

A Cry of Anguish in the Fog-Choked Darkness Brings
Arn Flannery to a Scene of Ghastly Evil



*"You will be permitted to
witness a miracle!"*

The YELLOW CURSE

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THE clammy fog swirled and twisted like a monstrous yellow shroud.

A battered roadster purred along the graveled road from the direction of the city. Arn Flannery sat tensed behind the wheel. He was driving slowly, blue eyes vainly boring into the concealing mist, grunting eloquently as the car bounced over the washboarded apology for a highway.

"Seventeen million for roads in five years," he mused, sarcastically. "And look at this!" Thin lips twisted in a sneer about the cold pipe-stem gripped in strong, white teeth.

He shot a glance at the tiny clock on the dash. It was almost ten o'clock in the evening. He should

reach his destination soon now. Would he be able to find it in the hellish murk? Had anything gone wrong with Elena's plans? Why had she written so briefly, asked him to come to her tonight instead of following through with their set date for Saturday?

Abruptly, a scream, high-pitched, blood-curdling, broke through the saffron curtain of the mist. Flannery tensed, braked the car to an instant standstill as the tortured wail knifed his ears. He leaped from the car, slipped, went to his knees in the gravel. Off to one side he heard a gasping moan. For a moment, he hunched there on all fours, listening.

The mist grew momentarily in its shrouding, yellow intensity. It mocked him as it rolled about

on its clammy belly like some swaying, poisonous monster of the night. It was impossible to see six feet in front. Nature seemed in the mood for aiding and abetting anything that was going on in the fog-choked darkness.

The lanky reporter scrambled to his feet, swore softly, dug a flash from the door pocket of the roadster. His fingers trembled, fumbled at the switch. It was a poor light, but better than nothing at all. He turned the sickly, orange glow into the teeth of the mist. It was no match for that thick shroud, but it would have to do. Cautiously, he made his way in the direction from whence had sounded the shrill, fearful outcry.

Flannery could hear nothing now except the click and crunch of his shoes against the roadway. He paused, stood listening, his strong shoulders hunched, hard eyes narrowing. The hellish saffron billows clung to him like a material pall. Then, he heard it again. A gasping, whining moan of ineffable horror and anguish. It crescendoed upward, terminated abruptly. Then, there was no sound to be heard.

The next moment, Arn Flannery saw her. He lunged forward, leaned over the still, feminine form. The figure, scantily clad in filmy underthings, lay upon its side. The reporter smothered a curse as he turned the girl face upward.

"Holy Moses!" he gasped.

The prostrate girl had once been very beautiful. She was small and dainty. But her youthful cheeks were somewhat sunken, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her butter-hued hair was a mass of silken disarray about her rounded shoulders.

But one thing Flannery noticed with a start. The coloring of her smooth skin. It was of a ghastly hue that matched the golden satin undergarments. In the faint rays of the flash, her exposed loveliness gave off a hideous sheen that seemed to make her a part of the ghostly, macabre mist!

"It's as if this damnable fog had smirched her with its evil," Arn Flannery thought.

Just then, her long lashes fluttered weakly open; she gazed up at him with glazing, pitiful eyes.

"What in heaven's name has happened?" he asked, softly. "Are you hurt? Tell me."

Abruptly, a shiver shook her body and somehow, the man realized that it was not caused by the chill atmosphere.

"The yellow curse!" she moaned, weakly. "Go

for—help—before it is too late! Get—get key—key—"

Another horrible tremor stabbed her body; her piquant face twisted with pain; her soft flesh quivered and crawled as though at the memory of some malignant and evil thing. Then, suddenly, she went limp, her golden head lolling to one side.

Flannery fell to his knees beside the half-naked body, placed a gentle ear against the girl's left breast. There was no murmur, no sound of life.

"Dead!" he gasped.

SUDDENLY, as he straightened to his feet, a light loomed off to the left in the encompassing gloom. The fog swirled thickly yellow and ghastly between it and the man. It couldn't be far away! Striding forward, Flannery found a side road which led in its direction.

He considered a moment, returned to his roadster, slid beneath the wheel. He stepped on the starter, guided the battered car into a deep ditch beside the road. He tensed hard muscles, braced himself, as the machine went over on its side. Cautiously, he crawled from the wreckage, uninjured, grinning, serene. A moment later, without a backward glance, his tall figure was cutting through the clinging mist in the direction of the light.

The driveway from the main road ran upgrade along a narrow ridge. He followed its winding course with cautious tread till he faced a huge, ugly edifice, a piled mass of masonry, grim, forbidding. Obviously, it had once been a mansion of some grandeur. Now, however, it had deteriorated; its gables sagged, its general aspect was as evil as Arn Flannery had anticipated. At one end a round tower thrust upward, gaunt in the eerie yellow mist. A single light blinked like an evil eye from a window on the lower floor.

The reporter shivered as he put foot upon the high porch. It, like the rest of the house, was of a deeper, more sinister yellow than the fog that surrounded it. He approached the front door, banged with an immense brass knocker. It sent echoes whispering through the interior of the place like ghostly mutterings in a tomb.

Flannery waited. Slow minutes passed. He knocked again, insistently. Once more the whispers ricocheted through the depths within. Suddenly, soundlessly, the door swung open before him.

A man stared out at him. Arn Flannery felt then

a touch of the fear which was to follow. He was not conscious of being afraid, but there was an odd, heavy feeling in his chest, and his hands shook slightly as he looked into a pair of sunken, malignant orbs which might belong to the devil instead of man.

The man was tall, thin, almost gaunt. His angular face was sallow, saturnine, strangely Satanic. His narrow, slanted eyes were like those of a coiled cobra. Corn-tasseled hair was trained to a peak on his low forehead. His thin lips were twisted into a snarl. His ears were pointed at the top.

Everything Arn contacted in this eerie night was of the same ghastly, malignant yellow hue! The damnable fog, the corpse by the roadside, this gaunt skeleton of a house. And now, strangest of all, the sallow-faced devil who was peering at him with such ill-disguised malevolence in his eyes.

What had the dying girl gasped? The yellow curse! What was the meaning behind her words? "Go for help before it is too late!"

Too late for what? "Get key!" What key could she have meant? All these questions harassed the reporter as he faced the apparition in the doorway. He shook off an overpowering sense of dread, grinned affably. But the yellow creature before him did not return the grin.

"What do you want here?" he asked in a voice that dripped venom.

"Had a bit of a smash-up in the beastly fog," replied Flannery, smoothly. "The steering-gear went bad on me. I hate to bother you, but there's no other house near. Perhaps you would—"

"I have no servants who might help you," gritted the man evilly. "And no telephone. You came to a poor place for help!" He half closed the door.

"In that case," Flannery said quickly. "I'd be glad to pay you if you could accommodate me until morning. It's all of fifteen miles to Thibadeau, you know."

THE yellow-visaged man glared intently at Flannery for a moment. The reporter quaked inwardly at an odd, peculiar light which flared in the evil orbs for an instant, then died away. Then, the fellow stepped aside, waved him into a dim reception hall.

A single lamp burned in the long corridor. Its fearsome glow bathed the drab velvet curtains that hung over doorways on either side. A heavy

Turkish rug deadened the sound of footsteps, and led to stairs slanting upward in the semi-gloom. Although scantily furnished, the general impression was of wealth. But Flannery sensed an unholy tension in the still, musky atmosphere as he turned to his host.

"I have no accommodations for guests," piped the thin man, sourly. "But come upstairs and I'll show you a place where you may sleep."

He leered at the reporter, tilting his Satanic eyes so that they caught the green light, gleamed balefully at his unwanted caller. Bloodless, green-yellow lips tightened back from white, wolfish teeth in an ugly snarl. His voice was cathedral-toned.

Flannery shrugged, followed obediently after him up the broad staircase at the far end of the gloomy hall. They reached the second floor of the house. The host stopped before a bedroom door, flung it open.

"I hope you sleep well," he muttered in an unholy tone which sounded like a knell of death in the tautened ears of the reporter. "You asked for a place to sleep. You will not leave this room until morning!"

What did the leering devil mean?

Before Flannery could answer him, he turned and glided swiftly down the black corridor, odd laughter coming back to the puzzled guest over his gaunt shoulder. The laugh was a mad, rippling sound like that of a stream flowing beneath Winter's ice. It made Flannery shiver as if a cold blast had fanned his spine.

Arn Flannery stood in the center of the room, lit a cigarette, listened intently. It was near midnight, he knew. The great house was perfectly still. Ominously so. Something was wrong with the place. No question as to that. Something terrible was going on here. Something horrible. Try as he would, he could not shake off the feeling that this was true.

Flannery had been detailed by the city desk to work on a couple of mysterious disappearances that had plagued the civic authorities for several months. Elena Vaughn had been selected to work with him on the case. However, the girl reporter had ferreted out her own leads, and had not confided all of them to him. Three days before, she had vanished, leaving him a note. In it, she had merely stated that she was taking a secretarial position in the country. She hinted that it was all in

line with her duty.

Since that time, she had not contacted him, and Flannery, who loved her ardently, had become worried. Today, she had ended that worry by sending him a brief note asking him to come to her tonight. Her instructions had been vague, the fog had made them almost useless. Was he in the right house? Or was his entrance into this place a wasted, futile effort?

ARN FLANNERY believed in hunches. He had a strong one out there in the fog while crouched beside the dying girl. The dull gleam of the light through the mist had convinced him of its authenticity; he had determined to see what he could do about her gasping plea!

Back and forth, he strode, thinking. Pacing, the weary reporter became unaccountably sleepy. The air of the room suddenly became musty, foul-smelling to his sensitive nostrils. In spite of the swirling fog, Flannery opened the window a little way, allowed dank air to seep into the chamber.

He turned, reeled slightly, sank down upon the side of the bed. He stared about him in the dim candlelight. All the strength seemed to ooze out of his lanky body. He felt tired and languid. His wide shoulders drooped wearily, arms fell to his sides. He shivered.

Abruptly, Flannery felt blackness cascading down upon him. He knew that he was sinking backward upon the bed. He seemed to be encased in an airless tomb, felt he would suffocate if he could not get a breath of air. He tore at his throat, fell backward, gurgling hoarsely. A wave of hateful, vivid yellow seemed to blaze in his eyes. He heard a guttural chuckle; an evil, mocking laugh. Then he slid off into nothingness.

When he opened his eyes he felt weak, exhausted. He tried to sit up, but a wave of bitter nausea saturated his lank body. He fell back on the pillows again. For a few minutes the young reporter battled, with taut nerves and tensed muscles, to overcome the dizziness that threatened to overcome him.

Gradually, his strong body threw off the strangling effects of the gaseous opiate which had gripped his heart and lungs with crushing intensity. He sat up, taking stock of the situation.

Was this then the answer to that vague statement of the yellow devil that he was not to leave the room until morning? Had the open

window saved him from hours of drugged stupor, possible death? Was the fiend even now turning his beloved Elena to a still, yellow form like that of the girl he had met outside?

SUDDENLY, he froze. What was that dreadful sound?

It came again to his straining ears; an eerie, gruesome, blood-freezing scream, as though from the throat of a soul faced by some awful horror. The blood almost congealed in Flannery's veins as the dreadful echoes ricocheted upward from the lower regions of the house.

He tensed; then, with a bitter oath, he sprang from the bed, hurled himself toward the door of the room, plunged out into the gloomy corridor. All was dark, ominously still. Had that weird outcry emanated from the tortured throat of the girl he loved?

Flannery's craggy jaw squared at the thought, blue eyes hardening. He swore beneath his breath, groped along the clammy wall and reached the head of the stairs. For an instant, he stood stock still, listening. No sound was to be heard except the straining sobs of his own breathing. The ghostly house was quiet and still like—he shivered—like a graveyard at midnight.

He descended on tiptoe, long fingers tense to the cold, smooth balustrade. His determination was to hunt out the yellow beast, wrest Elena from its foul clutches, carry her away to safety.

At the foot of the stairs, he paused, his hand on the newel. In front of him lay the rooms of the lower floor, the eerie reception hall where he had been received. Behind the stairs was a door that should lead to a cellar. Some intangible force drew him irresistibly toward it.

Flannery opened the door. A stairway led downward in the blackness. He descended cautiously, every nerve and fiber tensed to the tautness of a violin string.

There was a long hallway at the foot of the stairs. A room near the front was lighted. He crept toward it. Crouching, he applied an eye to the keyhole. A whispered oath tumbled from his lax lips.

Never had he seen such a room. It was sinister, ungodly. In the corner opposite him was a heavy bronze urn filled with gleaming yellow flowers. The entire room was a Midas-dream, done entirely in glittering gilt. A sense of evil seemed to hang

suspended over it.

There were four long tables in the room. One of these was empty. Each of the other three held the body of a beautiful girl. Each was young, honey-haired, and two of them were saffron-hued in harmony with the hideous color scheme of the nightmarish place. The third, the one nearest the door, flesh yet untouched by the hideous curse, was Elena Vaughn. She was strapped tightly to the surface of a table!

The two golden-hued girls were entirely nude; gleaming, carved figures of yellowest wax. The orange lights from above glinted down upon their bodies with a nacreous gleam. Elena alone was partially clothed. Flannery almost cried aloud as he noticed that the garments resembled the golden, satin creations worn by the lovely, dying girl he had encountered in the damnable fog.

Abruptly, something seemed to envelop Flannery in its folds. It came on silent feet from the darkness behind him.

Claws raked at his face, tore into his flesh, his throat. An overpowering odor was in his nostrils, shutting off his breathing. He reeled giddily. He felt himself slipping into blackness. Mouthing a curse, he struck out desperately against the form that engulfed him; but his blows futilely contacted wispy nothingness. He staggered drunkenly. Something whistled in the darkness behind him, crashed down behind his left ear. Arn Flannery slithered inertly to the floor in an unconscious stupor.

WHEN the reporter regained consciousness a short time later, he found himself securely strapped to a long hard-surfaced table. The first thing his glazed eyes were conscious of was the macabre costume which adorned his figure. It consisted of loose robes of the vivid, gleaming hue of the sunset. Dizziness attacked him, and he closed his eyes to shut out the ghastly yellowness all about him.

Presently, he opened them again, and an oath seeped from his flaccid lips. He was in the hideous golden den, occupying the empty table he had seen. The room fairly stank with the heavy odor emanating from the yellow flowers.

Flannery's eyes went to the tall, thin creature who smirked down in sadistic glee at his victims. The robes that covered his gaunt frame were golden. His yellow face was topped by a shock of

corn-tassel hair which was trained to a point on his low forehead. The claw-like hands that extended toward the girls were covered with a wrinkled, yellow skin that resembled ancient parchment in texture.

Curses gurgled in Flannery's throat and he lunged upward shouting Elena's name. "Elena! What has he done? If the devil has harmed you—"

The girl found voice after turning her head and looking directly into his eyes. There was an infinity of pleading in her great orbs.

"He hasn't harmed me yet, Arn. I'm all right so far. But I'm so afraid—"

The yellow creature spun around at the sound of their voices, glided softly over to Flannery's table. The reporter felt a shudder twist his spine as he glanced up into those cruel eyes.

Thin, bloodless, green-yellow lips jerked back in a snarl. "Why did you come here?" the tall man droned.

"I came to see Miss Vaughn," said Flannery, slowly, "who had taken a position as your secretary."

"If that were true, would you have obtained entrance under false pretenses, my young friend? Why was the girl here?"

"She answered your ad for a secretary," Arn said.

"Bah! You lie!" raged the yellow man. "She is just another newspaper snooper like yourself! It would have been best for you had you remained quietly under the opiate in your room, my friend!"

His purring voice was soft, but hate blazed in the queerly slanted eyes as he stood beside Flannery's trussed body.

Flannery and the girl stared at him in wide-eyed horror, unable to give answer. The thin lips moved again, guttural words rumbled from them.

"You will be permitted to witness a miracle! You will see me change your sweetheart from the ugly whiteness she is now cursed with to the glowing, heated beauty of living gold.

"The others"—his tone softened, mournfully—"could not stand the change; they died just at the moment when my plans were near success. But I shall not fail this time. It will require three days and nights. And you, my sneaking friend, in the golden robes that do not defile my gold room, shall witness the amazing change. After that"—he spread talon-like hands—"I shall have a bit of sport with you, my impetuous intruder. Your sweetheart will be

mine, then! Together, we shall enjoy your anguish as I slowly divorce your spirit from the clay and allow it to soar to another, and, I trust, happier domain."

He chuckled obscenely, turned, walked over to Elena. Gently, his fingers stroked her rounded cheeks, and smooth, white shoulders.

"Ah, my dear," he chanted softly, "soon all this will be changed. You will no longer be ugly with the whiteness of death as you are now! I will change you to a gleaming, glorious, golden-skinned queen, worthy of my love and the wealth of a golden kingdom!"

Elena's eyes and soft body recoiled from him in pure horror. Frantically, she turned her head, looked appealingly at the helpless reporter. Flannery cursed, strained at his gyves.

"Damn you, you devil!" he raged, blue eyes blazing. "If you so much as lay your filthy hands on her again, I'll tear your foul body to pieces with my bare hands!"

The yellow-hued captor laughed, horribly. He turned, moved to the door, where he paused.

"I leave you alone," he piped, "while I go to prepare the first step."

A series of mad chuckles rumbled from his scrawny throat as he went out and closed the door behind him.

"OH, Arn!" sobbed the girl. "To think I should have brought you into this! He suspected my writing that letter, and tonight he dragged me to this dreadful yellow place! Now, everything is lost."

"Don't cry, honey. We'll beat him yet!" Flannery tried to put a confidence into his voice that he did not feel. "I'll get you out of this, Elena! But tell me. Was there another girl here?"

"There was one other, but she escaped tonight," said Elena. "She fled, and the horrid devil could not find her in the fog. He laughed, and said she couldn't go far in her condition. He boasted he'd bring her back in the morning!"

"She died in my arms," murmured Flannery. "What is the curse? And do you have any idea what she might have meant when she gasped 'Get key' just before she died?"

Elena was silent for a moment, thinking. "Of course, the yellow curse might mean the method used in turning those girls that ghastly color, Arn," she replied, slowly. "But 'Get key' puzzles me.

You don't suppose she meant for you to get Keithley, do you? The inhuman monster is Professor Hugo Keithley, the archeologist, you know."

"Why, of course, that's it!" he cried. "She asked me to go for help before it was too late to save you, and she tried to tell me to get Keithley, the devil behind the yellow curse, but death sealed her lips! Have you found out anything?"

"No," she said, hopelessly. "But he was constantly watching me, Arn. I hadn't the slightest chance to discover anything about him."

Flannery concentrated upon an attempt to free himself. He strained at the straps that held him. Perspiration dewed his forehead, dripped downward upon his neck. Elena gazed at him with imploring eyes, and her lips moved soundlessly as if praying to a merciful God to aid him.

His efforts were futile. He relaxed, gasping, cramps racking his body. He could do no more.

Suddenly, footsteps were again audible. Keithley reappeared in the doorway. One of the long hands was out-thrust, holding a tall, thin vial of varicolored pills. He moved forward slowly.

Helpless, Flannery focused his unwavering gaze on that container, wondering just what it might mean.

Like an apparition from some ghastly nightmare, Keithley waddled across the gilt-hued room, glared into the girl's terrified face.

"You see, my dear, you have nothing to fear. You will merely lie quietly while I administer the precious medicine. We will alternate the red and purple pills for three days and nights. Gradually, as your ghastly whiteness is enriched by a golden hue, you will feel yourself drawn to me." His leering lips curled, one claw gliding forward to touch pale flesh that shrank from his foul caress.

"Look, Keithley!" Flannery tried to keep his voice steady. "Why not try your evil concoction out on me? Give it to me and let her go!"

A sarcastic chuckle from the professor interrupted: "Don't try heroics, my friend. It is useless!"

As Flannery cursed, the fiend turned to a metal cabinet on the wall beside his desk. He busied himself with glass tubes for a while, mad mutterings and chuckles falling from his throat in an unintelligible rumble of sound. Then, without looking at the reporter, he approached the girl, a large red pill on his outstretched palm.

A lurid oath spewed from Arn Flannery's lips as he strained upward. Blind fury gave him the strength of a maniac.

Suddenly, abruptly, the worn leather straps parted under his mad efforts. His pain-racked arms were free. He sat up, tore at the buckles that bound his ankles, released himself. Then, grimly, he leaped to his feet and threw himself upon the figure of the yellow professor!

His plunging body crashed into the thin figure, bore it smashing to the floor. The yellow fiend cursed obscenely, fought back with all the fury of a madman. His long, sharp nails bit into Flannery's cheeks. Then the reporter's hard right fist crashed with bone-breaking impact against Keithley's jaw, and the struggle was ended!

Arn Flannery turned and released the sobbing girl from her bindings. He held her close in his arms, whispered: "Don't cry now, honey!"

He quickly strapped the unconscious figure to Elena's table beside its victims. Then he turned to the desk in the corner. Feverishly, his fingers delved into pigeonholes, brought to light the secrets of the professor. In a few minutes he swung around, grinning.

"Here's everything!" he announced, jubilantly, holding up a black bound volume. "The old coot's diary and confessional. This Professor Hugo Keithley was once one of our most famous archeologists. He was bitten by an insect of the tsetse family while in Egypt. The bite brought on a yellow fever which left him withered, yellow, and

with a mad lust in his blood. He became obsessed with a passion for gold!

"He outfitted this fantastic gold room to harmonize with his taste, then chose beautiful golden-haired girls as subjects for the hypnotism of which he was a past master. These victims were lured here by the secretarial ad, of course. Then to accomplish his purpose, and to change the girls to a golden hue, he administered a dangerous drug. It was a crude aphrodisiac, *phosphorus*! Wait, let me read from this book:

"Sodium phosphate—magnesium phosphate—phosphorus, a deadly poison, can, when properly treated and acidified by other agents, be taken into the human body in small quantities with comparative safety. The danger in its use, however, lies in the fact that the drug, under certain conditions, may burst into flame. The use of yellow phosphorus as an aphrodisiac will cause the patient to assume a vivid saffron hue. It is—"

"Heavens!" broke in Elena, shuddering with horror. "Think of that madman giving liquid fire to those helpless girls. And I was to be next!"

Arn Flannery took her into his arms, kissed her fears away.

"Let's forget what will never happen, Elena, sweet! The yellow curse is a thing of the past. But we must get into our clothes, hunt up Keithley's car. Mine's in the ditch, and we *must* make that six o'clock deadline. What a story!"

They made the deadline by fifteen minutes, and the *Times-Tribune* scooped the town.