

There was a sound of
sobbing in the old
graveyard



Candid Camera

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FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS
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SULKAS rocked the film tight on the spool of his small camera, sat the lens cap firmly in place. Then he smiled out across the haze-dimmed vista of the Mall with all the complacency of one who has done a day's work well. The last four frames had been used up that afternoon. Surely one of them would bring a prize.

His candid camera shots had won him honorable mention three successive Sundays in the *Times-Mail's* gravure section. One of those he'd made today was bound to put him in the money. They'd like that eight-foot, thirtieth second shot of the blond child with her hoop, or the park squirrel as it hung head down against the bole of an oak tree.

Animals and children always went across big, he reflected. This time he had something. Autumn haze was in the air. Autumn shadows marched across the flagstones of the Mall. In the west, the live coals of the sunset slowly died beneath the ashes of twilight. South of the park, the towering apartments were transfigured in the soft blue dusk until they looked like castles in a Maxfield Parrish painting. Lights were blossoming in their windows.

Behind them in the midtown section, flashing signs flaunted their semaphoric sales talks.

"You are a camera artist?"

Sulkas turned with a start. The question came in a deep, courteous voice, yet somehow he was vaguely frightened. A second ago he had been all alone, for this section of the Mall was deserted. He had not even heard a footfall on the flagstones.

"Not really an artist," he replied with belated civility. "Just an amateur looking for unusual shots, besides, photography was not actually an art."

Just why he stopped, he could not say. He didn't consider photography an art, like painting or sculpture. There was no reason why he should claim it was. Yet beneath the stranger's glance his words ceased as abruptly as if he had caught

himself talking blasphemy in a priest's presence. Again he felt that little, scarcely noticeable qualm of nameless dread as he looked at the man beside him on the bench.

There was no reason for it. The stranger was a foreigner, but there were many foreigners in New York. A long, loose cloak, like a naval officer's enveloped him. His hat was a broad-brimmed black felt. His clothes, too, seemed to be a dull black that caught and pocketed the light. His skin was olive and his long, thin lips were intensely red. About him was the pleasant smell of scented bath soap and fine powder. Underneath the perfume, though, lay the faintest suggestion of another odor, like the hint of decay.

"Not an art?" the deep, genteel voice answered in an almost shocked tone. "My dear sir, it is more than art. It's nature! The painter at his best can but show beholders how he saw a scene. Photography grasps the fleeting fraction of a second and holds it for eternity. How, save by photography, can we record the stress of great sorrow, delight, or terror? How can a painter, daubing- artificial impressions on canvas, or a sculptor, cutting-lifeless puppets out of lifeless stone, imprison such great moments of supreme emotion for the future? Only photography can do this."

"You are probably right," Sulkas said hesitantly.

HIS UNEASINESS was increasing. The low-spoken, well bred insistence of the argument seemed emphatic and fanatical, as if it had been shouted. When the stranger stripped a black glove from his hand, drew out a gleaming black case, and selected a long cigarette from it, Sulkas looked at him in fascination.

The bared hand was white as marble, with long tapering nails -- as red and pointed as a woman's yet Sulkas knew they were not manicured. A match flared suddenly. Its little point of orange flame seemed to be striking garnet flashes of reflection in the

deep-set eyes. Smoke wafted toward him like a cloud of heavy incense. It, too, had that vague charnel odor.

"Emotions," continued the stranger, "they are the only things that count. The world waits for the man who can capture sorrow, delight, or terror for the ages. My young friend, think of that next time you train your camera on a child or squirrel in the park, A thousand other men are taking similar pictures.

They may achieve a paltry prize from some newspaper. But is that fame, success? No, my friend, that's mediocrity. Fame and recognition wait for the successful man, but he who would succeed must dare to defy convention."

He rose and turned south toward the city. The echo of his laugh came softly, almost mockingly, as he walked off.

Sulkas watched him, wondering. How had he known about the little girl with her hoop and the squirrel on the oak tree? He hadn't been there when Sulkas made those shots, yet— For the first time Sulkas noticed the stranger's limp.

He leaned heavily upon a black malacca cane, hobbling as if one of his feet were deformed. A puff of breeze snatched up the long black cloak, raised its hem until it seemed to flutter like the wings of a giant bat.

The sun was sinking like a stricken ship into the tossing sea of cloud-rack in the west. Suddenly it disappeared. With its going, shadows closed down on the world like an extinguisher upon a guttering candle. A gust of wind came keening through the almost leafless trees. The feel of it was like an icy spray against his face. Sulkas shivered as he turned up the collar of his topcoat. There was no moon. Everything around him appeared dim and indistinct, unreal as ghosts are unreal or objects on a foggy night...

ALL NIGHT the stranger's mocking advice stood out in his memory like the afterimage of a flash-bulb's brilliant glare upon the retina.

"A paltry prize from some newspaper. That's mediocrity.... He who would succeed must dare to defy convention."

His ambitions of yesterday seemed childish. Why should he work to win a paltry prize from some newspaper? Fame and fortune waited for the man who dared. Well, why not? There was Hajos, rich and famous for his camera studies, and Carmody and Fischbein, hardly less well known. Why shouldn't Sulkas force his way into their select company? Why should he seek no higher goal than honorable mention or a miserable five dollars for his artistry?

It was a lovely autumn morning, cool and brisk, with sunlight sparkling on the tiny pools left by the melting frost. The sky above the half-bare trees was as blue as a china plate. A high-key day, he mused, almost too much light. The shadows would be sharp and harsh, He'd have to watch out for halation, keep the shutter closed down to a mere pinpoint—

"Oh, I'm sorry, little girl!" he exclaimed as he lurched against the broken picket fence before the vacant house. Sunk in his thoughts, he had walked, unseeing, into a small child who occupied the center of the sidewalk, with a kitten clutched against her threadbare jacket.

Sulkas looked at her carefully. Everything and everybody came within his range of possibility for camera study. The day before he would have snapped her picture as she stood there with the kitten in her arms. Probably he would have called it "Pals" or "The Little Mother."

The child was photogenic, no doubt of it. Her large eyes and her little pointed chin, the slim, small throat and the brush of straight black hair made her ideal photographic material. The decent poverty of her dress, worn coat, patched skirt, and several times patched shoes, the pinch of malnutrition in her cheeks-- there was pathos in the love of a slum child for her pet.

"Why not?" he asked himself. Plainly as if they were spoken in his ear, he heard

the strangers smooth, persuasive words: Fame and fortune for the man who can depict the ultimate in sorrow, delight, and terror

He slipped the lens cap from his camera, swung the instrument before him as an army officer hangs, his binoculars.

"Let me see your kitty," he said as he held his free hand toward the child. "What's her name?"

The little girl dug one scuffed shoe into the bare earth bordering the footpath. Childhood's innate suspicion of the good faith of grownups made her clutch her pet closer to her. Head bent until her chin was resting on the kitten, she looked obliquely up at him.

"Give me that cat!" With a snatching grasp he dragged the kitten from the grimy little hands and held it high above his head. "I'm going to kill it."

The child went suddenly rigid. Her lower lip began to quiver, then dropped and curled up like a frosted flower petal as her mouth squared with a quick retch of agony. Tears came to her eyes, rolled in big, slow drops down her thin cheeks. Her hands were clasped before her in a piteously entreating gesture.

Sulkas flipped the trigger of his camera. The light had been just right, he had maneuvered the child into just the proper position. Lighting, distance, timing—everything was perfect. He had made an ideal shot.

"Capture sorrow," the stranger had advised.

Sulkas had bettered the instructions. Here was sorrow, blended with surprise, fear, and entreaty. A little, life-starved child was pleading for the return and the life of the thing which she loved most dearly. Here was something real at last. His feet were on the ladder. He was climbing to success and recognition.

With the squirming, mewling cat wedged underneath his arm, he headed down the steep street toward St. Mary's Park. Behind him he could hear the child's thin,

pipng wail. Once he looked back. The little girl, had thrown herself face downward on the grass. With her head cupped in her folded hands she was crying in a strangled plaint of anguish.

"Kitty, kitty! O my little, little kitty!"...

THE IDIOT stood in his front yard, grinning fatuously at passers by. Sulkas noticed him as he went past—A giant's bulk of body, fat but not soft, with vacant, lackluster eyes and a mouth that sagged and drooled. His head was hideously deformed as if it had been molded in wax and squeezed out of alignment while still warm. His whole body was massive and grotesque as the monster of an insane artist's drawing. An animal he was, a thing that knew the world only because of its impact on his five senses.

As Sulkas reached the little iron fence that shut the idiot's play yard from the street, the uncouth creature bobbed and grinned at him. Once or twice, as he might have tossed peanuts to the bears in Bronx Park, Sulkas had thrown the imbecile a bit of candy. Now the oaf came shambling toward the fence, both hands outstretched, a half apologetic, half-ingratiating leer upon his malformed features. Sulkas paused in midstep, almost in midbreath. He swung his camera into position.

"Here, catch!" he called peremptorily, and tossed the little cat into the idiot's outstretched paws.

The fat cheeks creased and wrinkled as the grin grew deeper. Laughter bubbled up between the thick, slack lips with a noise like the gurgling of a spate of unclean water in a waste pipe.

"Purty, purty!" cried the idiot as he ran hands trembling with delight along the terrified kitten's sleek back. His voice was high and thin and childish. Somehow it was horrifying, that weak treble coming from that monstrous bulk. "Purty, purty pussy!"

Sulkas' finger was upon the camera trigger, but some inward warning bade him

hold the pressure. The kitten, terrified by the great fingers fumbling over it, had writhed and struggled to get free. Failing that, it had lashed out with its claws, etching a bright trail of blood across the hand that held it-like a vise.

It was amazing how quickly the laughter died in the big, malformed face. The pendulous lips drew inward as if they were a purse whose string was tightened suddenly. The puffy lids came down across the senseless eyes and veiled them till they were mere lines of pale color. The huge fists knotted.

The kitten had no time to scream its dying agony. The soft ball of fur lay still where it had been thrown on the grass. There was a rising roar of laughter. It churned and boiled as if its force were so great that the idiot's gaping mouth and open throat could not provide enough room for its escape. Rolling like the thunder of a beaten kettledrum, it betrayed no joy, no merriment, no gladness, only the amusement of a senseless devil watching the antics of the tortured damned.

"Now!"

The command seemed to come from somewhere in Sulkas' inner consciousness, yet from an outside source as well. He clicked the trigger of his camera. Then he hurried down the street with his spine cold, the waves of demoniac laughter rolling after him

ON mauve paper, almost as thick and heavy as a blotter, the letter was written in violet ink in a great sprawling hand that took a line for each six words. Brief to the point of curtness, it was like a royal command.

Come to see me at your earliest convenience and bring negatives of the two pictures published in todays Times-Mail

That was all, no punctuation, no salutation, no complimentary closing, not even a date. But the thrill of it raced through

Sulkas' veins like brandy. Hajos, the great cameraman had addressed a letter to him with his own hand.

The Times-Mail had accepted the two prints he'd sent them. The crying child he had called "Bereavement." The laughing imbecile he had labeled "Idiot's Delight." Both had won honorable mention. First and second prizes had gone, respectively, to pictures showing a blond child trundling a hoop and a park squirrel hanging head down on the trunk of an oak tree. The irony of it had brought a bitter laugh to his mouth, but the letter from Hajos washed it away.

Feverishly he made ready for the interview, chose and discarded half a dozen ties, fussed and fumed while knotting them. His fingers, shook so he could scarcely make them do his bidding. The subway seemed to crawl as it bore him downtown. The crosstown bus seemed slower than a snail as it bumped through the traffic. But finally, with a heart that beat so wildly it was almost stifling him, he stood before the great man's door.

"Hajos" - was the only word upon the ground-glass panel, without a given name or statement of his calling. But what need was there? Hajos was Hajos. Nobody knew if he had any other name. Certainly he never used it if he had. As to his calling, would anyone add "painter" to the name of Michelangelo, or "sculptor" to Rodin's? In all the world of photography there was no name so famous or so potent as Hajos, yet Sulkas had come by personal appointment!

A soft light burned above the gleaming desk in the center of the antechamber. Everything about the room was black. The black composition floor gleamed like polished jet. Dull, soot-black walls and ceiling gave back no gleam of light from the black shaded lamp. The furniture of polished ebony was upholstered in black silk brocade. In the coned rays of the desk lamp he descried the man at the desk, lighted like an actor on a darkened stage. The lean, sardonic face had eyes as black as coal, with heavy brows like

circumflexes over them. The hair, dead-black as the bushy brows, was brushed back sharply, showing a widows peak on the forehead. A long, hooked nose; a wide, almost colorless mouth; long, sharply slanting jaws that terminated in a long, sharp chin made it a terrifying face. It was the face of one who knows the weaknesses and wickedness of others and holds aloof in scorn, indifference, and contempt .

Sulkas stopped upon the threshold and drew in his breath so sharply that he seemed to sob. For just an instant- panic caught him by the throat. The black-globed light threw curious shadows on the farther wall. For a fleeting instant it seemed that he saw the figure of a tall and slender man in black with a wide hat and long, enveloping cloak of the stranger of the park. Then reason took the reins again. Of course there was no-body there.

"Mr. Hajos?" he asked tentatively.

"Not meestair," please," the thick, harsh voice reproved. "Those who call Hajos "meestair" insult heem. Hajos iss Hajos. It iss enough."

"I'm sorry." Suikas swallowed, his embarrassment. "You wrote me--"

"Yess." The man's reply was like a hiss. "You haf the prints or those pictures? Good. Giff them here."

When he took them in his long, thin dead-white hand, he sat silent, looking at the little negatives as he held them against the light.

"You haf the master's touch, younk man," he pronounced. "Emotions are the only things that count. The world waits for the man who can imprison supreme emotion and preserve it for the ages. Yess."

Sulkas shivered till he thought his teeth must be chattering. Hajos had used practically the same words the stranger in the park had used! He choked down the fear that had possessed him. Hajos had laid the films on the desk and put one long white hand palm down on each side of them.

"I want them," he declared.

"Of course Mr- I mean Hajos," Sulkas

stammered. "You're entirely welcome."

"No man iss welcome to anything. Everything must be paid for, and money is the cheapest thing, to pay. I shall pay for them." From the desk drawer, Hajos drew out a sheaf of bills and tossed them uncounted to Sulkas. "Take that as earnest money on our bargain. Tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day after that, perhaps, you make the last print of the trilogy?"

"I don't think I quite understand" began Sulkas.

A sharp, impatient exclamation from Hajos cut him short.

"You onnerstan me well enough, I theenk. Here," he took the little films between his thumb and forefinger--"we haf prints of sorrow and eletion, no? Ver' well. Now you go out and get me a print of horror, terror, fright. What you call it iss no matter. You know what I mean. You get me a print of someone who has just found out some dreadful thing he knows cannot be so iss so. You onnerstan? You bring that print to me, and then we really begin to talk business. Yess. Now go. Hajos would be alone."

THUS summarily dismissed, Sulkas went out. He hesitated in the corridor. His head was whirling. Hajos had complimented him, said he had the master's touch. Hajos had commissioned him to take a picture. Hajos had bought his negatives. For the first time, Sulkas looked at the sheaf of bills clutched in his hand. He hadn't thought of counting it, but-- one, two, ten, a dozen --twenty fifty~dollar bills were in the bundle!

Hajos, the greatest master of photography in the world, had bought two films from him for a thousand dollars! He had bought two films from him for a thousand dollars! He had bought them from him, Paul Sulkas, who only yesterday had almost wept with disappointment over failure to receive a ten-dollar first prize from the *Times-Mail* for those same pictures!...

The idea did not come to Sulkas full formed. He built it up a little at a time, picking, choosing, selecting, discarding.

Finally, as a picture puzzle or mosaic is at last completed, he worked out the pattern. All was ready, actors, scene, and plot. Only the performance waited, and the time for that, too, he had fixed upon.

The Stephans who lived out past Woodhaven, were giving a Hallowe'en party. Between their cottage and the city was a long, deserted stretch of desolate country. Almost in the center of it was the old Mount Holly Cemetery, graveyard of ten generations of Long Islanders, burying place for slaves when slavery was as legal in New York as in Virginia.

One plot, a little briar-grown patch of wasteland in the corner of the fence, had been reserved in olden days for the burial of suicides and executed felons, spies, and traitors. That would be the ideal spot, and Valborg Pettersen should help him. It would be pretty rough on Val, but when he'd conquered stubborn fame and made reluctant fortune come to heel, Sulkas would make it up to her and more. Besides, she would do anything for him. He knew that she'd forgive him.

He had known Valborg since they had been in grammar school together. From a chubby, tow-haired, apple-cheeked Norwegian lass, she'd grown into a tall, statuesque, lovely woman. Copper hair reached down to her knees and she had steadfast blue eyes, a fine skin, and teeth that showed as white as milk behind the vivid crimson of her long, firm lips.

Sulkas, with his eye for beauty and proportion, could not remember having seen a body that stood so straight and proudly as hers. Moreover, she loved him. Sometimes he felt unworthy, for hers was not a cheap and showy affection, but the deep, abiding love that women of the Northern races give to only one man in a whole life time. Anytime he chose to ask her, she would accept him, he was certain. But with the artist's concentration on his work, with ambition

battling frustration, he had temporarily held back an avowal of affection.

Somehow it put heart into a fellow, especially one with artistic temperament -and Sulkas never doubted he had that - to know a beautiful girl was waiting for him, needing only his first word to declare her love with all the open-hearted fervor of her generous nature. She'd go to the Stephans' party with him, of course. They'd drive out early in the evening, spend the night in games and telling ghost tales. Then-

"It cannot fail, it's sure-fire!" he told himself exultantly.

A thought bothered him for a moment. Valborg had been feeling rather low lately. The doctor had said her heart was not quite up to par, cautioned her against late hours and too much exercise or excitement. But that was all a pack of nonsense. What did doctors know about it, anyway? They always had to find an ailment when a person called on them, otherwise they couldn't justify their fees...

RED APPLES had been ducked for, fortunes told. The guests had danced to music from the radio. Now, with the empty plates of the repast stacked in the kitchen, they gathered in the firelight to spin ghost yarns. All the old favorites were paraded - the Golden Arm, the Monkey's Paw, Wandering Willie's Tale. Sulkas had grown restless. In a little while good nights would be in order, and he had to set his stage.

"Speaking of hauntings," he said abruptly with raised voice, "did any of you know that old Mount Holly Cemetery is supposed to be infested with a specially malignant specter?"

A little murmur of awed negatives went round the firelit room.

"Mount Holly, right over there by Ridgewood? Tell us about it!"

This was better, he thought complacently. Now to work.

"There doesn't seem to be much known about it, really," he began with a

light cough of deprecation. "The origin of the legend seems to have been lost. Some say it is the ghost of a sorcerer executed by the Dutch for witchcraft. There's another version that declares the specter is the wraith of a traitor who betrayed a company of Continentals to the British. Judging from the things I've heard, I'd say it is the ghost of a slave who set fire to the farmhouse of his master and was trapped and burned to death himself.

"Just whose the ghost it is seems a mystery, but there are some pretty well authenticated stories of its appearance especially on Halloween. It must be an unpleasant looking thing enveloped in a long white winding sheet, with only a skull and no face, all glowing with hell fire. Its dreadful power is to blast the person who sees it with blindness."

"Blindness?" asked Tim Stephan.

"How do you mean, Paul?"

"All I know is what I've heard, of course. But up to twenty years ago there was an old man out at Rockville Centre. He had been stone-blind for almost fifty years. Until the night he tried to take a short cut through Mount Holly, though, he could see as well as anybody. Better than most folks, in fact. He was a famous marksman and hardly ever failed to carry off first prize at the turkey shoots they used to have on the island every Christmas.

"Well, it seems one night he found himself out late, with no way of getting home but walking. A storm was blowing up. He was in so great a hurry that he decided to cut through Mount Holly. He almost got through. Just as he came to the plot reserved for suicides' and felons' burial, something seemed to rise up from the ground in front of him— a form draped in a sheet, with a skeleton's face all, glowing, as if it were incandescent, and eyes as green as a cat's. He stood rooted to the spot with terror. The thing went at him with a dreadful groan. Then, just as he thought it was about to seize him, it exploded."

"Exploded?" came the chorus from the listeners, "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything," he answered reprovingly. "I wasn't there. I didn't see it. I'm only saying what he said. The thing seemed to explode, vanish in a blaze of blinding light that left him dazzled-- permanently."

No one spoke for a minute. Was this a hoax, a trick to force a final question and make a fool of him who asked it? At last Tim Stephan cleared his throat.

"All right, I'll bite. What do you mean, he was permanently dazzled, Paul?"

"Just what I say. He never got his sight back. They found him the next morning, threshing around the graveyard, barging into tombstones, tearing himself to ribbons on the briars, blind as a mole. He was only twenty then. He lived past seventy, but all the years between he spent in darkness"

A long-drawn exclamation of horror exhaled through the living room, almost as if it were a gust of wind become articulate, Sulkas glanced at Valborg sitting on a hassock by the fire, elbow on knee, chin cupped in one hand, her wine-red party dress splashed out upon the dark blue of the rug. The dancing firelight added strength to the rich rose in her cheeks. Lord, she was a beauty!

It was a low, contemptible trick he planned to play. Softly as a half-heard echo, but loud enough to drown compunction, came the words of the mysterious stranger in the park.

"He who would succeed must dare to defy convention."...

HE HAD let out almost all the water from his radiator when he had parked in the driveway. They came abreast of the low picket fence that shut Mount Holly Cemetery from the back road he had chosen as a "short-cut." The little gage on the dashboard glowed fiery red in warning.

"The darn thing's empty again!" he groaned.

Valborg turned questioning eyes on him. Throughout the drive she had been

silent and tense. Once or twice he'd stolen sidelong glances at her, noticed how she sat with hands clasped in her lap, her eyes directed straight before her, as though she strove to see something beyond her vision's range. His story had struck deeper in her mind than he had dared to hope.

"What, Paul?" she asked.

"My radiator's dry again. I should have had it fixed this afternoon, but I thought I could get by tonight." He shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation: "Looks as if there's nothing to do but get out and rustle up a refill."

"But where can we get water here? There's not a house for half a mile or more."

"Afraid of the fiery ghost of Mount Holly?"

"The fiery ghost?"

"That's what I asked. This is Mount Holly Cemetery? With a vague, all-in-elusive, gesture, he swung his arm toward the dark patch of tree-grown land upon their right. "This is where the fiery ghost comes rising from the ground. All the same, there's bound to be a well or hydrant there, where I can get a bucketful of water. Mind waiting here, or would you rather come into the cemetery with me?"

"I'll wait," she answered.

"All right." He reached into the luggage trunk and found the canvas bucket, all loaded with his stage properties. "Sure you won't be afraid?"

"I probably will be Paul, but..."

"I'll be right back," he broke in. "If I see the specter coming at me, I'll let out a yell. Will you come to my help?"

"I'll come, Paul," she responded soberly. "You know that--"

"Of course I do," he interrupted. "You're a true friend, Val!"

Reaching through the opened window of the car, he found her hand and squeezed it. In the dashboard light he saw a quick flush come into her cheeks. Poor Val, she loved him so! He was a heel, But through his brain rang the refrain:

"Dare to defy convention!"

"Be seeing you," he said cheerfully and drew himself up to the fence top. "Keep your chin up and your ears open for my cry for succor."

This was going to be almost too easy, he assured himself as he picked a path between the tombstones. He'd been over the terrain that afternoon, There, by the van Replier plot, where the copse of hemlock made a solid-black background for a white face and blond hair, was just the spot. Workmen had been busy on the old monument, scrubbing it with wire brushes, spraying it with dilute acid to eat off the grime of years. The grass about the base was seared and brittle as if burned wherever the acid had touched it.

"Have to watch this stuff," one of the men had explained when he'd commented on their rubber gloves, aprons, and heavy goggles. "Seems like when this dilute muriatic acid mixes with the moss from these old stones, it forms a poison that just destroys human tissue. If you've got a cut, even a tiny scratch on your hand, it'll give you an infection that'll take a year to cure." Avoiding the acid-scarred patch of turf, Sulkas drew the things from their concealment in the bucket. A Hallowe'en ghost costume- long white linen sheet with hoodlike top to cover up the head, a skullfaced mask with eyes of green isinglass, the little pocket flashlight, with its green bulb, set just below the false-face to illuminate it. Then his camera with its flashbulb set in the parabolic reflector -- he'd need lots of light for this shot, but the heavy-duty bulb would furnish it.

Everything okay? He checked his equipment once more. There could be no second try if anything went wrong. All was in order.

He drew the ghostly costume over his clothes, set the mask in place, tested the flashlight to make sure it would properly light the skull-face with its green, unearthly glow. Then he swung his camera around his neck and focused it on a spot eight feet away, just where the path broke

through the clump of hemlock. Now--

"Val!" he shouted, and excitement lent something like trembling fear to his voice. "Help, Val! Help me!"

VALBORG drew the furred collar of her coat higher around her throat. It had been hard to wear a mask of festive gaiety all evening, to take part in the bantering fun of the party when more than anything she wanted to creep into his arms and beg:

"Hold me tight against your heart, Paul. It won't be for long."

She'd taken it standing that afternoon, like the thoroughbred she was. When Dr. Mendel gave his final verdict, she had smiled at him, chin up, lips firm.

"Haven't you forgotten something, Doctor?" she had asked.

"Forgotten?" His brows drew down in a thoughtful frown. "No, I don't think so, Miss Pettersen."

"Oh, maybe I'm confused. It was a judge I thought of."

"A judge?"

"Yes, You know, when they pronounce the death sentence, they add, "And may God have mercy on your soul."

Now she was alone with her thoughts, and they frightened her. In the faint glow from the dashboard light, her face looked sad. Her cheeks were hollow, and her red lips had a tragic downward droop. If only Paul would tell her, she thought wistfully. She knew he loved her, as much as he was capable of loving anything or anybody but himself. She had read it in his eyes, but she wanted it from his lips. It would be something-- Not much but more than nothing -- to carry into the dark with her.

She turned to look into the deep gloom of the old cemetery. She'd be lying in a place like that before the birds came north next spring. She shuddered, and a tiny blue vein fluttered at the base of her throat. There was a thin light, like a silver needle, here and there between the almost bare-limbed trees. The early morning wind soughed through them like a ghostly chorus. Farther on, where

evergreens were hunched in a small copse, a darker darkness loomed in the night. If only Paul would say he loved her, that he needed her --

The cry came suddenly, astonishingly, pitched shrilly, quavering with mortal dread.

"Val! Help, Val! Help me!"

She was out of the car with a bound, scrambling up and over the crude fence, heedless of the rents the pickets made in her dress, unmindful of the ruin of her satin sandals and silk stockings.

"Where are you, Paul?" she called in answer. "What is it? I'm coming!"

Again she heard the cry, lower this time, seemingly exhausted. A briar reached out thorn-clawed branches, tearing at her dress. She jerked the fabric savagely, felt it rip as it came loose. With one hand she gathered up the dress above her knees. With the other she thrust back the low-hung branches of the hemlocks.

"Paul, Paul, where are you?"

Visions danced before her inward eye. Voices chattered in her mind's ear. She was in a haunted graveyard where spirits of the damned dead walked the earth. Racial memories rose and gibbered at her, the trolls and goblins of her Norse ancestors' folklore, the "sendings" of the Finnish witches, the Erlking and his troop of demon courtiers. The very trees seemed menacing, not soft and friendly like the trees in the park. Gaunt and bare and sinister, they stretched their leafless branches up to the black sky to draw down darker secrets from it.

Her breath was coming faster, and her heart was wrenching like a creature in its death throes. She was sobbing hard, dry, ugly gasps of utter and complete exhaustion.

"Paul! Paul, where are you?"

OUT OF THE blackness before her it came, tall and obscene, the light that emanates from rotting things upon its bare-boned face, a green reflection as from

pools of stagnant water in its foul eyes. A winding-sheet, all smeared with patches of grave mold, was flung around it. Teeth, long and sharp and gleaming as a wolf's fangs gnashed in fleshless gums. A groan -- half-harrowing outcry of pain, half-wicked, triumphant laughter -- came from the lipless mouth.

She stopped abruptly, as if she had run full tilt into a solid wall. One hand went to her throat. Her mouth opened for a scream that refused to come. Everything inside her seemed to knot and contract. Her eyes were starting from their sockets. Her heart gave a cold nauseating lurch as a great blaze of blinding light flared in her face. Then darkness, black as an enveloping cloak, closed on her.

She did not feel the impact as her body struck the ground, for she was almost past sensation. Faintly, as if it were miles off and looked at through a dense shadow, she saw Paul's face above her. Around his shoulders was a wisp of flimsy cotton fabric. Torn aside and hanging around his neck by an elastic was the remnant of a skull-faced mask.

"Valborg!" he was whispering. "Valborg dear, it's all right. It was a joke, a gag to get a picture of you when you thought you'd seen a ghost. It's all right now, I tell you, Val This is Paul -- Paul."

With an effort greater than she'd thought she could make, she raised her heavy eyelids. For just a moment she looked at him in the flashlights glow. Love was in her eyes and forgiveness. He had hurt her cruelly, mortally, but she was just amazed to find him unkind. A whisper breathed from between her lips.

"Oh, Paul, how could you-- and I loved you so --" Then darkness fell -- Final, absolute, eternal.

"Val!" He bent above her, hands pressed on the seared grass where she lay. "Valborg, listen to me, please! It's all right."

Suddenly he knew it was no use to all, to plead. Those ears that never heard him say "I love you" were past all hearing. Those quiet, lightly parted lips would never speak to

him again.

"Oh, my God Almighty!"

It was not so much an exclamation as a prayer, forced from him as the realization of his littleness, his pettiness, his utter and complete unworthiness, came to him with a dreadful clarity. Except for his ambition--

Sick pain was clutching at his heart. His eyes were aching with the force of tears that would not be held back. Involuntarily he cupped his palms against his face. A dreadful pain shot down his cheeks and up his brow. A fiery liquid seemed to sink into his skin. He took his lower lip between his teeth to stifle back a scream, but flesh and nerves could endure just so much, no more.

In the blackness overhead, there burst a streak of light as the moon thrust aside the curtains of the overhanging clouds. A web of twinkling stars stretched clear across the zenith, like a chain of diamonds on a background of black velvet. But Sulkas did not see them as he turned his face up to the sky.

There was a sound of sobbing in the old graveyard, bitter with heartbreak and despair. A weasel, scuttling to her burrow in the sanctuary of the cemetery, paused to look at the two forms stretched on the acid-blasted grass. She raised one forefoot daintily, twitched her nose, studying the man's scent.

Then she slipped off noiselessly to her lair. There was no need for her caution. But how was she to know the man-thing was no menace to her, that he mourned his dead love -- and his sight?