

# The Sign of Venus

By Robert W. Chambers

In the card room the game, which had started from a chance suggestion, bid fair to develop into an all-night séance: the young foreign diplomat had shed his coat and lighted a fresh cigar; somebody threw a handkerchief over the face of the clock, and a sleepy club servant took reserve orders for two dozen siphons and other details.

“That lets me out,” said Hetherford, rising from his chair with a nod at the dealer. He tossed his cards on the table, settled side obligations with the man on his left, yawned, and put on his hat.

Somebody remonstrated: “It’s only two o’clock, Hetherford; you have no white man’s burden sitting up for you at home.”

But Hetherford shook his head, smiling.

So a servant removed his chair, another man cut in, the dealer dealt cards all around. Presently from somewhere in the smoke haze came a voice, “Hearts.” And a quiet voice retorted, “I double it.”

Hetherford lingered a moment, then turned on his heel, sauntered out across the hallway and down the stairs into the court, refusing with a sign the offered cab.

Breathing deeply, yawning once or twice, he looked up at the stars. The night air refreshed him; he stood a moment, thoughtfully contemplating his half-smoked cigar, then tossed it away and stepped out into the street.

The street was quiet and deserted; darkened brownstone mansions stared at him through somber windows as he passed; his footsteps echoed across the pavement like the sound of footsteps following.

His progress was leisurely; the dreary monotony of the house fronts soothed him. He whistled a few bars of a commonplace tune, crossed the deserted avenue under the electric lamps, and entered the dimly lighted street beyond.

Here all was silence; the doors of many houses were boarded up—sign that their tenants had migrated to the country. No shadowy cat fled along the iron railings at his approach; no night watchman prowled in deserted dooryards or peered at him from obscurity.

Strolling at ease, thoughts nowhere, he had traversed half the block, when an opening door and a glimmer of light across the sidewalk attracted his attention.

As he approached the house from whence the light came, a figure suddenly appeared on the stoop—a girl in a white ball gown—hastily descending the stone steps. Gaslight from the doorway tinted her bared arms and shoulders. She bent her graceful head and gazed earnestly at Hetherford.

“I beg your pardon,” she almost whispered; “might I ask you to help me?”

Hetherford stopped and wheeled short.

“I—I really beg your pardon,” she said, “but I am in such distress. Could I ask you to find me a cab?”

“A cab!” he repeated uncertainly; “why, yes—I will with pleasure—” He turned and looked up and down the deserted street, slowly lifting his hand to his short mustache. “If you are in a hurry,” he said, “I had better go to the nearest stables—”

“But there is something more,” she said, in a tremulous voice; “could you get me a wrap—a cloak—anything to throw over my gown?”

He looked up at her, bewildered. “Why, I don’t believe I—” he began, then fell silent before her troubled gaze. “I’ll do anything I can for you,” he said abruptly. “I have a raincoat at the club—if your need is urgent—”

“It is urgent; but there is something else—something more urgent, more difficult for me to ask you. I must go to Willow Brook—I must go now, to-night! And I—I have no money.”

“Do you mean Willow Brook in Westchester?” he asked, astonished. “There is no train at this hour of the morning!”

“Then—then what am I to do?” she faltered. “I cannot stay another moment in that house.”

After a silence he said: “Are you afraid of anybody in that house?”

“There is nobody in the house,” she said with a shudder; “my mother is in Westchester; all the household are there. I—I came back—a few moments ago—unexpectedly—” She stammered and winced under his keen scrutiny; then the pallor of utter despair came into her cheeks, and she hid her white face in her hands.

Hetherford watched her for a moment.

“I don’t exactly understand,” he said gently, “but I’ll do anything I can for you. I’ll go to the club and get my raincoat; I’ll go to the stables and get a cab; I haven’t any money with me, but it would take only a few minutes for me to drive to the club and get some. . . Please don’t be distressed; I’ll do anything you desire.”

She dropped her arms with a hopeless gesture.

“But you say there is no train!”

“You could drive to the house of some of your friends—”

“No, no! Oh, my friends must never know of this!”

“I see,” he said gravely.

“No, you don’t see,” she said unsteadily. “The truth is that I am almost frightened to death.”

“Can you not tell me what has frightened you so?”

“If I tried to tell you, you would think me mad—you would indeed—”

“Try,” he said soothingly.

“Why—why, it startled me to find myself in this house,” she began. “You see, I didn’t expect to come here; I didn’t really want to come here,” she added piteously. “Oh, it is simply dreadful to come—like this!” She glanced fearfully over her shoulder at the lighted doorway above, then turned to Hetherford as though dazed.

“Tell me,” he said in a quiet voice.

“Yes—I’ll tell you. At first it was all dark—but I must have known I was in my own room, for I felt around on the dresser for the matches and lighted a candle. And when I saw that it was truly my own room, and when I caught sight of my own face in the mirror, it terrified me—” She pressed her fingers to her cheeks with a shudder. “Then I ran downstairs and lighted the gas in the hall and peered into the mirror; and I saw a face there—a face like my own—”

Pale, voiceless, she leaned on the bronze balustrade, fair head drooping, lids closed.

Presently, eyes still closed, she said: “You will not leave me alone here—will you—” Her voice died to a whisper.

“No—of course not,” he replied slowly.

There was an interval of silence; she passed her hand across her eyes and raised her head, looking up at the stars.

“You see,” she murmured, “I dare not be alone; I dare not lose touch with the living. I suppose you think me mad, but I am not: I am only stunned. Please stay with me.”

“Of course,” he said in a soothing voice. “Everything will come out all right—”

“Are you sure?”

“Perfectly. I don’t quite know what to say—how to reassure you and offer you any help—”

He fell silent, standing there on the sidewalk, worrying his short mustache. The situation was a new one to him.

“Suppose,” he suggested, “that you try to take a little rest. I’ll sit down on the steps—”

She looked at him in wide-eyed alarm. “Do you mean that I should go into that house—alone!”

“Well—you oughtn’t to stand on the steps all night. It is nearly three o’clock. You are frightened and nervous. Really you must go in and—”

“Then you must come, too,” she said desperately. “This nightmare is more than I can endure alone. I’m not a coward; none of my race is. But I need a living being near me. Will you come?”

He bowed. She turned, hastily gathering her filmy gown, and mounted the shadowy steps without a sound; and he followed leisurely, even perhaps warily, every sense alert.

He was prepared to see the end of this encounter—see it through to an explanation if it took all summer. Of the situation, however, and of her, he had so far ventured no theory. The type of woman and the situation were perfectly new to him. He was aware that anything might happen in New York, and, closing the heavy front door, he was ready for it.

The hall gas jets were burning brightly, and in the darkened drawing-room he could distinguish the heavy outlines of furniture cased in dust coverings.

She asked him to strike a match and light the sconces in the drawing-room, and he did so, curiosity now thoroughly aroused.

As the gas flared up, shrouded pictures and furniture sprang into view surrounding him, and in the dusk of the room beyond he saw a ray of light glimmering on the foliated carving of a gilded harp.

Slowly he turned to the girl beside him. A warm shadow dimmed her delicate features, yet they were the loveliest he had ever looked upon.

Suddenly he understood the mute message of her eyes: “My imprudence places me at your mercy.”

“Your helplessness places me at yours,” he said aloud, scarcely conscious that he had spoken.

At that a bright flush transfigured her. “I trusted you the moment I saw you,” she said impulsively. “Do you mind sitting there opposite me? I shall take this chair—rather near you—”

She sank into an armchair; and, touched and a trifle amused, he seated himself, at a little nod from her, awaiting her further pleasure.

She lay there for a minute or two without speaking, rounded arms resting on the gilt arms of the chair, eyes thoughtfully studying him.

“I’ve simply got to tell you everything,” she said at length.

“It can do no harm, I think,” he replied pleasantly.

“No; no harm. The harm has been done. Yet, with you sitting there so near me, I am not frightened now. It is curious,” she mused, “that I should feel no apprehension now. And yet—and yet—”

She leaned toward him, dropping her linked fingers in her lap.

“Tell me, did you ever hear of the Sign of Venus?—the *Signum Veneris*?” she asked.

"I've heard of it—yes," he replied, surprised. And as she said nothing, he went on: "The distinguished gentleman who occupies the chair of Applied Psychics at the university lectures on the Sign of Venus, I believe."

"Did you attend the lectures?" she asked calmly.

He said he had not, smiling a trifle.

"I did."

"They were probably amusing," he ventured.

"Not very. Psychic phenomena bored me; I went during Lent. Psychic phenomena—" She hesitated, embarrassed at his amusement.

"I suppose you laugh at that sort of thing."

"No, I don't laugh at it. Queer things occur, they say. All I know is that I myself have never seen anything happen that could not be explained by natural laws."

"I have," she said.

He bent his head in polite acquiescence.

"I went to the lectures," she said. "I am not very intellectual; nothing he said interested me very much—which was, of course, suitable for a Lenten amusement."

She leaned a little nearer, small hands tightly interlaced on her knee.

"His lecture on the Sign of Venus was the last." She lifted a white finger, drawing the imaginary *Signum Veneris* in the air.

Hetherford nodded gravely.

"The lecture," she continued, "ended with an explanation of the Sign of Venus—how, contemplating it by starlight, one might pass into that physical unconsciousness which leaves the mind free to control the soul."

She held out her left hand toward him. On a stretched finger a ring glistened, mounted with the Sign of Venus blazing in brilliants.

"I had this made specially," she said; "nor that I had any particular desire to test it—no curiosity. It never occurred to me that here in New York one could—could—"

"What?" asked Hetherford dryly. "—could leave one's own body at will."

"I don't believe it could be accomplished in New York," he said with great gravity. "And that's a pretty safe conclusion to come to, is it not?"

She dropped her eyes, silent for a moment, resting her delicate chin on the palm of her hand. Then she lifted her eyes to him calmly, and the direct beauty of her gaze disturbed him.

"No, it is not a safe conclusion to come to. Listen to me. Last night they gave a dance at the Willow Brook Hunt. It was nearly two o'clock this morning when I left the club house and started home across the lawn with my mother and the maid—"

"But how on earth could—" he began, then begged her pardon and waited.

She continued serenely: "The night was warm and lovely, and it was clear starlight. When I entered my room I sent the maid away and sat down by the open window. The scent of the flowers and the beauty of the night made me restless; I went downstairs, unbolted the door, and slipped out through the garden to the pergola. My hammock hung there, and I lay down in it, looking out at the stars."

She drew the ring from her finger, holding it out for him to see.

“The starlight caught the gems on the Sign of Venus,” she said under her breath; “that was the beginning. And then—I don’t know why—as I lay there idly turning the ring on my finger, I found myself saying, ‘I must go to New York: I must leave my body here asleep in the hammock and go to my own room in Fifty-eighth Street.’”

A curious little chill passed over Hetherford.

“I said it again and again—I don’t know why. I remember the ring glittered; I remember it grew brighter and brighter. And then—and then! I found myself upstairs in the dark, groping over the dresser for the matches.”

Again that faint chill touched Hetherford.

“I was stupefied for a moment,” she said tremulously; “then I suspected what I had done, and it frightened me. And when I lighted the candle, and saw it was truly my own room—and when I caught sight of my own face in the mirror—terror seized me; it was like a glimpse of something taken unawares. For, do you know that although in the glass I saw my own face, the face was not looking back at me.” She dropped her head, crushing the ring in both hands. “The reflected face was far lovelier than mine; and it was mine, I think, yet it was not looking at me, and it moved when I did not move. I wonder—I wonder—”

The tension was too much. “If that be so,” he said, steadying his voice—if you saw a face in your mirror, the face was your own. He made an impatient gesture, rising to his feet at the same moment. “All that you have told me can be explained,” he said.

“How can it? At this very moment I am asleep in my hammock.”

“We will deal with that later,” he said, smiling down at her. “Where is there a looking-glass?”

“There is one in the hallway.” She rose, slipping the ring on her finger, and led the way to where an oval gilt mirror hung partly covered with dust cloths.

He cast aside the coverings. “Now look into the glass,” he said gayly.

She raised her head and faced the mirror for an instant.

“Come here,” she whispered; and he stepped behind her, looking over her shoulder.

In the glass, as though reflected, he saw her face, but the face was in profile!

A shiver passed over him from head to foot.

“Did I not tell you?” she whispered. “Look! See, the other face is moving, while I am still!”

“There’s something wrong about the glass, of course,” he muttered; “it’s defective.”

“But who is that in the glass?”

“It is you—your profile. I don’t exactly understand. Good Lord! It’s turning away from us!”

She shrank against the wall, wide-eyed, breathing rapidly.

“There is no use in our being frightened,” he said, scarcely knowing what he uttered. “This is Fifty-eighth Street, New York, 1903.” He shook his shoulders, squaring them, and forced a smile. “Don’t be frightened, there’s an explanation for all this. You are not asleep in Westchester; you are here in your own house. You mustn’t tremble so. Give me your hand a moment.”

She laid her hand in his obediently; it shook like a leaf. He held it firmly, touching the fluttering pulse.

“You are certainly no spirit,” he said, smiling; “your hand is warm and yielding. Ghosts don’t have hands like that, you know.”

Her fingers lay in his, quite passive now, but the pulse quickened.

“The explanation of it all is this,” he said: “You have had a temporary suspension of consciousness, during which time you, without being aware of what you were doing, came to town from Willow Brook. You believe you went to the dance at the Hunt Club, but probably you

did not. Instead, during a lapse of consciousness, you went to the station, took a train to town, came straight to your own house—” He hesitated.

“Yes,” she said, “I have a key to the door. Here it is.” She drew it from the bosom of her gown; he took it triumphantly.

“You simply awoke to consciousness while you were groping for the matches. That is all there is to it; and you need not be frightened at all!” he announced.

“No, not frightened,” she said, shaking her head; “only—only I wonder how I can get back. I’ve tried to fix my mind on my ring—on the Sign of Venus—I cannot seem to—”

“But that’s nonsense!” he protested cheerfully. “That ring has nothing to do with the matter.”

“But it brought me here! Truly I am asleep in my hammock. Won’t you believe it?”

“No; and you mustn’t, either,” he said impatiently. “Why, just now I explained to you—”

“I know,” she said, looking down at the ring on her hand; “but you are wrong—truly you are.”

“I am not wrong,” he said, laughing. “It was only a dream—the dance, the return, the hammock—all these were parts of a dream so intensely real that you cannot shake it off at once.”

“Then—then who was that we saw in the mirror?”

“Let us try it again,” he said confidently. She suffered him to lead her again to the mirror; again they peered into its glimmering depths, heads close together.

A second’s breathless silence, then she caught his hand in both of hers with a low cry; for the strange profile was slowly turning toward them a face of amazing beauty—her own face transfigured, radiantly glorified. “My soul!” she gasped, and would have fallen at his feet had he not held her and supported her to the stairs, where she sank down, hiding her face in her arms.

As for him, he was terribly shaken; he strove to speak, to reason with her, with himself, but a stupor chained body and mind, and he only leaned there on the newel post, vaguely aware of his own helplessness.

Far away in the night the bells of a church began striking the hour—one, two, three, four. Presently the distant rattle of a wagon sounded. The city stirred in its slumbers.

He found himself bending beside her, her passive hands in his once more, and he was saying: “As a matter of fact, all this is quite capable of an explanation. Don’t be distressed please don’t be frightened or sad. We’ve both had some sort of hallucination, that’s all—really that is all.”

“I am not frightened now,” she said dreamily. “I am quite sure that—that I am not dead. I am only asleep in my hammock. When I awake—”

Again, in spite of himself, he shivered.

“Will you do one more thing for me?” she asked.

“Yes—a million.”

“Only one. It is unreasonable, it is perhaps silly—and I have no right to ask—”

“Ask it,” he begged.

“Then—then, will you go to Willow Brook? Now?”

“Now?” he repeated blankly.

“Yes.” She looked down at him with the shadow of a smile touching lips and eyes. “I am asleep in the hammock; I sleep very, very soundly—and very, very late into the morning. They may not find me there for a long while. So would you mind going to Willow Brook to awaken me?”

“I—I—but you do not expect me to leave you here and find you in Westchester!” he stammered.

“You need not go,” she said quietly. “If you will telephone to the house and ask somebody to go out to the pergola—”

“No,” he said, “I will go; I will go anywhere on earth for you.”

He stood up, his senses in a whirl. She rose, too, leaning lightly on the balustrade.

“Thank you,” she said sweetly. “When you awake me, give me this.” She held out the *Signum Veneris*; and he took it, and bending his head slowly, raised it to his lips.

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It was almost morning when he entered his own house. In a dull trance he dressed, turned again to the stairs, and crept out into the shadowy street.

People began to pass him; an early electric tram whizzed up Forty-second Street as he entered the railway station. Presently he found himself in a car, clutching his ticket in one hand, her ring in the other.

“It is I who am mad, not she,” he muttered as the train glided from the station, through the long yard, dim in morning mist, where green and crimson lanterns still sparkled faintly.

Again he pressed the *Signum Veneris* to his lips. “It is I who am mad—love mad!” he whispered as the far treble warning of the whistle aroused him and sent him stumbling out into the soft fresh morning air.

The rising sun smote him full in the eyes as he came in sight of the club house among the still green trees, and the dew on the lawn flashed like the gems of the *Signum Veneris* on the ring he held so tightly.

Across the club house lawn stood another house, circled with gardens in full bloom; and to the left, among young trees, the white columns of a pergola glistened, tinted with rose from the early sun.

There was not a soul astir as he crossed the lawn and entered the garden, brushing the dew from overweighted blossoms as he passed.

Suddenly, at a turn in the path, he came upon the pergola, and saw a brilliant hammock hanging in the shadow.

Over the hammock’s fringe something light and fluffy fell in folds like the billowy frills of a ball gown. He stumbled forward, dazed, incredulous, and stood trembling for an instant.

Then, speechless, he sank down beside her, and dropped the ring into the palm of her half-closed and unconscious hand.

A ray of sunlight fell across her hair; slowly her blue eyes unclosed, smiling divinely.

And in her partly open palm the Sign of Venus glimmered like dew silvering a budding rose.