Strange Alliance

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DOCTOR SPECHAUG stopped running, breathing deeply and easily where he paused in the middle of the narrow winding road. He glanced at his watch. Nine a.m. He was vaguely perplexed because he did not react more emotionally to the blood staining his slender hands.

It was fresh blood, though just beginning to coagulate; it was dabbled over his brown serge suit, splotching the neatly starched white cuffs of his shirt. His wife always did them up so nicely with the peasant's love for trivial detail.

He had always hated the silent ignorance of the peasants who surrounded the little college where he taught psychology. He supposed that he had begun to hate his wife, too, when he realized, after taking her from a local barnyard and marrying her, that she could never be anything but a sloe-eyed, shuffling peasant.

He walked on with brisk health down the narrow dirt road that led toward Glen Oaks. Elm trees lined the road. The morning air was damp and cool. Dew kept the yellow dust settled where spots of sunlight came through leaves and speckled it. Birds darted freshly through thickly hung branches.

He had given perennial lectures on hysterical episodes. Now he realized that he was the victim of such an episode. He had lost a number of minutes from his own memory. He remembered the yellow staring eyes of the breakfast eggs gazing up at him from a sea of grease. He remembered his wife screaming—after that only blankness.

He stopped on a small bridge crossing Calvert's Creek, wiped the blood carefully from his hands with a green silk handkerchief. He dropped the stained silk into the clear water. Silver flashes darted up, nibbled the cloth as it floated down. He watched it for a moment, then went on along the shaded road.

This was his chance to escape from Glen Oaks. That was what he had wanted to do ever since he had come here five years ago to teach. He had a good excuse now to get away from the shambling peasants whom he hated and who returned the attitude wholeheartedly—the typical provincial's hatred of culture and learning.

Then he entered the damp, chilled shadows of the thick wood that separated his house from the college grounds. It was thick, dense, dark. One small corner of it seemed almost ordinary, the rest was superstition haunted, mysterious and brooding. This forest had provided Doctor Spechaug many hours of escape.

He had attempted to introspect, but had never found satisfactory causes for his having found himself running through these woods at night in his bare feet. Nor why he sometimes hated the sunlight.

HE TENSED in the dank shadows. Someone else was in this forest with him. It did not disturb him. Whatever was here was not alien to him or the forest. His eyes probed the mist that slithered through the ancient mossy trees and hanging vines. He listened, looked, but found nothing. Birds chittered, but that was all. He sat down, his back against a spongy tree trunk, fondled dark green moss.

As he sat there, he knew that he was waiting for someone. He shrugged. Mysticism was not even interesting to him, ordinarily. Still, though a behaviorist, he upheld certain instinctual motivation theories. And, though reluctantly, he granted Freud contributory significance. He could be an atavist, a victim of unconscious regression. Or a prey of some insidious influence, some phenomena a rather childish science had not yet become aware of. But it was of no importance. He was happier now than he had ever been. He felt free—young and new. Life seemed worth living.

Abruptly, with a lithe liquid ease, he was on his feet, body tense, alert. Her form was vaguely familiar as she ran toward him. She dodged from his sight, then re-appeared as the winding path cut behind screens of foliage.

She ran with long smooth grace, and he had never seen a woman run like that. A plain skirt was drawn high to allow long bronzed legs free movement. Her hair streamed out, a cloud of red-gold. She kept looking backwards and it was obvious someone was chasing her.

He began sprinting easily toward her, and as the distance shortened, he recognized her. Edith Bailey, a second-year psychology major who had been attending his classes two semesters. Very intelligent, reclusive, not a local-grown product. Her work had a grimness about it, as though psychology was a dire obsession, especially abnormal psychology. One of her theme papers had been an exhaustive, mature but somehow overly determined, treatise on self-induced hallucination and auto-suggestion. He had not been too impressed because of an unjustified emphasis on supernatural myth and legend, including werewolves, vampires, and the like.

She sprang to a stop like a cornered deer as she saw him suddenly blocking the path. She turned, then stopped and turned back slowly. Her

eyes were wide, cheeks flushed. Taut breasts rose and fell deeply, and her hands were poised for flight.

But she wasn't looking at his face. Her gaze was on the blood splattering his clothes.

He was breathing deeply too. His heart was swelling with exhilaration. His blood flowed hotly. Something of the whirling ecstasy he had known back in his student days as a track champion returned to him—the mad bursting of the wind against him, the wild passion of the dash.

A burly figure came lurching after her down the path. A tramp, evidently, from his filthy, smoke-sodden clothes and thick stubble of beard. He recalled the trestle west of the forest where the bindlestiffs from the Pacific Fruit line jungled up at nights, or during long layovers. Sometimes they came into the forest.

He was big, fat and awkward. He was puffing and blowing, and he began to groan as Doctor Spechaug's fists thudded into his flesh. The degenerate fell to his knees, his broken face blowing out bloody air. Finally he rolled over onto his side with a long sighing moan, lay limply, very still. Doctor Spechaug's lips were thin, white, as he kicked savagely. He heard a popping. The bum flopped sidewise into a pile of dripping leaves.

He stepped back, looked at Edith Bailey. Her full red lips were moist and gleaming. Her oddly opaque eyes glowed strangely at him. Her voice was low, yet somehow, very intense.

"Wonderful laboratory demonstration, Doctor. But I don't think many of your student embryos would appreciate it."

DOCTOR SPECHAUG nodded, smiled gently. "No. An unorthodox case." He lit a cigarette, and she took one. Their smoke mingled with the dissipating morning mist. And he kept on staring at her. A pronounced sweater girl with an intellect. This—he could have loved. He wondered if it were too late.

Doctor Spechaug had never been in love. He wondered if he were now with this fundamental archetypal beauty. "By the way," he was saying, "what are you doing in this evil wood?"

Then she took his arm, very naturally, easily. They began walking slowly along the cool, dim path.

"Two principal reasons. One, I like it here; I come here often. Two, I knew you always walk along this path, always late for your eight o'clock class. I've often watched you walking here. You walk beautifully."

He did not comment. It seemed unnecessary now.

"The morning's almost gone," she observed. "The sun will be out very warm in a little while. I hate the sun."

On an impulse he said: "I'm going away. I've wanted to get out of this obscene nest of provincial stupidity from the day I first came here. And now I've decided to leave."

"What are you escaping from?"

He answered softly. "I don't know. Something Freudian, no doubt. Something buried, buried deep. Something too distasteful to recognize."

She laughed. "I knew you were human and not the cynical pseudo-intellectual you pretended to be. Disgusting, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Being human, I mean."

"I suppose so. I'm afraid we're getting an extraordinarily prejudiced view. I can't help being a snob here. I despise and loathe peasants."

"And I," she admitted. "Which is merely to say, probably, that we loathe all humanity."

"Tell me about yourself," he said finally.

"Gladly. I like doing that—to one who will understand. I'm nineteen. My parents died in Hungary during the War. I came here to America to live with my uncle. But by the time I got here he was dead, too. And he left me no money, so there was no sense being grateful for his death. I got a part-time job and finished high school in Chicago. I got a scholarship to—this place." Her voice trailed off. She was staring at him.

"Hungary!" he said and repeated it. "Why—I came from Hungary!"

Her grip on his arm tightened. "I knew—somehow. I remember Hungary—its ancient horror. My father inherited an ancient castle. I remember long cold corridors and sticky dungeons, and cobwebbed rooms thick with dust. My real name is Burhmann. I changed it because I thought Bailey more American."

"Both from Hungary," mused Doctor Spechaug. "I remember very little of Hungary. I came here when I was three. All I remember are the ignorant peasants. Their dumb, blind superstition—their hatred for——"

"You're afraid of them, aren't you?" she said.

He started. "The peasants. I——" He shook his head. "Perhaps."

"You're afraid," she said. "Would you mind telling me, Doctor, how these fears of yours manifest themselves?"

He hesitated; they walked. Finally he answered. "I've never told anyone but you. There are hidden fears. And they reveal themselves consciously in the absurd fear of seeing my own reflection. Of not seeing my shadow. Of——"

She breathed sharply. She stopped walking, turned, stared at him. "Not—not seeing your—reflection!"

He nodded.

"Not seeing your—shadow—!"

"Yes."

"And the full moon. A fear of the full moon, too?"

"But how did you know?"

"And you're allergic to certain metals, too. For instance—silver?"

He could only nod.

"And you go out in the night sometimes—and do things—but you don't remember what?"

He nodded again.

Her eyes glowed brightly. "I know. I know. I've known those same obsessions ever since I can remember."

Doctor Spechaug felt strangely uneasy then, a kind of dreadful loneliness.

"Superstition," he said. "Our Old World background, where superstition is the rule, old, very old superstition. Frightened by them when we were young. Now those childhood fixations reveal themselves in crazy symptoms."

He took off his coat, threw it into the brush. He rolled up his shirt sleeves. No blood visible now. He should be able to catch the little local passenger train out of Glen Oaks without any trouble. But why should there be any trouble? The blood——

He thought too that he might have killed the tramp, that popping sound.

She seemed to sense his thoughts. She said quickly: "I'm going with you, Doctor."

He said nothing. It seemed part of the inevitable pattern.

THEY ENTERED the town. Even for mid-morning the place was strangely silent, damply hot, and still. The 'town' consisted of five blocks of main street from which cow paths wound off aimlessly into fields, woods, meadows and hills. There was always a few shuffling, dull-eyed people lolling about in the dusty heat. Now there were no people at all.

As they crossed over toward the shady side, two freshly clothed kids ran out of Davis' Filling Station, stared at them like vacant-eyed lambs, then turned and spurted inside Ken Wanger's Shoe Hospital.

Doctor Spechaug turned his dark head. His companion apparently hadn't noticed anything ominous or peculiar. But to him, the whole scene was morose, fetid and brooding.

They walked down the cracked concrete walk, passed the big plate-glass windows of Murphy's General Store which were a kind of fetish in Glen Oaks. But Doctor Spechaug wasn't concerned with the cultural significance of the windows. He was concerned with*not* looking into it.

And oddly, he never did look at himself in the glass, neither did he look across the street. Though the glass did pull his gaze into it with an implacable somewhat terrible insistence. And he stared. He stared at that portion of the glass which was supposed to reflect Edith Bailey's material self—*but didn't reflect anything. Not even a shadow.*

They stopped. They turned slowly toward each other. He swallowed hard, trembled slightly. And then he knew deep and dismal horror. He studied that section of glass where her image was supposed to be. *It still wasn't.*

He turned. And she was still standing there. "Well?"

And then she said in a hoarse whisper: "*Your reflection—where is it?*"

And all he could say was: "And yours?"

Little bits of chuckling laughter echoed in the inchoate madness of his suddenly whirling brain. Echoing years of lecture on—cause and effect, logic. Little bits of chuckling laughter. He grabbed her arm.

"*We—we can see our own reflections, but we can't see each other's!*"

She shivered. Her face was terribly white. "What—what is the answer?"

No. He didn't have it figured out. Let the witches figure it out. Let some old forbidden books do it. Bring the problem to some warlock. But

not to him. He was only a Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology. But maybe—

"Hallucinations," he muttered faintly. "Negative hallucinations."

"Doctor. Did you ever hear the little joke about the two psychiatrists who met one morning and one said, 'You're feeling excellent today. How am I feeling?'"

He shrugged. "We have insight into each other's abnormality, but are unaware of the same in ourselves."

"That's the whole basis for psychiatry, isn't it?"

"In a way. But this is physical—functional—when psychiatry presents situation where—" His voice trailed off.

"I have it figured this way." How eager she was. Somehow, it didn't matter much now, to him. "We're conditioned to react to reality in certain accepted ways. For instance that we're supposed to see our shadows. So we see them. But in our case they were never really there to see. Our sanity or 'normalcy' is maintained that way. But the constant auto-illusion must always lead to neuroticism and pathology—the hidden fears. But these fears must express themselves. So they do so in more socially acceptable ways."

Her voice suddenly dropped as her odd eyes flickered across the street. "But we see each other as we really are," she whispered tensely. "Though we could never have recognized the truth in ourselves."

She pointed stiffly. Her mouth gaped, quivered slightly.

He turned slowly. His mouth twitched with a growing terrible hatred. They were coming for him now.

FOUR MEN WITH RIFLES were coming toward him. Stealthily creeping, they were, as though it were some pristine scene with caves in the background. They were bent slightly, stalking. Hunters and hunted, and the law of the wild and two of them stopping in the middle of the street. The other two branched, circled, came at him from either side, clumping down the walk. George recognized them all. The town marshal, Bill Conway, and Mike Lash, Harry Hutchinson, and Dwight Farrigon.

Edith Bailey was backed up against the window. Her eyes were strangely dilated. But the faces of the four men exuded cold animal hate, and blood-lust.

Edith Bailey's lips said faintly, "What—what are we going to do?"

He felt so calm. He felt his lips writhe back in a snarl. The wind tingled on his teeth. "I know now," he said. "I know about the minutes I lost. I know why they're after me. You'd better get away."

"But why the—the guns?"

"I murdered my wife. She served me greasy eggs. God—she was an animal—just a dumb beast!"

Conway called, his rifle crooked in easy promising grace. "All right, Doc. Come on along without any trouble. Though I'd just as soon you made a break. I'd like to shoot you dead, Doctor."

"And what have I done, exactly," said Doctor Spechaug.

"He's hog-wild," yelled Mike Lash. "Cuttin' her all up that way! Let's string 'em up!" Conway yelled something about a "fair trial," though not with much enthusiasm.

Edith screamed as they charged toward them. A wild, inhuman cry.

Doctor Spechaug's eyes flashed up the narrow street.

"Let's go!" he said to Edith Bailey. "They'll see running they've never seen before. They can't touch us."

They ran. They heard the sharp crack of rifles. They saw the dust spurting up. Doctor Spechaug heard himself howling as he became aware of peculiar stings in his body. Queer, painless, deeply penetrating sensations that made themselves felt all over his body—as though he was awakening from a long paralysis.

Then the mad yelling faded rapidly behind them. They were running, streaking out of the town with inhuman speed. They struck out in long easy strides across the meadow toward the dense woods that brooded beyond the college.

Her voice gasped exultingly. "They couldn't hurt us! They couldn't! They tried!"

He nodded, straining eagerly toward he knew not what, nosing into the fresh wind. How swiftly and gracefully they could run. Soon they lost themselves in the thick dark forest. Shadows hid them.

DAYS LATER the moon was full. It edged over the low hill flanking Glen Oaks on the east. June bugs buzzed ponderously like armor-plated dragons toward the lights glowing faintly from the town. Frogs croaked from the swampy meadows and the creek.

They came up slowly to stand silhouetted against the glowing moon, nosing hungrily into the steady, aromatic breeze blowing from the Conway farm below.

They glided effortlessly down, then across the sharp-bladed marsh grass, leaping high with each bound. As they came disdainfully close to the silent farm house, a column of pale light from a coal oil lamp came through the living room window and haloed a neglected flower bed. Sorrow and fear clung to the house.

The shivering shadow of a gaunt woman was etched against the half drawn shade. The two standing outside the window called. The woman's shadow trembled.

Then a long rigid finger of steel projected itself beneath the partially raised window. The rifle cracked almost against the faces of the two. He screamed hideously as his companion dropped without a sound, twitching, twitching—he screamed again and began dragging himself away toward the sheltering forest. Intently and desperately the rifle cracked again.

He gave up then.

He sprawled out flatly on the cool, damp, moon-bathed path. His hot tongue lapped feverishly at the wet grass. He felt the persistent impact of the rifle's breath against him, and now there was a wave of pain. The full moon was fading into black mental clouds as he feebly attempted to lift his bleeding head.

He thought with agonized irony:

"Provincial fools. Stupid, superstitious idiots … and that damned Mrs. Conway—the most stupid of all. *Only she would have thought to load her dead husband's rifle with silver bullets!* Damned peasants——"

Total darkness blotted out futile revery.

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