and remove that purple gown.

"Well," said Sophia, "if you have got that done I wish you would take hold and string those beans. The first thing we know there won't be time to boil them for dinner."

Amanda moved toward the pan of beans on the table, then she looked at her sister.

"Did you come up in Aunt Harriet's room while I was there?" she asked weakly.

She knew while she asked what the answer would be.

"Up in Aunt Harriet's room? Of course I didn't. I couldn't leave this cake without having it fall. You know that well enough. Why?"

"Nothing," replied Amanda.

Suddenly she realized that she could not tell her sister what had happened, for before the utter absurdity of the whole thing her belief in her own reason quailed. She knew what Sophia would say if she told her. She could hear her.

"Amanda Gill, have you gone stark staring mad?"

She resolved that she would never tell Sophia. She dropped into a chair and begun shelling the beans with nerveless fingers. Sophia looked at her curiously.

"Amanda Gill, what on earth ails you?" she asked.

"Nothing," replied Amanda. She bent her head very low over the green pods.

"Yes, there is, too! You are as white as a sheet, and your hands are shaking so you can hardly string those beans. I did think you had more sense, Amanda Gill."

"I don't know what you mean, Sophia."

"Yes, you do know what I mean, too; you needn't pretend you don't. Why did you ask me if I had been in that room, and why do you act so queer?"

Amanda hesitated. She had been trained to truth. Then she lied.

"I wondered if you'd noticed how it had leaked in on the paper over by the bureau, that last rain," said she.

"What makes you look so pale then?"

"I don't know. I guess the heat sort of overcame me."

"I shouldn't think it could have been very hot in that room when it had been shut up so long," said Sophia.

She was evidently not satisfied, but then the grocer came to the door and the matter dropped.

For the next hour the two women were very busy. They kept no servant. When they had come into possession of this fine old place by the death of their aunt it had seemed a doubtful blessing. There was not a cent with which to pay for repairs and taxes and insurance, except the twelve hundred dollars which they had obtained from the sale of the little house in which they had been born and lived all their lives. There had been a division

in the old Ackley family years before. One of the daughters had married against her mother's wish and had been disinherited. She had married a poor man by the name of Gill, and shared his humble lot in sight of her former home and her sister and mother living in prosperity, until she had borne three daughters; then she died, worn out with overwork and worry.

The mother and the elder sister had been pitiless to the last. Neither had ever spoken to her since she left her home the night of her marriage. They were hard women.

The three daughters of the disinherited sister had lived quiet and poor, but not actually needy lives. Jane, the middle daughter, had married, and died in less than a year. Amanda and Sophia had taken the girl baby she left when the father married again. Sophia had taught a primary school for many years; she had saved enough to buy the little house in which they lived. Amanda had crocheted lace, and embroidered flannel, and made tidies and pincushions, and had earned enough for her clothes and the child's, little Flora Scott.

Their father, William Gill, had died before they were thirty, and now in their late middle life had come the death of the aunt to whom they had never spoken, although they had often seen her, who had lived in solitary state in the old Ackley mansion until she was more than eighty. There had been no will, and they were the only heirs with the exception of young Flora Scott, the daughter of the dead sister.

Sophia and Amanda thought directly of Flora when they knew of the inheritance.

"It will be a splendid thing for her; she will have enough to live on when we are gone," Sophia said.

She had promptly decided what was to be done. The small house was to be sold, and they were to move into the old Ackley house and take boarders to pay for its keeping. She scouted the idea of selling it. She had an enormous family pride. She had always held her head high when she had walked past that fine old mansion, the cradle of her race, which she was forbidden to enter. She was unmoved when the lawyer who was advising her disclosed to her the fact that Harriet Ackley had used every cent of the Ackley money.

"I realize that we have to work," said she, "but my sister and I have determined to keep the place."

That was the end of the discussion. Sophia and Amanda Gill had been living in the old Ackley house a fortnight, and they had three boarders: an elderly widow with a comfortable income, a young congregationalist clergyman, and the middle-aged single woman who had

charge of the village library. Now the school-teacher from Acton, Miss Louisa Stark, was expected for the summer, and would make four.

Sophia considered that they were comfortably provided for. Her wants and her sister's were very few, and even the niece, although a young girl, had small expenses, since her wardrobe was supplied for years to come from that of the deceased aunt. There were stored away in the garret of the Ackley house enough voluminous black silks and satins and bombazines to keep her clad in somber richness for years to come.

Flora was a very gentle girl, with large, serious blue eyes, a seldom-smiling, pretty mouth, and smooth flaxen hair. She was delicate and very young—sixteen on her next birthday.

She came home soon now with her parcels of sugar and tea from the grocer's. She entered the kitchen gravely and deposited them on the table by which her Aunt Amanda was seated stringing beans. Flora wore an obsolete turban-shaped hat of black straw which had belonged to the dead aunt; it set high like a crown, revealing her forehead. Her dress was an ancient purple-and-white print, too long and too large except over the chest, where it held her like a straight waistcoat.

"You had better take off your hat, Flora," said Sophia. She turned suddenly to Amanda. "Did you fill the water-pitcher in that chamber for the schoolteacher?" she asked severely. She was quite sure that Amanda had not filled the water-pitcher.

Amanda blushed and started guiltily. "I declare, I don't believe I did," said she.

"I didn't think you had," said her sister with sarcastic emphasis.

"Flora, you go up to the room that was your Great-aunt Harriet's, and take the water-pitcher off the wash-stand and fill it with water. Be real careful, and don't break the pitcher, and don't spill the water."

"In *that* chamber?" asked Flora. She spoke very quietly, but her face changed a little.

"Yes, in that chamber," returned her Aunt Sophia sharply. "Go right along."

Flora went, and her light footstep was heard on the stairs. Very soon she returned with the blue-and-white water-pitcher and filled it carefully at the kitchen sink.

"Now be careful and not spill it," said Sophia as she went out of the room carrying it gingerly.

Amanda gave a timidly curious glance at her; she wondered if she had seen the purple gown.

Then she started, for the village stagecoach was seen driving around to the front of the house. The house stood on a corner.

"Here, Amanda, you look better than I do; you go and meet her," said Sophia. "I'll just put the cake in the pan and get it in the oven and I'll come. Show her right up to her room."

Amanda removed her apron hastily and obeyed. Sophia hurried with her cake, pouring it into the baking-tins. She had just put it in the oven, when the door opened and Flora entered carrying the blue water-pitcher.

"What are you bringing down that pitcher again for?" asked Sophia.

"She wants some water, and Aunt Amanda sent me," replied Flora.

Her pretty pale face had a bewildered expression.

"For the land sake, she hasn't used all that great pitcherful of water so quick?"

"There wasn't any water in it," replied Flora.

Her high, childish forehead was contracted slightly with a puzzled frown as she looked at her aunt.

"Wasn't any water in it?"

"No, ma'am."

"Didn't I see you filling the pitcher with water not ten minutes ago, I want to know?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What did you do with that water?"

"Nothing."

"Did you carry that pitcherful of water up to that room and set it on the washstand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Didn't you spill it?"

"No, ma'am."

"Now, Flora Scott, I want the truth! Did you fill that pitcher with water and carry it up there, and wasn't there any there when she came to use it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Let me see that pitcher." Sophia examined the pitcher. It was not only perfectly dry from top to bottom, but even a little dusty. She turned severely on the young girl. "That shows," said she, "you did not fill the pitcher at all. You let the water run at the side because you didn't want to carry it upstairs. I am ashamed of you. It's bad enough to be so lazy, but when it comes to not telling the truth—"

The young girl's face broke up suddenly into piteous confusion, and her blue eyes became filmy with tears.

"I did fill the pitcher, honest," she faltered, "I did, Aunt Sophia. You ask Aunt Amanda."

"I'll ask nobody. This pitcher is proof enough. Water don't go off and leave the pitcher dusty on the inside if it was put in ten minutes ago. Now you fill that pitcher full quick, and you carry it upstairs, and if you spill a drop there'll be something besides talk."

Flora filled the pitcher, with the tears falling over her cheeks. She sniveled softly as she went out, balancing it carefully against her slender hip. Sophia followed her.

"Stop crying," said she sharply; "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. What do you suppose Miss Louisa Stark will think. No water in her pitcher in the first place, and then you come back crying as if you didn't want to get it."

In spite of herself, Sophia's voice was soothing. She was very fond of the girl. She followed her up the stairs to the chamber where Miss Louisa Stark was waiting for the water to remove the soil of travel. She had removed her bonnet, and its tuft of red geraniums lightened the obscurity of the mahogany dresser. She had placed her little beaded cape carefully on the bed. She was replying to a tremulous remark of Amanda's, who was nearly fainting from the new mystery of the water-pitcher, that it was warm and she suffered a good deal in warm weather.

Louisa Stark was stout and solidly built. She was much larger than either of the Gill sisters. She was a masterly woman inured to command from years of school-teaching. She carried her swelling bulk with majesty; even her face, moist and red with the heat, lost nothing of its dignity of expression.

She was standing in the middle of the floor with an air which gave the effect of her standing upon an elevation. She turned when Sophia and Flora, carrying the water-pitcher, entered.

"This is my sister Sophia," said Amanda tremulously.

Sophia advanced, shook hands with Miss Louisa Stark and bade her welcome and hoped she would like her room. Then she moved toward the closet. "There is a nice large closet in this room—the best closet in the house. You might have your trunk—" she said, then she stopped short.

The closet door was ajar, and a purple garment seemed suddenly to swing into view as if impelled by some wind.

"Why, here is something left in this closet," Sophia said in a mortified tone. "I thought all those things had been taken away."

She pulled down the garment with a jerk, and as she did so Amanda passed her in a weak rush for the door.

"I am afraid your sister is not well," said the school-teacher from Acton. "She looked very pale when you took that dress down. I noticed it at once. Hadn't you better go and see what the matter is? She may be going to faint."

"She is not subject to fainting spells," replied Sophia, but she followed Amanda.

She found her in the room which they occupied together, lying on the bed, very pale and gasping. She leaned over her.

"Amanda, what is the matter; don't you feel well?" she asked.

"I feel a little faint."

Sophia got a camphor bottle and began rubbing her sister's forehead.

"Do you feel better?" she said.

Amanda nodded.

"I guess it was that green apple pie you ate this noon," said Sophia. "I declare, what did I do with that dress of Aunt Harriet's? I guess if you feel better I'll just run and get it and take it up garret. I'll stop in here again when I come down. You'd better lay still. Flora can bring you up a cup of tea. I wouldn't try to eat any supper."

Sophia's tone as she left the room was full of loving concern. Presently she returned; she looked disturbed, but angrily so. There was not the slightest hint of any fear in her expression.

"I want to know," said she, looking sharply and quickly around, "if I brought that purple dress in here, after all?"

"I didn't see you," replied Amanda.

"I must have. It isn't in that chamber, nor the closet. You aren't lying on it, are you?"

"I lay down before you came in," replied Amanda.

"So you did. Well, I'll go and look again."

Presently Amanda heard her sister's heavy step on the garret stairs. Then she returned with a queer defiant expression on her face.

"I carried it up garret, after all, and put it in the trunk," said, she. "I declare, I forgot it. I suppose your being faint sort of put it out of my head. There it was, folded up just as nice, right where I put it."

Sophia's mouth was set; her eyes upon her sister's scared, agitated face were full of hard challenge.

"Yes," murmured Amanda.

"I must go right down and see to that cake," said Sophia, going out of the room. "If you don't feel well, you pound on the floor with the umbrella."

Amanda looked after her. She knew that Sophia had not put that purple dress of her dead Aunt Harriet in the trunk in the garret.

Meantime Miss Louisa Stark was settling herself in the southwest chamber. She unpacked her trunk and hung her dresses carefully in the closet. She filled the bureau drawers with nicely folded linen and small articles of dress. She was a very punctilious woman. She put on a black India silk dress with purple flowers. She combed her grayish-blond hair in smooth ridges back from her broad forehead. She pinned her lace at her throat with a brooch, very handsome, although somewhat obsolete—a bunch of pearl grapes on black onyx, set in gold filagree. She had purchased it several years ago with a considerable portion of the stipend from her spring term of school-teaching.

As she surveyed herself in the little swing mirror surmounting the old-fashioned mahogany bureau she suddenly bent forward and looked closely at the brooch. It seemed to her that something was wrong with it. As she looked she became sure. Instead of the familiar bunch of pearl grapes on the black onyx, she saw a knot of blonde and black hair under glass surrounded by a border of twisted gold. She felt a thrill of horror, though she could not tell why. She unpinned the brooch, and it was her own familiar one, the pearl grapes and the onyx. "How very foolish I am," she thought. She thrust the pin in the laces at her throat and again looked at herself in the glass, and there it was again—the knot of blond and black hair and the twisted gold.

Louisa Stark looked at her own large, firm face above the brooch and it was full of terror and dismay which were new to it. She straightway began to wonder if there could be anything wrong with her mind. She remembered that an aunt of her mother's had been insane. A sort of fury with herself possessed her. She stared at the brooch in the glass with eyes at once angry and terrified. Then she removed it again and there was her own old brooch. Finally she thrust the gold pin through the lace again, fastened it and turning a defiant back on the glass, went down to supper.

At the supper table she met the other boarders—the elderly widow, the young clergyman and the middle-aged librarian. She viewed the elderly widow with reserve, the clergyman with respect, the middle-aged librarian with suspicion. The latter wore a very youthful shirt-waist, and her hair in a girlish fashion which the school-teacher, who twisted hers severely from the straining roots at the nape of her neck to the small, smooth coil at the top, condemned as straining after effects no longer hers by right.

The librarian, who had a quick acridness of manner, addressed her, asking what room she had, and asked the second time in spite of the school-teacher's evident reluctance to hear her. She even, since she sat next to her, nudged her familiarly in her rigid black silk side.

"What room are you in, Miss Stark?" said she.

"I am at a loss how to designate the room," replied Miss Stark stiffly.

"Is it the big southwest room?"

"It evidently faces in that direction," said Miss Stark.

The librarian, whose name was Eliza Lippincott, turned abruptly to Miss Amanda Gill, over whose delicate face a curious colour compounded of flush and pallour was stealing.

"What room did your aunt die in, Miss Amanda?" asked she abruptly.

Amanda cast a terrified glance at her sister, who was serving a second plate of pudding for the minister.

"That room," she replied feebly.

"That's what I thought," said the librarian with a certain triumph. "I calculated that must be the room she died in, for it's the best room in the house, and you haven't put anybody in it before. Somehow the room that anybody has died in lately is generally the last room that anybody is put in. I suppose YOU are so strong-minded you don't object to sleeping in a room where anybody died a few weeks ago?" she inquired of Louisa Stark with sharp eyes on her face.

"No, I do not," replied Miss stark with emphasis.

"Nor in the same bed?" persisted Eliza Lippincott with a kittenish reflection.

The young minister looked up from his pudding. He was very spiritual, but he had had poor pickings in his previous boarding place, and he could not help a certain abstract enjoyment over Miss Gill's cooking.

"You would certainly not be afraid, Miss Lippincott?" he remarked, with his gentle, almost caressing inflection of tone. "You do not for a minute believe that a higher power would allow any manifestation on the part of a disembodied spirit—who we trust is in her heavenly home—to harm one of His servants?"

"Oh, Mr. Dunn, of course not," replied Eliza Lippincott with a blush. "Of course not. I never meant to imply—"

"I could not believe you did," said the minister gently. He was very young, but he already had a wrinkle of permanent anxiety between his eyes and a smile of permanent ingratiating on his lips. The lines of the smile were as deeply marked as the wrinkle.

"Of course dear Miss Harriet Gill was a professing Christian," remarked the widow, "and I don't suppose a professing Christian would come back and scare folks if she could. I wouldn't be a mite afraid to sleep in that room; I'd rather have it than the one I've got. If I was afraid to sleep in a room where a good woman died, I wouldn't tell of it. If I saw things or heard things I'd think the fault must be with my own guilty conscience." Then she turned to Miss Stark. "Any time you feel timid in that room I'm ready and willing to change with you," said she.

"Thank you; I have no desire to change. I am perfectly satisfied with my room," replied Miss Stark with freezing dignity, which was thrown away upon the widow.

"Well," said she, "any time, if you should feel timid, you know what to do. I've got a real nice room; it faces east and gets the morning sun, but it isn't so nice as yours, according to my way of thinking. I'd rather take my chances any day in a room anybody had died in than in one that was hot in summer. I'm more afraid of a sunstroke than of spooks, for my part."

Miss Sophia Gill, who had not spoken one word, but whose mouth had become more and more rigidly compressed, suddenly rose from the table, forcing the minister to leave a little pudding, at which he glanced regretfully.

Miss Louisa Stark did not sit down in the parlour with the other boarders. She went straight to her room. She felt tired after her journey, and meditated a loose wrapper and writing a few letters quietly before she went to bed. Then, too, she was conscious of a feeling that if she delayed, the going there at all might assume more terrifying proportions. She was full of defiance against herself and her own lurking weakness.

So she went resolutely and entered the southwest chamber. There was through the room a soft twilight. She could dimly discern everything, the white satin scroll-work on the wall paper and the white counterpane on the bed being most evident. Consequently both arrested her attention first. She saw against the wall-paper directly facing the door the waist of her best black satin dress hung over a picture.

"That is very strange," she said to herself, and again a thrill of vague horror came over her.

She knew, or thought she knew, that she had put that black satin dress waist away nicely folded between towels in her trunk. She was very choice of her black satin dress.

She took down the black waist and laid it on the bed preparatory to folding it, but when she attempted to do so she discovered that the two sleeves were firmly sewed together. Louisa Stark stared at the sewed sleeves. "What does this mean?" she asked herself. She examined the sewing carefully; the stitches were small, and even, and firm, of black silk.

She looked around the room. On the stand beside the bed was something which she had not noticed before: a little old-fashioned work-box with a picture of a little boy in a pinafore on the top. Beside this work-box lay, as if just laid down by the user, a spool of black silk, a pair of scissors, and a large steel thimble with a hole in the top, after an old style. Louisa stared at these, then at the sleeves of her dress. She moved toward the door. For a moment she thought that this was something legitimate about which she might demand

information; then she became doubtful. Suppose that work-box had been there all the time; suppose she had forgotten; suppose she herself had done this absurd thing, or suppose that she had not, what was to hinder the others from thinking so; what was to hinder a doubt being cast upon her own memory and reasoning powers?

Louisa Stark had been on the verge of a nervous breakdown in spite of her iron constitution and her great will power. No woman can teach school for forty years with absolute impunity. She was more credulous as to her own possible failings than she had ever been in her whole life. She was cold with horror and terror, and yet not so much horror and terror of the supernatural as of her own self. The weakness of belief in the supernatural was nearly impossible for this strong nature. She could more easily believe in her own failing powers.

"I don't know but I'm going to be like Aunt Marcia," she said to herself, and her fat face took on a long rigidity of fear.

She started toward the mirror to unfasten her dress, then she remembered the strange circumstance of the brooch and stopped short. Then she straightened herself defiantly and marched up to the bureau and looked in the glass. She saw reflected therein, fastening the lace at her throat, the old-fashioned thing of a large oval, a knot of fair and black hair under glass, set in a rim of twisted gold. She unfastened it with trembling fingers and looked at it. It was her own brooch, the cluster of pearl grapes on black onyx. Louisa Stark placed the trinket in its little box on the nest of pink cotton and put it away in the bureau drawer. Only death could disturb her habit of order.

Her fingers were so cold they felt fairly numb as she unfastened her dress; she staggered when she slipped it over her head. She went to the closet to hang it up and recoiled. A strong smell of lovage came in her nostrils; a purple gown near the door swung softly against her face as if impelled by some wind from within. All the pegs were filled with garments not her own, mostly of somber black, but there were some strange-patterned silk things and satins.

Suddenly Louisa Stark recovered her nerve. This, she told herself, was something distinctly tangible. Somebody had been taking liberties with her wardrobe. Somebody had been hanging some one else's clothes in her closet. She hastily slipped on her dress again and marched straight down to the parlour. The people were seated there; the widow and the minister were playing backgammon. The librarian was watching them. Miss Amanda Gill was mending beside the large lamp on the centre table. They all looked up with

amazement as Louisa Stark entered. There was something strange in her expression. She noticed none of them except Amanda.

"Where is your sister?" she asked peremptorily of her.

"She's in the kitchen mixing up bread," Amanda quavered; "is there anything—" But the school-teacher was gone.

She found Sophia Gill standing by the kitchen table kneading dough with dignity. The young girl Flora was bringing some flour from the pantry. She stopped and stared at Miss Stark, and her pretty, delicate young face took on an expression of alarm.

Miss Stark opened at once upon the subject in her mind.

"Miss Gill," said she, with her utmost school-teacher manner, "I wish to inquire why you have had my own clothes removed from the closet in my room and others substituted?"

Sophia Gill stood with her hands fast in the dough, regarding her. Her own face paled slowly and reluctantly, her mouth stiffened.

"What? I don't quite understand what you mean, Miss Stark," said she.

"My clothes are not in the closet in my room and it is full of things which do not belong to me," said Louisa Stark.

"Bring me that flour," said Sophia sharply to the young girl, who obeyed, casting timid, startled glances at Miss Stark as she passed her. Sophia Gill began rubbing her hands clear of the dough. "I am sure I know nothing about it," she said with a certain tempered asperity. "Do you know anything about it, Flora?"

"Oh, no, I don't know anything about it, Aunt Sophia," answered the young girl, fluttering.

Then Sophia turned to Miss Stark. "I'll go upstairs with you, Miss Stark," said she, "and see what the trouble is. There must be some mistake." She spoke stiffly with constrained civility.

"Very well," said Miss Stark with dignity. Then she and Miss Sophia went upstairs. Flora stood staring after them.

Sophia and Louisa Stark went up to the southwest chamber. The closet door was shut. Sophia threw it open, then she looked at Miss Stark. On the pegs hung the schoolteacher's own garments in ordinary array.

"I can't see that there is anything wrong," remarked Sophia grimly.

Miss Stark strove to speak but she could not. She sank down on the nearest chair. She did not even attempt to defend herself. She saw her own clothes in the closet. She knew there had been no time for any human being to remove those which she thought she had seen and put hers in their places. She knew it was impossible. Again the awful horror of herself overwhelmed her.

"You must have been mistaken," she heard Sophia say.

She muttered something, she scarcely knew what. Sophia then went out of the room. Presently she undressed and went to bed. In the morning she did not go down to breakfast, and when Sophia came to inquire, requested that the stage be ordered for the noon train. She said that she was sorry, but was ill, and feared lest she might be worse, and she felt that she must return home at once. She looked ill, and could not take even the toast and tea which Sophia had prepared for her. Sophia felt a certain pity for her, but it was largely mixed with indignation. She felt that she knew the true reason for the school-teacher's illness and sudden departure, and it incensed her.

"If folks are going to act like fools we shall never be able to keep this house," she said to Amanda after Miss Stark had gone; and Amanda knew what she meant.

Directly the widow, Mrs. Elvira Simmons, knew that the school-teacher had gone and the southwest room was vacant, she begged to have it in exchange for her own. Sophia hesitated a moment; she eyed the widow sharply. There was something about the large, roseate face worn in firm lines of humour and decision which reassured her.

"I have no objection, Mrs. Simmons," said she, "if—"

"If what?" asked the widow.

"If you have common sense enough not to keep fussing because the room happens to be the one my aunt died in," said Sophia bluntly.

"Fiddlesticks!" said the widow, Mrs. Elvira Simmons.

That very afternoon she moved into the southwest chamber. The young girl Flora assisted her, though much against her will.

"Now I want you to carry Mrs. Simmons' dresses into the closet in that room and hang them up nicely, and see that she has everything she wants," said Sophia Gill. "And you can change the bed and put on fresh sheets. What are you looking at me that way for?"

"Oh, Aunt Sophia, can't I do something else?"

"What do you want to do something else for?"

"I am afraid."

"Afraid of what? I should think you'd hang your head. No; you go right in there and do what I tell you."

Pretty soon Flora came running into the sitting-room where Sophia was, as pale as death, and in her hand she held a queer, old-fashioned frilled nightcap.

"What's that?" demanded Sophia.

"I found it under the pillow."

"What pillow?"

"In the southwest room."

Sophia took it and looked at it sternly.

"It's Great-aunt Harriet's," said Flora faintly.

"You run down street and do that errand at the grocer's for me and I'll see that room," said Sophia with dignity. She carried the nightcap away and put it in the trunk in the garret where she had supposed it stored with the rest of the dead woman's belongings. Then she went into the southwest chamber and made the bed and assisted Mrs. Simmons to move, and there was no further incident.

The widow was openly triumphant over her new room. She talked a deal about it at the dinner-table.

"It is the best room in the house, and I expect you all to be envious of me," said she.

"And you are sure you don't feel afraid of ghosts?" said the librarian.

"Ghosts!" repeated the widow with scorn. "If a ghost comes I'll send her over to you. You are just across the hall from the southwest room."

"You needn't," returned Eliza Lippincott with a shudder. "I wouldn't sleep in that room, after—" she checked herself with an eye on the minister.

"After what?" asked the widow.

"Nothing," replied Eliza Lippincott in an embarrassed fashion.

"I trust Miss Lippincott has too good sense and too great faith to believe in anything of that sort," said the minister.

"I trust so, too," replied Eliza hurriedly.

"You did see or hear something—now what was it, I want to know?" said the widow that evening when they were alone in the parlour. The minister had gone to make a call.

Eliza hesitated.

"What was it?" insisted the widow.

"Well," said Eliza hesitatingly, "if you'll promise not to tell."

"Yes, I promise; what was it?"

"Well, one day last week, just before the school-teacher came, I went in that room to see if there were any clouds. I wanted to wear my gray dress, and I was afraid it was going to rain, so I wanted to look at the sky at all points, so I went in there, and—"

"And what?"

"Well, you know that chintz over the bed, and the valance, and the easy chair; what pattern should you say it was?"

"Why, peacocks on a blue ground. Good land, I shouldn't think any one who had ever seen that would forget it."

"Peacocks on a blue ground, you are sure?"

"Of course I am. Why?"

"Only when I went in there that afternoon it was not peacocks on a blue ground; it was great red roses on a yellow ground."

"Why, what do you mean?"

"What I say."

"Did Miss Sophia have it changed?"

"No. I went in there again an hour later and the peacocks were there."

"You didn't see straight the first time."

"I expected you would say that."

"The peacocks are there now; I saw them just now."

"Yes, I suppose so; I suppose they flew back."

"But they couldn't."

"Looks as if they did."

"Why, how could such a thing be? It couldn't be."

"Well, all I know is those peacocks were gone for an hour that afternoon and the red roses on the yellow ground were there instead."

The widow stared at her a moment, then she began to laugh rather hysterically.

"Well," said she, "I guess I sha'n't give up my nice room for any such tomfoolery as that. I guess I would just as soon have red roses on a yellow ground as peacocks on a blue; but there's no use talking, you couldn't have seen straight. How could such a thing have happened?"

"I don't know," said Eliza Lippincott; "but I know I wouldn't sleep in that room if you'd give me a thousand dollars."

"Well, I would," said the widow, "and I'm going to."

When Mrs. Simmons went to the southwest chamber that night she cast a glance at the bed-hanging and the easy chair. There were the peacocks on the blue ground. She gave a contemptuous thought to Eliza Lippincott.

"I don't believe but she's getting nervous," she thought. "I wonder if any of her family have been out at all."

But just before Mrs. Simmons was ready to get into bed she looked again at the hangings and the easy chair, and there were the red roses on the yellow ground instead of the

peacocks on the blue. She looked long and sharply. Then she shut her eyes, and then opened them and looked. She still saw the red roses. Then she crossed the room, turned her back to the bed, and looked out at the night from the south window. It was clear and the full moon was shining. She watched it a moment sailing over the dark blue in its nimbus of gold. Then she looked around at the bed hangings. She still saw the red roses on the yellow ground.

Mrs. Simmons was struck in her most vulnerable point. This apparent contradiction of the reasonable as manifested in such a commonplace thing as chintz of a bed-hanging affected this ordinarily unimaginative woman as no ghostly appearance could have done. Those red roses on the yellow ground were to her much more ghostly than any strange figure clad in the white robes of the grave entering the room.

She took a step toward the door, then she turned with a resolute air. "As for going downstairs and owning up I'm scared and having that Lippincott girl crowing over me, I won't for any red roses instead of peacocks. I guess they can't hurt me, and as long as we've both of us seen 'em I guess we can't both be getting loony," she said.

Mrs. Elvira Simmons blew out her light and got into bed and lay staring out between the chintz hangings at the moonlit room. She said her prayers in bed always as being more comfortable, and presumably just as acceptable in the case of a faithful servant with a stout habit of body. Then after a little she fell asleep; she was of too practical a nature to be kept long awake by anything which had no power of actual bodily effect upon her. No stress of the spirit had ever disturbed her slumbers. So she slumbered between the red roses, or the peacocks, she did not know which.

But she was awakened about midnight by a strange sensation in her throat. She had dreamed that some one with long white fingers was strangling her, and she saw bending over her the face of an old woman in a white cap. When she waked there was no old woman, the room was almost as light as day in the full moonlight, and looked very peaceful; but the strangling sensation at her throat continued, and besides that, her face and ears felt muffled. She put up her hand and felt that her head was covered with a ruffled nightcap tied under her chin so tightly that it was exceedingly uncomfortable. A great qualm of horror shot over her. She tore the thing off frantically and flung it from her with a convulsive effort as if it had been a spider. She gave, as she did so, a quick, short scream of terror. She sprang out of bed and was going toward the door, when she stopped.

It had suddenly occurred to her that Eliza Lippincott might have entered the room and tied on the cap while she was asleep. She had not locked her door. She looked in the closet,

under the bed; there was no one there. Then she tried to open the door, but to her astonishment found that it was locked—bolted on the inside. "I must have locked it, after all," she reflected with wonder, for she never locked her door. Then she could scarcely conceal from herself that there was something out of the usual about it all. Certainly no one could have entered the room and departed locking the door on the inside. She could not control the long shiver of horror that crept over her, but she was still resolute. She resolved that she would throw the cap out of the window. "I'll see if I have tricks like that played on me, I don't care who does it," said she quite aloud. She was still unable to believe wholly in the supernatural. The idea of some human agency was still in her mind, filling her with anger.

She went toward the spot where she had thrown the cap—she had stepped over it on her way to the door—but it was not there. She searched the whole room, lighting her lamp, but she could not find the cap. Finally she gave it up. She extinguished her lamp and went back to bed. She fell asleep again, to be again awakened in the same fashion. That time she tore off the cap as before, but she did not fling it on the floor as before. Instead she held to it with a fierce grip. Her blood was up.

Holding fast to the white flimsy thing, she sprang out of bed, ran to the window which was open, slipped the screen, and flung it out; but a sudden gust of wind, though the night was calm, arose and it floated back in her face. She brushed it aside like a cobweb and she clutched at it. She was actually furious. It eluded her clutching fingers. Then she did not see it at all. She examined the floor, she lighted her lamp again and searched, but there was no sign of it.

Mrs. Simmons was then in such a rage that all terror had disappeared for the time. She did not know with what she was angry, but she had a sense of some mocking presence which was silently proving too strong against her weakness, and she was aroused to the utmost power of resistance. To be baffled like this and resisted by something which was as nothing to her straining senses filled her with intensest resentment.

Finally she got back into bed again; she did not go to sleep. She felt strangely drowsy, but she fought against it. She was wide awake, staring at the moonlight, when she suddenly felt the soft white strings of the thing tighten around her throat and realized that her enemy was again upon her. She seized the strings, untied them, twitched off the cap, ran with it to the table where her scissors lay and furiously cut it into small bits. She cut and tore, feeling an insane fury of gratification.

"There!" said she quite aloud. "I guess I sha'n't have any more trouble with this old cap."

She tossed the bits of muslin into a basket and went back to bed. Almost immediately she felt the soft strings tighten around her throat. Then at last she yielded, vanquished. This new refutation of all laws of reason by which she had learned, as it were, to spell her theory of life, was too much for her equilibrium. She pulled off the clinging strings feebly, drew the thing from her head, slid weakly out of bed, caught up her wrapper and hastened out of the room. She went noiselessly along the hall to her own old room: she entered, got into her familiar bed, and lay there the rest of the night shuddering and listening, and if she dozed, waking with a start at the feeling of the pressure upon her throat to find that it was not there, yet still to be unable to shake off entirely the horror.

When daylight came she crept back to the southwest chamber and hurriedly got some clothes in which to dress herself. It took all her resolution to enter the room, but nothing unusual happened while she was there. She hastened back to her old chamber, dressed herself and went down to breakfast with an imperturbable face. Her colour had not faded. When asked by Eliza Lippincott how she had slept, she replied with an appearance of calmness which was bewildering that she had not slept very well. She never did sleep very well in a new bed, and she thought she would go back to her old room.

Eliza Lippincott was not deceived, however, neither were the Gill sisters, nor the young girl, Flora. Eliza Lippincott spoke out bluntly.

"You needn't talk to me about sleeping well," said she. "I know something queer happened in that room last night by the way you act."

They all looked at Mrs. Simmons, inquiringly—the librarian with malicious curiosity and triumph, the minister with sad incredulity, Sophia Gill with fear and indignation, Amanda and the young girl with unmixed terror. The widow bore herself with dignity.

"I saw nothing nor heard nothing which I trust could not have been accounted for in some rational manner," said she.

"What was it?" persisted Eliza Lippincott.

"I do not wish to discuss the matter any further," replied Mrs. Simmons shortly. Then she passed her plate for more creamed potato. She felt that she would die before she confessed to the ghastly absurdity of that nightcap, or to having been disturbed by the flight of peacocks off a blue field of chintz after she had scoffed at the possibility of such a thing. She left the whole matter so vague that in a fashion she came off the mistress of the situation. She at all events impressed everybody by her coolness in the face of no one knew what nightly terror.

After breakfast, with the assistance of Amanda and Flora, she moved back into her old room. Scarcely a word was spoken during the process of moving, but they all worked with trembling haste and looked guilty when they met one another's eyes, as if conscious of betraying a common fear.

That afternoon the young minister, John Dunn, went to Sophia Gill and requested permission to occupy the southwest chamber that night.

"I don't ask to have my effects moved there," said he, "for I could scarcely afford a room so much superior to the one I now occupy, but I would like, if you please, to sleep there to-night for the purpose of refuting in my own person any unfortunate superstition which may have obtained root here."

Sophia Gill thanked the minister gratefully and eagerly accepted his offer.

"How anybody with common sense can believe for a minute in any such nonsense passes my comprehension," said she.

"It certainly passes mine how anybody with Christian faith can believe in ghosts," said the minister gently, and Sophia Gill felt a certain feminine contentment in hearing him. The minister was a child to her; she regarded him with no tincture of sentiment, and yet she loved to hear two other women covertly condemned by him and she herself thereby exalted.

That night about twelve o'clock the Reverend John Dunn essayed to go to his nightly slumber in the southwest chamber. He had been sitting up until that hour preparing his sermon.

He traversed the hall with a little night-lamp in his hand, opened the door of the southwest chamber, and essayed to enter. He might as well have essayed to enter the solid side of a house. He could not believe his senses. The door was certainly open; he could look into the room full of soft lights and shadows under the moonlight which streamed into the windows. He could see the bed in which he had expected to pass the night, but he could not enter. Whenever he strove to do so he had a curious sensation as if he were trying to press against an invisible person who met him with a force of opposition impossible to overcome. The minister was not an athletic man, yet he had considerable strength. He squared his elbows, set his mouth hard, and strove to push his way through into the room. The opposition which he met was as sternly and mutely terrible as the rocky fastness of a mountain in his way.

For a half hour John Dunn, doubting, raging, overwhelmed with spiritual agony as to the state of his own soul rather than fear, strove to enter that southwest chamber. He was simply powerless against this uncanny obstacle. Finally a great horror as of evil itself came over him. He was a nervous man and very young. He fairly fled to his own chamber and locked himself in like a terror-stricken girl.

The next morning he went to Miss Gill and told her frankly what had happened, and begged her to say nothing about it lest he should have injured the cause by the betrayal of such weakness, for he actually had come to believe that there was something wrong with the room.

"What it is I know not, Miss Sophia," said he, "but I firmly believe, against my will, that there is in that room some accursed evil power at work, of which modern faith and modern science know nothing."

Miss Sophia Gill listened with grimly lowering face. She had an inborn respect for the clergy, but she was bound to hold that southwest chamber in the dearly beloved old house of her fathers free of blame.

"I think I will sleep in that room myself to-night," she said, when the minister had finished.

He looked at her in doubt and dismay.

"I have great admiration for your faith and courage, Miss Sophia," he said, "but are you wise?"

"I am fully resolved to sleep in that room to-night," said she conclusively. There were occasions when Miss Sophia Gill could put on a manner of majesty, and she did now.

It was ten o'clock that night when Sophia Gill entered the southwest chamber. She had told her sister what she intended doing and had been proof against her tearful entreaties. Amanda was charged not to tell the young girl, Flora.

"There is no use in frightening that child over nothing," said Sophia.

Sophia, when she entered the southwest chamber, set the lamp which she carried on the bureau, and began moving about the room pulling down the curtains, taking off the nice white counterpane of the bed, and preparing generally for the night.

As she did so, moving with great coolness and deliberation, she became conscious that she was thinking some thoughts that were foreign to her. She began remembering what she

could not have remembered, since she was not then born: the trouble over her mother's marriage, the bitter opposition, the shutting the door upon her, the ostracizing her from heart and home. She became aware of a most singular sensation as of bitter resentment herself, and not against the mother and sister who had so treated her own mother, but against her own mother, and then she became aware of a like bitterness extended to her own self. She felt malignant toward her mother as a young girl whom she remembered, though she could not have remembered, and she felt malignant toward her own self, and her sister Amanda, and Flora. Evil suggestions surged in her brain—suggestions which turned her heart to stone and which still fascinated her. And all the time by a sort of double consciousness she knew that what she thought was strange and not due to her own volition. She knew that she was thinking the thoughts of some other person, and she knew who. She felt herself possessed.

But there was tremendous strength in the woman's nature. She had inherited strength for good and righteous self-assertion, from the evil strength of her ancestors. They had turned their own weapons against themselves. She made an effort which seemed almost mortal, but was conscious that the hideous thing was gone from her. She thought her own thoughts. Then she scouted to herself the idea of anything supernatural about the terrific experience. "I am imagining everything," she told herself. She went on with her preparations; she went to the bureau to take down her hair. She looked in the glass and saw, instead of her softly parted waves of hair, harsh lines of iron-gray under the black borders of an old-fashioned head-dress. She saw instead of her smooth, broad forehead, a high one wrinkled with the intensest concentration of selfish reflections of a long life; she saw instead of her steady blue eyes, black ones with depths of malignant reserve, behind a broad meaning of ill will; she saw instead of her firm, benevolent mouth one with a hard, thin line, a network of melancholic wrinkles. She saw instead of her own face, middle-aged and good to see, the expression of a life of honesty and good will to others and patience under trials, the face of a very old woman scowling forever with unceasing hatred and misery at herself and all others, at life, and death, at that which had been and that which was to come. She saw instead of her own face in the glass, the face of her dead Aunt Harriet, topping her own shoulders in her own well-known dress!

Sophia Gill left the room. She went into the one which she shared with her sister Amanda. Amanda looked up and saw her standing there. She had set the lamp on a table, and she stood holding a handkerchief over her face. Amanda looked at her with terror.

"What is it? What is it, Sophia?" she gasped.

Sophia still stood with the handkerchief pressed to her face.

"Oh, Sophia, let me call somebody. Is your face hurt? Sophia, what is the matter with your face?" fairly shrieked Amanda.

Suddenly Sophia took the handkerchief from her face.

"Look at me, Amanda Gill," she said in an awful voice.

Amanda looked, shrinking.

"What is it? Oh, what is it? You don't look hurt. What is it, Sophia?"

"What do you see?"

"Why, I see you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. What did you think I would see?"

Sophia Gill looked at her sister. "Never as long as I live will I tell you what I thought you would see, and you must never ask me," said she.

"Well, I never will, Sophia," replied Amanda, half weeping with terror.

"You won't try to sleep in that room again, Sophia?"

"No," said Sophia; "and I am going to sell this house."

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