



# Mistress of Snarling Death

Paul Chadwick

This page copyright © 2003 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

*EText from PulpGen.com*

*Stephen Demarest might have gone  
back from that barren, eroded  
wasteland, where those gigantic black  
dogs ringed him in a sinister circle.*

*But the weirdly beautiful mistress of  
the great beasts fixed him with her  
strange, smoldering eyes—eyes that  
both attracted and frightened. And the  
attraction was greater than the fear.*

STEPHEN DEMEREST stopped when he saw the figure coming toward him across the desolate, rain-drenched fields. It was his first glimpse of a human being since his car had mired in the thick mud of the country road.

He was on foot now, lost in a dreary region of deserted farms and rocky fields, from which all fertility seemed to have been pressed by the weight of ages. Even the spring rain had brought no life back to the barren, eroded earth.

He waited beside the rough path he'd followed.

The figure was only a dimly moving shape in the dusk, at first. Then, it materialized into a human form enveloped in some sort of dark cloak, with a stiff, wide-brimmed hat standing out queerly from the head, reminding him of a fantastic figure out of the mists of antique Spanish legend. But this was New England he was in, not ancient Spain, and the approaching figure was incongruous.

Then Stephen Demerest started. For the lowering sunset clouds broke apart a little. A sulphurous glow came through them, touching the wet landscape with a weird, sickly saffron light.

And he saw that the person coming toward him was a woman.

She moved with stately grace. There was something so odd about her presence in this lonely spot, something so arresting in her costume, that Demerest stared in growing wonder.

She got closer. He saw that she was youthful, hardly more than a girl. A girl with pale, impassive features, beautifully molded, and great dark eyes that were strangely fixed upon him.

He stood speechless, breathless. She was directly opposite before he pulled himself out of his trance sufficiently to speak. "Can you tell me," he said, "if I'm anywhere near the Benjamin Halliday house?"

Her eyes remained fixed upon him, but she didn't answer. Demerest hurriedly explained: "My car got stuck in the mud. I had to leave it. I thought I was taking a short-cut across country to the Halliday house, but apparently I'm lost."

Still she was silent, her oval, cameo-clear face unchanging in its expression, her dark, unfathomable eyes staring at him as though he were something less than human.

Demerest, wet, cold, weary and annoyed, stepped quickly toward her—and at once stopped with a stifled gasp. For a sound reached him that he hadn't heard before—the soft, rustling patter of many feet. He saw suddenly that the girl wasn't alone.

Behind her, their shaggy bodies almost invisible against the dark ground, six great black dogs padded two abreast in somber escort. Their huge muzzles hung close to the earth. They rolled their eyes upward, until a dozen points of sinister, greenish fire glared at Demerest. He stood transfixed, spellbound, feeling his spine crawl with horror.

Yet they were only dogs after all, he reasoned, and this girl constituted his one hope of finding his way out of the wilderness before night came.

He took another step toward her. The dogs, as though obeying a quick, unspoken command, broke their strange formation and suddenly ringed him, the giant leaders slinking around to his back, the others stationing themselves one on each side and two in front. They stood stiff-legged, fangs bared, the fur on their necks lifting up in savage hackles.

Demerest felt a moment of instinctive, cringing dread. He wasn't a coward. But his good sense told him that he stood in the presence of violent death.

In a concerted attack these dogs would rip out his throat, literally tear him to pieces.

The girl stopped, too. Tall, imperious, and lovely in spite of her grotesque garb, she regarded him searchingly for many seconds, her great, dark eyes lingering on his face. Then her lips moved.

She made a clucking sound to the dogs.

They fell out of their ring formation as quickly as they had assumed it, and slunk behind her again, following with silent obedience as she moved away.

Demerest stood weak and trembling, a light sweat beading his forehead, as the weird cavalcade passed on. The dogs appeared to vanish almost at once, their great shapes blending with the darkness of the ground.

For a full minute he watched the girl move off, and got a suggestion of the lithe loveliness of her figure beneath her cloak, the exquisite grace of her carriage. He stared until her imperious shoulders blurred and disappeared in the gathering dusk.

Then, resolutely, he turned and followed. She had refused to speak to him. Her dogs had menaced his life. She'd treated him as something to be ignored or scorned. But there must, he reasoned, be some human habitation in the direction she had taken.

DARKNESS came. The sulphurous glow faded from the west, extinguished by the dying day, and blotted out by the low-seeping rain clouds that were gathering again. A wind whimpered across the soggy fields like a tortured spirit. Demerest strayed from the path several times.

He bumped into jagged rocks, scratched himself on ground-clinging bushes. At the end of half an hour it was pitch-black. His small flashlight, with its battery nearly exhausted and its bulb already weakly red, shed hardly enough illumination for him to see a yard ahead. Finally he caught sight of a wan glimmer in the darkness.

He moved toward it, seeing in imagination the shapes of the great black dogs creeping close. The glimmer became an old-fashioned porch lantern swinging above the door of a massive stone house.

Demerest stooped and groped for a stick. If the black beasts served as watch dogs for this mansion, they might attack him.

He got closer, stared at the imposing front of the building, and realized that this must be the Halliday place. A sudden sense of the strangeness of his mission came to him. It was deeper, more eerie than when he'd received the letter in his pocket, every word of which he remembered clearly. It read:

Dear Stephen:

You probably have forgotten me, but your dear father and I were very close friends. And now, because I'm in desperate trouble, I'm turning to you, his son.

I've heard that you're engaged in radio work. Please come to my country home at once. Pretend you're nothing more than a radio repair man whom I've summoned. Don't admit that you know me. Be formal when we meet, unless we get a chance to talk alone.

Guard every action, every word. Be ready to help me when the signal is given. There's no one else on the outside I'd dare turn to.

I've made many mistakes. I've been a wicked, selfish old fool. But, for the sake of one I love more than life itself, I ask you to help me. The enclosed check for five hundred dollars will defray expenses.

Thinking back, Stephen Demerest shook his head. He had no inkling of the letter's meaning. He remembered Benjamin Halliday only dimly, recalling, however, that he had once been his father's friend. Only a few meager bits of information had come to him about Halliday. The man had grown wealthy in Europe. He had married brilliantly but unhappily. His wife had run off with another man, leaving him with an infant daughter.

Then no further reports of Halliday had reached Demerest until, two years ago, he'd seen a brief notice in the paper of Halliday's arrival in America.

What the man's trouble now was, why he had buried himself in the wildest part of New England, Demerest could not imagine.

But the size of the house before him indicated wealth. He believed it was Halliday's place. He approached the door, lifted the old-fashioned knocker and heard the hollow thud of it echo far inside the house.

Footsteps approached. The door was opened and Demerest froze into startled wonder. It was as though the mouth of some fantastic sub-chamber of hell had opened. Never had he seen such a revoltingly ugly man as the one who stood in the threshold.

A single, glaring eye gazed out of a scarred, pockmarked face. The man's nose had been eaten away by accident or disease. His mouth was twisted into a misshapen hole that showed two broken teeth. The place where his other eye should have been was a gaping, horrible cavity in his cadaverous face.

Demerest made an effort to keep his voice steady. "Is this Mr. Halliday's house?" he asked.

For almost a minute the single eye of the man before him searched his face, probed like a bright gimlet, trying, it seemed, to read his thoughts. Then the ugly head bobbed. The man stood waiting.

“I’m a radio specialist,” went on Demerest.

“Mr. Halliday asked me to come to do some repairing. My car, with all my tools in it, got mired in the mud. I’ll have to get it in the morning. I wonder if I can stay here for the night?”

Again the noseless face bobbed. The man could understand, but seemed incapable of speech. It came to Demerest with another pang of horror that he was not only disfigured but also mute.

The hideous servant stood aside and motioned for Demerest to enter. Demerest did so and found himself in a richly decorated hall. He started to look about him, then jumped as a voice suddenly spoke at his side. “This way if you please!”

He had seen no one else come in, but when he looked around, there was another man almost as ugly as the first—a gnome-like figure with immensely broad shoulders and arms that nearly reached the floor. His simian, brutal face appeared hardly human, yet it was he who had spoken. He added gruffly: “You can’t see Mr. Halliday now. The doctor’s with him. Wait in here.”

The gnome-man ushered Demerest into a big drawing-room, then turned and left him. Demerest nervously drew a cigarette from his coat and lit it.

But he’d barely taken a puff when a shuffling step sounded.

He whirled, went close to the door. An old man carrying a physician’s black satchel came slowly down the stairs. He, too, was hideously ugly, chinless, with a great projecting nose like the beak of some bird, and a pompadour of stiff white hair, giving him the look of an evil, crested parrot. He nodded at the servant, turned red-rimmed eyes on Demerest.

Demerest shuddered. Every human being he had seen in this fantastic place had been ugly as Satan.

The gnome-man saw the doctor to the door, then came back and planted himself in front of Demerest. “You may now go up and see Mr. Halliday,” he said, harshly. “I understand he’s expecting you.”

Demerest didn’t answer. He moved up the stairs, heard the gnome-man’s step close behind him. The servant was dogging his footsteps like an evil shadow.

“Right here!” The servant held open a door and followed Demerest into a room where there was a huge, old-fashioned canopied bed.

Demerest’s eyes swung to the figure on it, then to the two others who stood beside it.

THE man in the bed was obviously Halliday.

That wrinkled, crafty face, prematurely aged, stirred vague memories in Demerest’s mind. The other two, a youngish, fair-haired couple, were the first civilized-looking people he’d seen in the house. The woman had fair skin, a shapely body and washed-out but still attractive blue eyes. The man bore a striking resemblance to her. Both seemed well-bred, quiet.

Halliday turned feverish eyes on his visitor.

Demerest could sense the hideous, gnome-like servant standing close behind him; and Halliday’s expression seemed to plead craftily for Demerest to be discreet.

“You’ve come about the radio,” said Halliday in a thin, flat voice. “I’m glad. It hasn’t been acting right. I’m an old man, bedridden, helpless. The radio, which keeps me in touch with the outside world, is one of my

few pleasures.”

“I won't be able to fix it until tomorrow,” Demerest said. “My car, with all my tubes and testing equipment, is stuck in the road a mile from here. If you'll let me spend the night, I'll start on the radio tomorrow.”

“I expected you to spend the night,” said Halliday. “We're far from things here—isolated, as you see.” He waved his thin hand toward the man and the woman. “My good friends, Eric and Nana Larsen! They and my daughter, Gail, are taking turns nursing me.”

Demerest looked into the faded blue eyes of the man and the woman, and knew that these two must be brother and sister.

The woman favored him with a smile that made her look younger and glamorously appealing, in a foreign sort of way. “Please to meet you,” she said, with a slight, becoming accent. Then her eyes fell on the hideous gnome standing behind Demerest.

The smile left her face and she shuddered. An air of tenseness settled over the room.

Halliday's features, now that the first effort of greeting was over, had become wan and corpse-like, their only expression one of inscrutable, deep-seated terror. He said, listlessly: “Dinner will soon be ready. I'm sorry I can't join you; but I shall not be alone. Either Eric or Nana will stay with me.”

The invitation to dinner seemed also dismissal.

The hideous servant, standing so close behind Demerest that he could feel the man's breath on his neck, said: “Come, Mr. Demerest. I'll find you a room.”

Demerest had only a small grip with him. He followed the squat-bodied servant down a long hall.

The man thrust open a door, lighted an oil lamp and favored Demerest with a curious leer. He said:

“Here's where you'll sleep.”

There was another canopied bed in the room—like the one Halliday had. The house was obviously ancient, all the furnishings dating back to Colonial times. The servant withdrew, then abruptly thrust his ugly face back around the door. “Dinner will be ready in ten minutes,” he growled.

Demerest unpacked his things, went out into the hall, and saw Nana Larsen descending the staircase.

She had changed her gown, as though for his especial benefit. Her low-cut dress revealed the shapeliness and alluring whiteness of her shoulders.

But a moment later the pale beauty of Nana Larsen was eclipsed by the lush, dark loveliness of the girl who entered the hall below, through another door.

Demerest started, stared, felt his heart contract.

For he was again looking at the classic, inscrutable features of the mystery girl, whose great dogs had menaced his life.

Nana Larsen smiled. “Miss Halliday, this is Mr. Demerest, your father's radio man.”

The mystery girl's dark eyes searched Demerest's face. She nodded briefly, acknowledging the introduction. There was something both haughty and tragic in her bearing.

She preceded them into the dining room, and Demerest noticed that she was dressed almost as strangely as before. Her gown was individual and exquisitely becoming, but old-fashioned, Victorian in its cut, as though the girl were costumed for some part in a play.

A third repulsive and gnome-like servant, seeming to be a brother of the one who had given Demerest his orders, was in the dining room. Gail Halliday seated herself with all the hauteur of a princess. Nana Larsen smiling slid into her chair.

Demerest took a place facing the two women.

He had a strange feeling of unreality. No one spoke. The candles on the table shed a light that barely penetrated to the corners of the big Colonial room. The presence of the monster-like servants cast a damper on the meal. Demerest could feel their eyes boring into him, watching his every move.

Each time one of them went near Nana Larsen, to present a dish, she cringed away, as though the white, bare skin of her arms and shoulders shrank from any possible contact with their simian hands.

GAIL HALLIDAY kept her eyes steadfastly on her plate. Demerest found himself watching her with ever-increasing fascination. He'd never seen a girl like her, never beheld such a mixture of strange beauty and chill aloofness. Once, when she raised her dark eyes and glanced at him, he had a sense of hidden, unaroused depths, tragic and exciting. He was attracted by her and afraid of her, at one and the same time. Nana Larsen made conversation finally by asking him about his trip from the city, slurring soft words in her peculiarly accented voice.

The meal ended at last. Gail Halliday slipped away as mysteriously, as silently, as she had come.

Nana Larsen went upstairs and Eric Larsen came down. But he did not attempt to talk to Demerest, and Demerest went to his room, after one cigarette.

There seemed nothing else to do. Halliday hadn't called him, and he found himself wondering if the old man's strange letter had not been the product of delirium.

As he went along the hall to his chamber, he caught sight of the most hideous of the servants, the one with the single burning eye and noseless face, watching him. The ugly mute stared, as though in secret, diabolical speculation.

Demerest paced his room nervously, smoking cigarette after cigarette. The whimpering wind rose outside to a tortured moan. Spurts of rain rapped against his window with a sound like bony knuckles. Demerest drew the shade, gazed out.

He started when he looked across to another wing of the house, where there were lighted shades, across which a figure moved—the tall, lithe, glorious figure of Gail Halliday. She was also pacing, appearing and reappearing against the shades.

Then Demerest heard the throaty howling of dogs, a strange, clamorous, oddly menacing chorus, out in the darkness of the night. Somewhere on the other side of the court, in the girl's wing of the house, the great black beasts were imprisoned, stirred apparently by the noise of the storm, and by a macabre, vaguely-felt restlessness that filled the air. Demerest suddenly had a sense that unknown, devilish forces were all about; that some storm other than the wind and the rain was gathering, creeping closer and closer, threatening them all.

The girl finally stopped pacing. She disappeared from a window, then came back. For a moment he saw her figure eerily silhouetted without the strange gown on it; saw the chaste, proud lines of her body. Then

her light went out.

Demerest lay down on his bed without undressing. Steadily, above the wind and rain, he heard the mournful howling of the dogs. He dozed into fitful slumber, their animal voices ringing in his ears like some weird devil's chorus.

A scream awakened him, brought him bolt upright in bed, then sent him lunging off it, straight toward the door. For there was terror, anger in the shrill cry, and it was in the hall outside.

Demerest flung the door open, leaped into the corridor. In the glow of a hanging lamp near the stairway he saw two struggling figures. One was the hideous, apelike gnome-man who had spoken to him. The other was Nana Larsen.

She tried to break away as Demerest stood gaping. Her face was convulsed in terror and loathing. The servant clutched her with arms that writhed like constricting pythons. He lifted her bodily, tried to carry her toward the stairs.

With a cry Demerest leaped forward. But he stopped almost at once, as though steel cables were looped about his wrists. He stooped and whirled, gasping, with the clutch of muscular fingers around his arms. He looked back, saw that the other gnome-man had sneaked up behind him.

HE inhuman-appearing monster was incredibly strong, so strong that, with the surprise hold he had taken, Demerest was helpless.

He cursed, kicked back, but the gnome-man twisted his arms until they ached, blocking all movement.

Nana Larsen shrieked, trying desperately to get free. Demerest saw her frantic movements tear her gown, saw the gleam of bare flesh, white as alabaster. The gnome-man's fingers twined closer around her. He clutched her desperately, jaws clenched, eyes glaring, panting with his efforts.

Then the tall form of Eric Larsen bounded into the hall. His eyes were blazing. He had a gun in his hand. With a nerve that Demerest admired, he took aim, waited a brief instant till his sister's squirmings left a portion of the servant's chest uncovered. Then he fired, twice.

With a hideous howl, the ugly servant dropped the woman. He took three steps backward, clutched at his chest, toppled down the stairs, with death glazing his eyeballs. The man holding Demerest whimpered and broke away. He was quick as he darted along the hall, but Eric Larsen was quicker.

He slapped a bullet after the retreating figure.

Demerest heard the spat of it against flesh, saw the gnome-man's arm jerk, heard his moan of pain.

Then the man was gone through a door. And Demerest turned and strode toward the fallen woman.

She was just picking herself up, her clothes halftorn from her. But in her agitation she didn't seem to notice them. Her brother, Eric, was panting with fury, face tense and white. The sound of the shots had aroused the dogs still more. Their barking rose to a frenzied pitch, blended with the moaning of the wind. Nana shivered, pressed her arms across her body. Eric tensely said: "Stay here. Miss Halliday is in danger. I've got to see."

Demerest started to follow, but Nana clutched him. "No, stay with me! I've got to go back to Mr. Halliday. He is in danger, too, but—" She suddenly turned, ran down the stairs to where the fallen gnome-man lay in a tumbled heap. Demerest saw her stoop and retrieve a small automatic, which the man had evidently taken from her. She came running up the stairs, her torn clothes flapping wide.

Eric Larsen had gone, and Nana motioned Demerest to follow her into Halliday's room.

Halliday was sitting up in bed, wild-eyed, staring.

His face whitened at sight of Demerest and Nana.

He said in a strangled whisper: "What—what has happened?"

Nana went to him, laid her hand on his forehead, and pushed him gently but firmly back.

"Nothing, my friend. Please calm yourself. One of your servants attacked me, and Eric had to shoot him. The man was mad. But there is nothing to fear. Eric has gone to see that Gail isn't harmed."

An unearthly howling came from the dogs, rising in a crescendo louder than at anytime before.

Halliday pushed himself up, bright feverish spots burning in his gaunt cheeks, eyes like living coals.

"No, no!" he cried. "Something must be done. Demerest, go to Gail. Help her!"

Demerest turned toward the door, but a sudden icy voice checked him. "Fool—stay quiet! Another step, and I'll kill you."

He whirled. Nana Larsen was clutching the automatic, had pointed it straight at his heart. Her pale blue eyes were glittering and deadly, chill as ice. Her voluptuous body was as rigid as a figure carved from snow. He saw her finger tighten on the trigger as she read defiance in his eyes, saw murder on her face.

He did the one thing possible, leaped sidewise and dropped flat. He heard the report of the gun, felt the fanning flame of the bullet above his head.

He caught hold of a light chair and flung it at her.

As she leaped aside screaming, he rushed her in the brief instant that her gun was deflected.

She swung wildly, crashed two more shots his way. But she missed him. He closed with her, thrusting her wrist downward and aside in a grip of iron.

She fought like a trapped panther. She kicked him, scratched him. When he wrestled the gun from her fingers, made her drop it, she bent suddenly and sank her white teeth into his arm.

He cried out, hugged her in a restricting grip that made her hardly able to move. She hissed like a cat, came up out of her bursting dress, her body gleaming, and tried to scratch out his eyes.

Demerest, in the straining emergency of the moment, did something he'd never done before, something ungentle but necessary. He crashed a fist to the point of her chin, dropping her, senseless, to the floor.

He turned away, picked up her gun, and ran to the door, with Halliday shouting for him to hurry.

He didn't know what weird conspiracy he had to face. He only knew that Gail Halliday was in some sort of danger. He seemed to feel her dark, unfathomable eyes upon him, no longer arrogant, but helpless and appealing.

He ran through the corridor down a flight of stairs, around another hall into that other wing of the mansion. He heard a sound of battle, saw Eric Larsen struggling with the second gnome-like figure. The servant had evidently jumped him, taken him by surprise. With his one good arm, he was trying to hold Larsen, clutching both wrists, to prevent him from again using his weapon. Larsen was snarling, cursing,



and the dogs in a nearby room were howling frightfully, leaping against a closed door, scratching and whining with desperate claws.

DEMEREST ran straight toward the fighting figures. He raised the gun he had taken from Nana Larsen. Then Eric Larsen saw him. With a superhuman wrench, he broke away from the servant. He whirled, his gun aimed straight at Demerest.

Demerest pumped the trigger of the small automatic. He felt a brief, sickening sensation inside when no shot sounded. The gun's magazine was empty.

He saw the quick flash of Larsen's pistol, felt a hot, stinging pain at the top of his head. He sank to his knees, as though a burning iron had been laid across his scalp. He sank inertly, saw Larsen turn and fire straight into the gnome-man's face. The ugly creature went down spouting blood.

Larsen turned and disappeared through a door.

Demerest could still see. His eyes were half-open.

His mind was even capable of registering impressions. But the stunning force of the bullet that had laid his scalp open, almost seared his brain, made movement impossible. He could only lie and stare through half-closed lids.

Dimly he heard a scream, then silence—except for the fearful racket of the dogs. A moment later, Larsen came through the door. He was carrying Gail Halliday. There was a bruise on the girl's white forehead. She was in her nightdress, with her white legs trailing. Larsen, without a single glance at Demerest, bore her along the hall and out into the night.

Demerest tried to rise. He fought within himself, as a man fights a horrible, paralyzing force; fought while his brain burned in agony, and hot blood trickled down his face. But he couldn't rise. And he saw a shadow, as in a nightmare, creep along the hall when Larsen had gone.

It was the horrible, noseless servant with the single eye. The eye was glaring now, burning with the fierce light of a devil's torch. The man was shaking. His lips were moving, writhing across his broken teeth, though no sound came from them.

He moved straight toward the door, from behind which the howling of the dogs sounded. He sprang a bolt, drew the door outward. He went down writhing under a mad rush of flying black bodies.

Like the moving ribbon of some satanic cyclorama, Demerest saw the snarling, wicked heads of the great black dogs. He saw their green eyes, their slavering lips, their bared and glistening fangs. He saw them come straight toward him in a surging flood of fury. They loomed as large as mammoths, their fangs were curving scimitars that seemed, to his dazed brain, to sweep the whole hallway. He already thought he felt them, rending, tearing at his throat, thought he felt his own hot blood choking him.

But instead the dogs passed over him, unheedingly trampled him with their flying paws, went by so near him that he could feel their fetid breaths on his face. They passed on along the hall, turned in a column and plunged through the open doorway out into the night.

Demerest lay weakly, sheer terror bringing his numb brain slowly back. He watched as the one-eyed, monstrous servant got to his feet. He saw a hideous, sinister expression on the man's scarred face. The servant disappeared for a brief moment, returned, and came toward Demerest with something in his fingers.

Demerest cringed with returning consciousness, gasped and shrank back in horror as the one-eyed

servant pressed a cold substance against his face.

Then reason asserted itself. Demerest relaxed for an instant, trembling.

The one-eyed man was pressing a wet cloth to his skin, trying to revive him. Demerest helped, battling the cloudy pain in his head. The servant got two more cloths, then dragged Demerest to his feet.

He plucked at Demerest's coat sleeve, made strange, inarticulate whimpers in his scarred throat, pointed out the door through which the dogs had gone.

Demerest understood that he was to follow them. The servant drew an old-fashioned lantern from a closet. He shuffled ahead of Demerest, still beckoning fiercely.

As he neared the doorway, Demerest heard a sound he was never to forget, a sound of mortal, bloodcurdling horror coming out of the darkness— a scream torn from a human throat. Above it, he heard the snarling of the dogs like that of a pack of ravening wolves.

The one-eyed servant hurried forward.

Demerest, weak and trembling, followed. The cold rain on his face helped to revive him, washed the blood from the crease along his scalp. The sound of the horrible battle ahead lent speed to his feet.

Then under the glow of the lantern, he saw what was happening; saw a bloodstained body leap upward, like a huge white fish, above a sea of tossing black muzzles. The sea of savage animal forms was speared with green points of light, like stars blazing above water.

LARSEN, stripped from the waist up, his flesh torn already into awful ribbons, was striking right and left with his gun butt. But the fierce dogs pulled him down. His crimson-stained back disappeared under a tidal wave of furry bodies. He didn't appear again, and the sound of gurgling, bubbling worryings that followed sickened Demerest.

The servant waved his skinny arms, again making meaningless noises. The dogs snarled and broke away a little. Demerest caught sight of the still, shapeless thing that had a moment before been Larsen. Faint and sickened, he turned toward the slumped form on the ground a little way off.

The dogs, jaws dripping, instantly sprang away from their dead quarry. Demerest thought for an instant they were going to fly at him. But they ringed the form of Gail Halliday and snarled their menace at him until the clucking of the noseless servant made them draw off.

Then Demerest and the servant bent over Gail Halliday. She lay unconscious but feebly stirring, the thin, rain-soaked nightdress plastered to the lovely lines of her body, beautiful, Demerest thought, as some reclining, fabled goddess. The servant plucked Demerest's arm, made motions for him to pick the girl up and carry her.

Demerest did so, feeling a strange, thrilling sense of protective tenderness as her warm body lay against his chest. Her face was upturned. Her black, silky hair lay in damp, sweet ringlets on her glorious shoulders.

As the servant led the way, Demerest bore her toward the house, leaving that grisly thing out in the dark. The dogs fell into step behind him, escorting him now, as though in carrying their strange mistress he had become their master.

Demerest thrilled with an exultant feeling of power as he heard their padding feet.

As he entered the house, and the light fell on Gail Halliday's face, he stopped in wonder.

The pain in his head seemed to turn to a quivering song; the beat of tumultuous music. She was beautiful, so beautiful, that he bent irresistibly, as one in a dream, and pressed his lips against her warm, damp ones. It was a tender kiss, respectful in its lightness, an impulse born of the whirling giddiness in his head, and the great strain he'd been under.

But as he kissed her, Gail Halliday's eyes opened. The lids fluttered like moth wings for a moment, uncovering the dark, glorious depths that lay beneath. She lay still in his arms for a breathless second, looking up, while a slow, strange smile softened her face. Childlike, trusting, her arms tightened about his neck for the barest instant.

Then color flooded her pale cheeks. She slipped from his grasp, said huskily: "We must go to my father. He may have been hurt. Those terrible people!"

She turned and ran down the hall, her damp hair swinging against her neck. Demerest and the servant followed, around the wing of the house, up a stairway, into Halliday's room.

HALLIDAY was sitting up in bed, face twitching, hoarsely calling out. Nana Larsen still lay crumpled.

Halliday sank back gasping and held out his shaking arms to his daughter. She fled to them, said soft, reassuring things to comfort him. Then suddenly remembering her thin nightdress, she shrank shyly away into a corner.

Demerest stared at Halliday, and the sick man, finding his voice, spoke to his daughter. "Please go outside a minute, Gail. There are some things I want to tell our friend, Demerest—things he will want to know."

When the girl had gone, Halliday grasped Demerest's hand in his. "You have been kind," he said, "so kind to come here. You have saved us."

Demerest shook his head. He pointed to the noseless servant. "Thank him. He saved things, just now, by turning the dogs on Larsen. Larsen shot the two others. He is dead, now, himself."

"If you hadn't come," said Halliday, "my servants would never have had the courage to act.

Your arrival was the signal."

"The signal for what?"

"To make an attempt to free ourselves from the bondage of the Larsens." Halliday bent forward, his voice trembling. "You must have guessed that they had some hold over me. I know I am dying; I can talk freely, now. There are many things I've done that I shouldn't, but I didn't deserve such persecution. The Larsens were criminals, wicked people trying to steal my money—and Eric Larsen wanted Gail."

"I don't think I quite understand," said Demerest.

"No, no, you wouldn't. But this will help to explain it. I killed the man who ran off with my wife—shot him in a fair fight after he had caused her death by his brutal treatment. I am not a murderer, really—but the law is sometimes cruel. It seemed best to leave Europe, quickly. I thought nobody knew, but the Larsens learned what I had done somehow. They followed me here to blackmail me, bleed me. They threatened to expose me as a criminal, unless I turned over everything I had. They knew I was old, dying, and when I was stubborn, Eric Larsen saw a way of accomplishing his ends through Gail. He might have succeeded—if you hadn't come. He would have taken her away—I don't know where."

Halliday lay back breathing laboredly for a moment. Demerest could see the tortured pounding of his heart, and knew that the man's days were numbered. Halliday went on slowly, huskily:

“In many ways, as I said in my letter, I've been a wicked, selfish fool. But after my wife, Grace, left me, after I'd brought up Gail from babyhood, nursed her, watched over her, I made up my mind that no man should ever take her from me. She had reached lovely young womanhood when I brought her here. I tried my best to see that no attractive man should ever meet her. I hired the most hideous servants I could find. I saw to it that even our family doctor was old and ugly. I went further, and encouraged a scorn of men in Gail herself, told her never to speak to any stranger, gave her clothes that were unconventional, queer. Even the dogs were my doing. She's held in such terror by the few neighbors we have, that no man would go near her.

“But it was wrong, wicked. What has happened in the last few weeks has made me see it. She might, even in her loneliness, have been beguiled by that monster, Larsen. It was wrong, and I want to ask a favor of you, Demerest. I want to pay you handsomely to see, after I'm dead, that Gail leads a more normal life: that she meets some good young men and finds love and marriage, if that is her wish. Will you do that for me, in memory of the friendship that I bore your father?”

Demerest started to speak, then turned his head.

Gail Halliday had stolen back into the room. She stood just inside the doorway, tall, white, lovely as a vision, her dark eyes fixed upon him, a strange, knowing smile softening her lips.

Demerest turned toward her father and bowed his head. “I think I can promise to take good care of Gail,” he said. “Something tells me she and I are always going to understand each other, and be— dear friends.”