

# A House Possessed

By Sax Rohmer

I strode briskly up the long beech avenue. The snow that later was to carpet the drive and to clothe the limbs of the great trees, now hung suspended in dull grey cloud banks over Devrers Hall. This I first set eyes upon the place.

Earl Ryland had seen it from the car when motoring to Stratford, had delayed one hour and twenty-five minutes to secure the keys and look over the house, and had leased it for three years. That had been two days ago. Now, as I passed the rusty, iron gates and walked up the broad stairs of the terrace to the front door, the clatter of buckets and a swish of brushes told me that the workmen were busy within. It is, after all, a privilege to be the son of a Wall Street hustler.

Faithful to my promise, I inspected the progress made by the decorating contractor, and proceeded to look over the magnificent old mansion. Principally, I believe, it was from designs by Vanbrugh. The banqueting hall impressed me particularly with its fret-work ceiling, elaborate mouldings, and its large, stone-mullioned windows with many-hued, quarrel-pane lattices.

I had this wing of the building quite to myself, and passing through into what may have been a library, I saw at the farther end a low, arched door in the wall. It was open, and a dim light showed beyond. I approached it, passed down six stone steps and found myself in a small room, evidently of much earlier date than the rest of the house.

It had an elaborately carved chimney piece reaching to the ceiling, and the panelling was covered with extraordinary designs. One small window lighted the room. Before the window, his back towards me, stood a cowed monk!

At my gasp of mingled fear and surprise, he turned a red, bearded face to me. To my great amazement, I saw that the mysterious intruder was smoking a well coloured briar!

‘Did I frighten you?’ he inquired, with a strong Irish brogue. ‘I’m sorry! But it’s years since I saw over Devrers, and so I ventured to trespass. I’m Father Bernard from the monastery yonder. Are you Mr Ryland?’

I gasped again, but with relief. Father Bernard, broad-shouldered and substantial, puffing away at his briar, was no phantom after all, but a very genial mortal.

‘No,’ I replied. ‘He will be down later. I am known as Cumberly.’

He shook my hand very heartily; he seemed on the point of speaking again, yet hesitated.

‘What a grand old place it is,’ I continued. ‘This room surely, is older than the rest?’

‘It is part of the older mansion,’ he replied, ‘Devereaux Hall. Devrers is a corruption.’

‘Devereaux Hall,’ I said. ‘Did it belong to that family?’

Father Bernard nodded.

‘Robert Devereaux, Earl of Essex, owned it. There’s his crest over the door. He never lived here himself, but if you can make out medieval Latin, this inscription here will tell you who did.’

He watched me curiously while I struggled with the crabbed characters.

‘Here by grace of his noble patron, Robert Devereaux, my lord of Essex,’ I read, ‘laboured Maccabees Nosta of Padua, a pupil of Michel de Notredame, seeking the light.’

‘Nosta was a Jewish astrologer and magician,’ explained the monk, ‘and according to his own account, as you see, a pupil of the notorious Michel de Notredame, or Nostradamus. He lived here under the patronage of the Earl until 1601, when Essex was executed. Legend says that he

was not the pupil of Nostradamus, but his master the devil, and that he brought about the fall of his patron. What became of Nosta of Padua nobody knows.'

He paused, watching me with something furtive in his blue eyes.

'I'm a regular guidebook, you're thinking?' he went on. 'Well, so I am. We have it all in the old records at the monastery. A Spanish family acquired the place after the death of Robert Devereaux—the Miguels, they called themselves. They were shunned by the whole country, and it's recorded that they held Black Masses and Devil's Sabbaths here in this very room!'

'Good heavens!' I cried, 'the house has an unpleasant history!'

'The last of them was burned for witchcraft in the market-place at Ashby, as late as 1640!'

I suppose I looked as uncomfortable as I felt, glancing apprehensively about the gloomy apartment.

'When Devereaux or Devrers Hall was pulled down and rebuilt, this part was spared for some mysterious reason. But let me tell you that from 1640 till 1863—when a Mr Nicholson leased it—nobody has been able to live here!'

'What do you mean? Ghosts?'

'No, fires!'

'Fires!'

'That same! If you'll examine the rooms closely, you'll find that some of them have been rebuilt and some partially rebuilt, at dates long after Vanbrugh's day. It's where the fires have been! Seven poor souls have burned to death in Devrers since the Miguels' time, but the fires never spread beyond the rooms they broke out in!'

'Father Bernard,' I said, 'tell me no more at present! This is horrible! Some of the best friends I have are coming to spend Christmas here!'

'I'd have warned Mr Ryland if he'd given me time,' continued the monk. 'But it's likely he'd have laughed at me for my pains! All you can do now, Mr Cumberly, is to say nothing about it until after Christmas. Then induce him to leave. I'm not a narrow-minded man, and I'm not a superstitious one, I think, but if facts are facts, Devrers Hall is *possessed!*'

The party that came together that Christmas at Devrers Hall was quite the most ideal that one could have wished for or imagined. There was no smart set boredom, for Earl's friends were not smart set bores. Old and young there were, and children too. What Christmas gathering is complete without children?

Mr Ryland, Sr, and Mrs Ryland were over from New York, and the hard-headed man of affairs proved the most charming old gentleman one could have desired at a Christmas party. A Harvard friend of Earl's, the Rev. Lister Hanson, Mrs Hanson, Earl's sister, and two young Hansons were there. They, with Mrs Van Eyck, a pretty woman of thirty whose husband was never seen in her company, completed the American contingent.

But Earl had no lack of English friends, and these, to the round number of twenty, assisted at the Christmas house-warming.

On the evening of the twenty-third of December, as I entered the old banqueting hall bright with a thousand candles, the warm light from the flaming logs danced upon the oak leaves, emblems of hospitality which ornamented the frieze. Searching out strange heraldic devices upon the time-blackened panelling, I stood in the open door in real admiration.

A huge Christmas tree occupied one corner by the musicians' gallery, and around this a group of youngsters had congregated, looking up in keen anticipation at the novel gifts which swung from the frosted branches. My Ryland, Sr, his wife and another grey-haired lady, with Father

Bernard from the monastery, sat upon the black oak settles by the fire; they were an oddly assorted, but merry group. In short, the interior of the old hall made up a picture that would have delighted the soul of Charles Dickens.

‘It’s just perfect, Earl!’ came Hanson’s voice.

I turned, and saw that he and Earl Ryland stood at my elbow.

‘It will be, when Mona comes!’ was the reply.

‘What has delayed Miss Verek?’ I asked. Earl’s fiancé, Mona Verek, and her mother were to have joined us that afternoon.

‘I can’t quite make out from her wire,’ he answered quietly, a puzzled frown ruffing his forehead. ‘But she will be here by tomorrow, Christmas Eve.’

Hanson clapped him on the back and smiled. ‘Bear up, Earl,’ he said. ‘Hello! here comes Father Bernard, and he’s been yarning again. Just look how your governor is laughing.’

Earl turned, as with a bold gait the priest came towards them, his face radiating with smiles, his eyes alight with amusement. It was certainly a hilarious group the monk had left behind him. As he joined us, he linked his arm in that of the American clergyman and drew him aside for a private chat, I thought what a broad-minded company we were. When the two, in intimate conversation, walked off together, they formed one of the most pleasant pictures imaginable. The true spirit of Christmas reigned.

I passed to an oak settee where Justin Grinley, his wife and small daughter were pulling crackers with Mrs Hanson, just as young Lawrence Bowman appeared from a side door.

‘Have you seen Mrs Van Eyck?’ he inquired quickly.

No one had seen her for some time, and young Bowman hurried off upon his quest.

Grinley raised quizzical eyebrows, but said nothing. In point of fact, Bowman’s attentions to the lady had already excited some comment; but Mrs Van Eyck was an old friend of the Rylands, and we relied upon her discretion to find a nice girl among the company—there were many—to take the romantic youth off her hands.

Father Bernard presently beckoned to me from the door beneath the musicians’ gallery.

‘You have, of course, said nothing of the matters we know of?’ he asked, as I joined him.

I shook my head, and the monk smiled around on the gathering. ‘The old sorcerer’s study is fitted up as a cozy corner, I see,’ he continued, ‘but between ourselves, I shouldn’t let any of the young people stay long in there!’ He met my eyes seriously.

‘If, indeed, the enemy holds power within Devrers, I think there is no likely victim among you tonight. The legend of Devrers Hall, you must know, Mr Cumberland, is that Maccabees Nosta, or the arch enemy in person, appears here in response to the slightest evil thought, word or deed within the walls! If any company could hope to exclude him, it is the present!’ This he said half humorously and with his eyes roaming again over the merry groups about the great lighted room. ‘But, please God, the evil has passed.’

He was about to take his leave, for he came and went at will, a privileged visitor, as others of the Brotherhood. I walked with him along the gallery, lined now with pictures from Earl Ryland’s collection. One of the mullioned windows was open.

Out of the darkness we looked for a moment over the dazzling white carpet which lay upon the lawn, to where a fairy shrubbery, backed by magical, white trees, glittered as though diamond-dusted under the frosty moon. A murmur of voices came, and two figures passed across the snow: a woman in a dull red cloak with a furred collar and a man with a heavy travelling coat worn over his dress clothes. His arm was about the woman’s waist.

The monk made no sign, leaving me at the gallery door with a deep ‘Good night.’

But I saw his cowed figure silhouetted against a distant window, and his hand was raised in the ancient form of benediction.

Alone in the long gallery, something of the gaiety left me. By the open window, I stood for a moment looking out, but no one was visible now. The indiscreet dalliance of Mrs Van Eyck with a lad newly down from Cambridge seemed so utterly out of the picture. The lawn on that side of the house was secluded, but I knew that Father Bernard had seen and recognised them. I knew, too, the thought that was in his mind. As I passed slowly back towards the banqueting hall, my footsteps striking hollowly upon the oaken floor, that thought grew in significance. Free as I was, or as I thought I was, from the medieval superstitions which possibly were part of the monk's creed, I shuddered at remembrance of the unnamable tragedies which this gallery might have staged.

It was very quiet. As I came abreast of the last window, the moonlight through a stained quarrel pane spread a red patch across the oaken floor, and I passed it quickly. It had almost the look of a fire burning beneath the woodwork!

Then, through the frosty, night air, I distinctly heard the great bell tolling out, from up the beech avenue at the lodge gate.

I was anxious to know what it meant myself. But Earl, whose every hope and every fear centred in Mona Verek, outran me easily. I came up to the lodge gates just as he threw them open in his madly impulsive way. The lodge was unoccupied, for the staff was incomplete, and a servant had fastened the gates for the night after Father Bernard had left.

The monk could not have been gone two minutes, but now in the gateway stood a tall man enveloped in furs, who rested one hand upon the shoulder of a chauffeur. It had begun to snow again.

'What's the matter?' cried Ryland anxiously, as the man who attended to the gates tardily appeared. 'Accident?'

The stranger waved his disengaged hand with a curiously foreign gesture, and showed his teeth in a smile. He had a black, pointed beard and small moustache, with fine, clear-cut features and commanding eyes.

'Nothing serious,' he replied. Something in his voice reminded me of a note in a great organ, it was so grandly deep and musical. 'My man was blinded by a drive of snow and ran us off the road. I fear my ankle is twisted, and the car being temporarily disabled . . .'

With the next house nearly two miles away, that was explanation enough for Earl Ryland. Very shortly we were assisting the distinguished-looking stranger along the avenue, Earl pooh-poohing his protests and sending a man ahead to see that a room would be ready. The snow was falling now in clouds, and Ryland and I were covered. At the foot of the terrace stairs, with cheery light streaming out through the snowladen air, I noted something that struck me as odd, but at the time as no more than that.

Not a flake of snow rested upon the stranger, from the crown of his black fur cap to the edge of his black fur coat!

Before I had leisure to consider this circumstance, which a moment's thought must have shown to be a curious phenomenon, our unexpected visitor spoke.

'I have a slight face wound, occasioned by broken glass,' he said. For the first time, I saw that it was so. 'I would not alarm your guests unnecessarily. Could we enter by a more private door?'

'Certainly!' cried Ryland heartily. 'This way, sir.'

So, unseen by the rest of the party, we entered by the door in the tower of the south wing and lodged the stranger in one of the many bedrooms there. He was profuse in his thanks, but declined any medical aid other than that of his saturnine man. When the blizzard had somewhat abated, he said, the man could proceed to the wrecked car and possibly repair it well enough to enable them to continue their journey. He would trespass upon our good nature no longer; an hour's rest was all that he required.

'You must not think of leaving tonight,' said Ryland cordially. 'I will see that your wants are attended to.'

His man entered, carrying a bag; we left him descending again to the hall.

'Why!' cried Earl, 'I never asked him his name and never told him mine!'

He laughed at his own absentmindedness, and we rejoined his guests. But an indefinable change had come over the party. The blizzard was increasing in violence, so that now it shrieked around Devrers Hall like a regiment of ghouls. The youthful members, numbering five, had been sent off to bed, and into the hearts of the elders of the company had crept a general predilection for the fireside. Our entrance created quite a sensation.

'Why,' cried Ryland, 'I believe you took us for bogeys. Who's been telling ghost stories?'

Mrs Van Eyck stretched a dainty foot to the blaze and writhed her white shoulders expressively.

'Mr Hanson has been talking about the Salem witch trials,' she said, turning her eyes to Earl. 'I don't know why he likes to frighten us!'

'There was an alleged witch burned at Ashby, near here, as recently as 1640,' continued Hanson. 'I remember reading about it in a work on the subject; a young Spanish woman, of great beauty, too, called Isabella de Miguel, I believe.'

I started. The conversation was turning in a dangerous direction. Old Mr Ryland laughed, but not mirthfully.

'Quit demons and witches,' he said. 'Let's find a more humorous topic, not that I stand for such nonsense.'

Three crashing blows, sounding like those of a titanic hammer on an anvil, rang through the house. An instant's silence followed, then a frightened chorus: 'What was that?'

No one could imagine, and Earl had been as startled as the rest of us. He ran from the room, and I followed him. The wind howled and whistled with ever increasing violence. At the low arched door leading to the domestic offices, we found a group of panic-stricken servants huddled together.

'What was that noise?' asked Earl sharply.

His American butler, Knowlson, who formed one of the group, came forward. 'It seemed to come from upstairs, sir,' he said. 'But I don't know what can have caused it.'

'Come and look, then.'

Up the massive staircase we went, Knowlson considerably in the rear. But though we searched everywhere assiduously, there was nothing to show what had occasioned the noise. Leaving Ryland peeping in at his two small nephews, who proved to be slumbering peacefully, I went up three steps and through a low archway, and found myself in the south wing. The only occupant, as far as I knew, was the injured stranger. A bright light shone under his door, and I wondered how many candles he had burning. I knocked.

A gust of wind shrieked furiously around the building, then subsided to a sound like the flapping of wings.

The door was opened a few inches. The light almost dazzled me. I had a glimpse of the unbidden guest, and saw that he wore a loose dressing gown of an unusual shade of red.

‘Has anything disturbed you?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he replied, with much concern in his deep, organ voice, yet his black eyes were laughing. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘We heard a strange noise,’ I answered shortly. ‘Is your ankle better?’

‘I thank you—very much,’ he said, ‘I am awaiting my man’s report respecting the state of the car.’

There was nothing in his handsome dark face, in his deep voice, or even in his laughing eyes to justify it, but at that moment I felt certain, beyond any possibility of doubt, that the noise had come from his room. I wanted to run! In fact, I do not know how I might have acted, if Ryland hadn’t joined me.

‘Sorry to have disturbed you,’ came his jovial tones, ‘but the house is full of funny noises! By the way, I forgot to mention that my name is Wilbur Earl Ryland, and I hope you’ll stay just as long as it suits you!’

‘I thank you,’ was the unemotional reply. ‘You are more than kind. I am Count de Stano of Padua. Good night.’

He closed the door.

Again came the wind, shrieking around the end of the wing like a troop of furies; and again came an uncanny flapping. Earl caught at my arm.

‘What is it?’

‘Did you hear—someone laughing?’

‘No,’ I said unsteadily. ‘It was the howling of the blizzard.’

At the landing, he turned to me again.

‘What had the Count burning in his room?’ he muttered. ‘That wasn’t candlelight!’

We found a crowd awaiting us at the foot of the staircase. No one was anxious to go to bed, and arrangements were made by several of the more nervous to share rooms.

‘Has the Count’s chauffeur returned?’ Earl asked Knowlson.

‘He’s just come into the servants’ hall now, sir. He—’

‘Lock up, then.’

‘He’d been out in all that snow, sir . . .’

‘Well?’

‘There wasn’t a sign of any on his coat.’

The man’s voice shook and he glanced back at the group of servants, none of whom seemed disposed to return to their quarters.

‘He wore another over it, ass!’ snapped Ryland. ‘Set about your business, all of you! You are like a pack of children.’

We experienced no further alarms, save from the uncanny howling of the wind, but there were no more ghost stories. Those who went to bed ascended the great oak staircase in parties. Mr Ryland, Earl and I were the last to go, and we parted at last without reference to the matter, of which, I doubt not, all of us were thinking.

Sleep was almost impossible. My quaint little oak-panelled room seemed to rock in a tempest which now had assumed extraordinary violence. For hours I lay listening for that other sound which was not the voice of the blizzard and which, although I had belittled, I had heard as clearly as Earl had heard it.

I detected it at last, just once—a wild, demoniacal laugh.

I leaped to the floor. The sound had not been within the house, I thought, but outside. Clenching my teeth in anticipation of the icy gust which would sweep into the room, I slightly opened the heavily leaded window. The south wing was clearly visible.

Out from the small, square window of the study of Maccabees Nosta poured a beam of fiery light, staining the snow flakes as they swirled madly through its redness.

A moment it shone, and was gone.

I pulled the window fast.

Strange needs teach us strange truths. I was sure in that hour that the simple faith of Father Bernard was greater than all our wisdom, and I would have given much for his company.

For me the pleasures and entertainments of the ensuing day were but gnawing anxieties and fruitless vigils. Who was the man calling himself de Stano? *Stano* was merely a play on *Nosta*. To what place had his chauffeur taken his car to be repaired? Why did he avoid Father Bernard, as that morning I had seen him do? De Stano claimed acquaintance with mutual friends, all of them absent. Earl was too hospitable. A man who could walk, even with the aid of a big ebony stick, could reach the station in a borrowed car and proceed on his journey.

Devrers Hall was nearly empty, but by one pretext or another I had avoided joining any of the parties. As I stood smoking on the terrace, Mrs Van Eyck came out, dressed in a walking habit which displayed her lithe figure almost orientally.

'Mr Bowman and I are walking over to the monastery. Won't you join us, Mr Cumberly?' she said.

'Thank you, but some unexpected work has come to hand and I fear I must decline! Have you seen our new guest recently?'

'The Count? Yes, just a while ago. What a strange man! Do you know, Mr Cumberly, he almost frightens me.'

'Indeed!'

'He is a most accomplished hypnotist! Oh, I must show you! He was angry with me for being sceptical, you know, and suddenly challenged me to touch him, even with my little finger. I did, look!'

She had pulled off her glove and held out her hand. The top of one finger was blistered, as by contact with fire!

'Hypnotic suggestion, of course,' she said laughingly. 'He is not always red hot.'

She laughed gaily as young Bowman came out; the two walking off together.

I re-entered the house.

None of the servants had seen the Count, and when I knocked at his door there was no reply. Passing back along the corridor I met Lister Hanson.

'Hello!' I said. 'I thought you were out with the others.'

'No. I had some trivial matters to attend to; Majorie and the youngsters have gone skating.'

I hesitated.

'Is Earl with them?'

Hanson laughed.

'He has motored over to the station. Mona Verek is due some time within the next three hours.' Should I confide in him? Yes, I decided, for I could contain my uncanny suspicions no longer.

'What is your opinion of this de Stano?' I asked abruptly.

Hanson's face clouded.

‘Curiously enough, I have not met him,’ he replied. ‘He patently avoids me. In fact, Cumberly, very few of the folks *have* met him. You must have noticed that on one pretence or another he has avoided being present at meals? Though he is living under the same roof, I assure you the bulk of us *have never seen him.*’

It was sufficient. I at any rate felt assured of a hearing, and, drawing Hanson into my own room, I unfolded to him the incredible suspicions which I dared to harbour and which were shared by Father Bernard.

At the end of my story, the young clergyman sat looking out the window. When he turned his face to me, it was unusually serious.

‘It is going back to the Middle Ages,’ he said, ‘but there is nothing in your story that a Churchman may not believe. I have studied the dark pages of history which deal with witchcraft, demonology and possession. I have seen in Germany the testimonies of men as wise as any we have today. Although I can see your expected incredulity and scepticism, I assure you I am at one with Father Bernard upon this matter. The Count de Stano, whoever or whatever he is, must quit this house.’

‘But what weapons have we against—’

‘Cumberly, if some awful thing in the shape of man is among us, that thing has come in obedience to a summons. Do you know the legend of Devrers Hall, the dreadful history of the place?’

I nodded, greatly surprised.

‘You wonder where I learned it? You forget that I have dipped deeply into these matters. Directly after the party broke up, I had intended to induce Earl to leave. Cumberly, the place is unclean.’

‘Is there no way of ridding it of—’

‘Only by defeating the thing which legend says first appeared here as Maccabees Nosta. And which of us, being human, can hope to brave that ordeal?’

I was silent for some time.

‘We must remember, Hanson,’ I said, ‘that, regarding certain undoubtedly weird happenings in the light of what we know of Devrers, we may have deceived ourselves.’

‘We may,’ he agreed. ‘But we dare not rest until we know that we *have.*’

So together we searched the house for Count de Stano, but failed to meet with him. The storm of the previous night had subsided, and dusk came creeping upon a winter landscape which spoke only of great peace. The guests began to return, in parties, and presently Earl Ryland arrived, looking very worried.

‘Mona’s missed her train,’ he said. ‘There seems to be a fatality about the thing.’

Hanson said nothing at the time, but when Earl had gone upstairs to dress, he turned to me.

‘You know Mona Vereck, of course?’

‘Quite well.’

‘She justifies all his adoration, Cumberly. She is the nearest thing to an angel that a human can be. I agree with Earl that there is a fatality in her delay! He is going off again after dinner. You know how dreadfully impulsive he is, and I have always at the back of my brain the idea that we may be deluding ourselves.’

It was close to the dinner hour now, and I hurried to my room to dress. The quaint little window, as I already have mentioned, commanded a view of the south wing, and as I stooped to the oaken window seat, groping for the candles, my gaze strayed across the snow-carpeted lawns to where the shrubbery loomed greyly in the growing December dusk.

Two figures passed hurriedly in by the south entrance, Lawrence Bowman and Marie Van Eyck. They would have quick work to dress. I found the candles, then dropped them and stood peering from the window with a horror upon me greater than any I yet had known in that house.

A few paces behind the pair, footsteps were forming in the snow—the footsteps of one invisible, who followed, who came to the southern door and who entered after them. Faint wreaths as of steam floated over the ghostly trail.

‘My God!’ I whispered. ‘My God!’

How I dressed, Heaven only knows. I have no recollection of anything until, finding myself at the foot of the great staircase, I said to Knowlson, struggling to make my voice sound normal, ‘Is the Count de Stano in?’

‘I think not, sir. I believe he is leaving this evening. But I have never seen the Count personally, sir.’

Looking in at the door of the long apartment which Earl had had converted into a billiard room, I found Bowman adjusting his tie before a small mirror.

‘Have you seen the Count?’ I asked shortly.

‘Yes. He is talking to Marie—to Mrs Van Eyck—in the lounge.’ I set off briskly. There was but one door to the old study, now the lounge. I hoped (and feared, I confess) to meet the Count there face to face.

The place was only lighted by the crackling wood fire on the great hearth and Mrs Van Eyck alone stood leaning against the mantelpiece, the red gleam of the fire upon her bare shoulders.

‘I had hoped to find the Count here,’ I said, as she turned to me.

‘Surely you passed him? He couldn’t have reached farther than the library as you came in.

I shook my head, and for a moment Mrs Van Eyck looked almost afraid.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked. ‘I can’t understand it. He is leaving almost immediately, too.’

Her hands were toying with a curious little ornament suspended by a chain about her neck. She saw me looking at it and held it up for my inspection.

‘Isn’t it odd?’ she laughed rather uneasily. ‘The Count tells me that it is an ancient Assyrian love charm.’

It was a tiny golden calf, and, unaccountably, I knew that I paled as I looked at it.

The gong sounded.

I met Lister Hanson at the door of the banqueting hall. His quest had proved as futile as mine.

We were a very merry dinner party. Again it seemed impossible to credit the idea that malign powers were at work in our midst. Earl Ryland made himself the object of much good-humoured jest by constantly glancing at his watch.

‘I know it’s rude,’ he said, ‘but you don’t know how anxious I am about Mona.’

When at last dinner was over, he left the old people to do the honours and rushed away in his impetuous, schoolboy fashion to the waiting car, and so off to the station.

Hanson touched me on the shoulder.

‘To the Count’s room first,’ he whispered.

We slipped away unnoticed and mounted the staircase. On the landing we met Mrs Van Eyck’s maid carrying an armful of dresses.

‘Are you packing?’ rapped Hanson, with a sudden suspicion in his voice.

‘Yes, sir,’ replied the girl. ‘My lady has had a message and must leave tonight.’

‘Have you seen the Count de Stano?’

‘A tall, dark gentleman, carrying a black stick? He has just gone along the passage, sir.’

Hanson stood looking after the maid for a moment.

'I have heard of no messenger,' he said, 'and Van Eyck is due on Christmas morning.'

Along the oak-lined passage and up into the south wing we went. The Count's room was empty. There was no fire in the hearth, but the heat of the place was insupportable, although the window was open.

Something prompted me to glance out. From the edge of the lawn below, across to the frosted shrubbery, extended a track of footprints.

'Look, Hanson!' I said and grasped his arm. 'Look! and tell me if I dream!'

A faint vapour was rising from the prints.

'Let's get our coats and see where they lead,' he said quietly.

It was with an indescribable sense of relief that I quitted the room which the Count de Stano had occupied. We got our coats and prepared to go out. With a suddenness which was appalling, the wind rose and, breaking in upon the frozen calm of the evening, shrieked about Devrers Hall with all the fury of a high gale. With it came snow.

Through that raging blizzard, we fought our way around the angle of the house, leaving the company preparing for the dance in the banqueting hall.

Not a track was to be seen, and the snow was falling in swirling clouds.

We performed a complete circuit of the hall, and in the huge yard we found lamps and lanterns burning. Lawrence Bowman's man was preparing his car for the road; he was driving Mrs Van Eyck to the station, the man said. But both Hanson and I quickly noted that young Bowman's luggage was strapped in place.

Retracing our steps, we saw two snow-covered figures ahead of us, a woman in a dull-red cloak and a man in a big motor coat. They passed on to the terrace, and into the light streaming from the open doors. Earl Ryland had returned. His big Panhard stood at the steps.

'My God! Look!' gasped Hanson, and dragged me back.

I knew what to expect, yet at sight of it my heart stood still.

Steaming footprints appeared, hard upon those of Mrs Van Eyck and Bowman. They pursued a supernatural course on the terrace steps, stopped, and passed away around the north angle of the hall.

'May Heaven protect all here tonight!' prayed the clergyman fervently. 'Follow, follow, Cumberly? At all costs we must follow!' he continued hoarsely.

Which of us trembled the more violently, I do not know. Passing the cheery light of the open doors, we traced the devilish tracks before us. The wind had dropped as suddenly as it had arisen, but snow still fell lightly. Then, from the angle of the great house, we saw a sight which robbed us of what little courage we retained.

Glaring in at the window of the room known as the lantern room, with the light of a great log fire and many candles playing fully upon its malignant face, crouched a red-robed figure. A demon of the Dark Ages it seemed, that clutched and mewed and muttered as it glared. It crouched lower, and lower, then drew back and held its arms before its awful face, thrusting away from it that which approached the window from within. It turned and fled with a shriek unlike anything human or animal, and was gone, leaving behind it steaming footprints in the snow.

A slim shape showed darkly behind the lattice, and the cold light reflected from the snow touched the pure, oval face of Mona Verek.

We fought our way back to the terrace.

‘The curse of Devrers Hall in its true form,’ muttered Hanson, ‘in the red robe of Maccabees Nosta, the Uniform of Satan!’

We could not and dared not, speak of what we had seen, but the gaieties of the night left us cold. As the hours passed and still nothing occurred to break the serenity of the happy gathering, my forebodings grew keener.

Yet, whenever I looked at Mona Verrek, fair and fragile, with wonderful blue eyes—which often made me fear that already she was more than half a creature of another sphere—I found new courage.

It was Hanson who first noticed that Mrs Van Eyck and Bowman were missing.

He drew my attention to it at the instant when the tempest, for a while quiescent, awoke to renewed fury.

‘Did you hear that?’ he whispered.

I saw Earl glance up quickly from an intimate chat with Mona. Mingled with the song of the storm had arisen fiendish laughter again and the sound of dull flapping. It seemed like the signal for what was to befall.

Knowlson, ghastly white, rushed into the hall.

‘Mr Ryland! Mr Ryland!’ he cried unceremoniously.

In an instant we were all flocking about the door. Bowman’s man, trembling, stood outside.

‘I don’t know what’s become of him, sir,’ he said tremulously. ‘He and Mrs Van Eyck were to have started at eleven-thirty, and, going in to look for him in the lounge—Oh, my God, sir!—I saw something like a great owl go in at the window.’

We delayed no longer. Out into the blizzard we poured and over the snow to the south wing.

Blue, spirituous flames were belching from the window of the astrologer’s study! One shrill scream reached our ears, to be drowned by the mighty voices of the wind.

‘Impossible to get in the window,’ cried Ryland. ‘Around through the library. Form up a line to pass buckets, Knowlson!’

As we rushed up the snow-carpeted terrace steps, Hanson fell. Someone stayed to attend to him. Ryland and I ran on through the house and entered the library together. It was in darkness, but the ancient, iron-studded door leading down into the study was outlined in blue light.

I leapt forward in the gloom, my hand outstretched, and something interposed between me and the door—something fiery. With a muffled yell, I drew back.

Ryland passed me. His form vaguely silhouetted against that weird glow, I saw him raise his arms as if to shield his face. An evidently irresistible force hurled him back, and he fell with a crash at the feet of those who crowded the entrance to the library.

‘Oh! my God!’ he groaned, struggling to his feet. ‘*What* is before that door?’

A sound like the roaring of a furnace came from within, with a dull beating on the oak. We stood there in the dark, watching the door. Someone pushed to the front of the group.

‘Keep back, Masters,’ said Ryland huskily. ‘My arms are burned to the elbows. Some hellish thing stands before that door. Keep back, man, till we get lights. Bring lights! Bring lights!’

At that we withdrew from the dark library, until we all stood outside in the hall. Some of us muttered what prayers we knew, while the furnace roared inside and the storm shrieked outside.

There have been some with whom I have discussed these events, who were convinced that these were the result of hallucination combined with the unsuspected presence of an accomplished illusionist and remorseless jester, but I am convinced otherwise.

Mona Verek approached from the direction of the banqueting hall, two trembling servants following with lights. She was very pale, but quite composed.

‘Mona!’ began Earl huskily, ‘there’s devil’s work! This is no place—’

She stopped him with a quiet little gesture, and took a lamp from one of the men.

‘Mr Hanson has explained to me, Earl,’ she said. ‘He is disabled, or he would be here. I quite understand that there is nothing in the library that can harm me. It can only harm those who fear it. I will unlock the door, Earl, I have promised.’

‘Mona! Hanson has asked *you*—’

‘You don’t understand. He has asked me, because for me there is no danger.’

He would have stopped her, but he forgot his injured arms, and was too late. She went in, believing she would be protected.

Protected she was.

No invisible flame seared her, nothing contested her coming. Entering behind her, he saw her stoop and unlock the door. A cloud of oily, blue-black smoke belched out.

We had thought to find those within past aid, but up the steps Lawrence Bowman staggered, dragging the insensible form of Marie Van Eyck.

‘Thank God!’ said old Mr Ryland devoutly.

There was a piercing, frenzied shriek. All heard it with horror. One of the Library windows banged open, and a cloud of snow poured into the room.

‘There’s someone getting out,’ cried a man’s voice.

‘De Stano!’ yelled Earl.

Several of us leaped to the window. In the stormy darkness, a red something was racing over the snow towards the beech avenue. The wind dropped, and from the monastery a bell rang.

‘The midnight service,’ I said.

At the first stroke the red figure stopped dead, turned, and seemed to throw up its arms. It was at that moment, I was told by those near the door, that the strange flames died away in the ancient study, leaving only some charred woodwork to show where the fire had been. The blizzard howled again madly. I was not the only one there who heard amid its howling the sound as of flapping wings.

Mona Verek and Bowman were bending over the insensible woman. Upon her flesh was burned a clear impression of a calf, but the little image itself was missing.

The wind died away, no more snow fell and suddenly, as if a curtain had been raised from before it, the moon sailed into the skies. Marie Van Eyck opened her eyes and looked about her with an expression I shall never forget.

‘The fire!’ she whispered, ‘the fire! What is it?’

The bell ceased tolling.

‘It is Christmas morning!’ said Mona Verek.