

# CELLAR OF SKULLS

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A Nightmarish Dream Turns to Cold Reality When  
Nina Benson Suddenly Faces a Horrible Ordeal

**T**O awaken from a bad dream—a thing of nightmare and horror—and to find oneself in one's own bed, safe and sound, with a soft spring breeze blowing through the open windows, is an experience known personally by most humans. But to awaken from a bad dream to a reality more horrible than any phantasmagoria of sleep, is strange, and terrible—and rare.

Moreover, in deep nightmare, all the dreamer's senses do not operate. For instance, although he sees and hears, he does not smell.



Nina Benson

Nina Benson smelled blood.

She was awake and she smelled blood.

In her dream she had been in rooted flight from a demon—rooted because only the attempt at flight had been there, not flight itself. In nightmare one cannot flee, one can only desire, with terrible urgency, to run while the feet seemed sucked in mire. But now, awake, it was the same—she could not move.

How does one tell one is no longer dreaming? What is the difference between waking and sleeping. The answer is memory—memory of the actual happenings in the time before the dream.

The dream comes in between but when the dream is done, the mind puts it aside and joins up the waking past with the waking present so that no seam shows and all the threads are whole.

So, even though Nina awakened to horror—a horror like the dream, only worse—she knew that this was not her dream continued, but gross and terrifying reality! Yet the immediate past before the dream, though it came back to her and told her she was not dreaming now, was not as clear as it would have been had not the nightmare intervened.

It was blurred, dreamlike, with its own overtones of horror.

She was at the Medical Center dance, meeting the colleagues of the man she was to marry—young Doctor Merritt. Bill Merritt, junioring at the Center, had been supposed to escort her, and they had both looked forward to an evening of fun and dancing. But there had been no dancing with Bill, neither had he escorted her. In fact she had not even seen him that day.

There was nothing mysterious about it. Bill was a junior—therefore, at the beck and call of his superiors, and in fact he had not even had time to inform her by phone that a mass accident case would keep him busy assisting in the Emergency Operating Room for an indefinite number of hours. Nina assumed that it was something like that—she was getting used to being a doctor's wife even before her marriage.

Anyway, she was not exactly a stranger at the dance. Even though this was her first visit to the new Center, she was known by a few of the older physicians who had been associated with her father, the late and highly esteemed Doctor Benson—a man who had been well-beloved both as a surgeon and a man. It was as Doctor Benson's daughter and the fiancée of the promising young medico, Bill Merritt, that she was introduced.

**D**OCTOR WARNER led her over to a man in evening clothes who was sitting down.

"I want you to meet Doctor Wirt," he said as

they approached the man.

The man rose, evidently having heard what Doctor Warner had said. He was a cripple. His right leg was off at the knee, and he supported himself with a crutch. In addition, his right hand had been amputated a little above the wrist. His face was long, lean and cavernous, and a sardonic light gleamed in his eyes. A thatch of gray, unkempt hair covered one half of his skull. A livid scar, in the shape of a question mark ran around that part of his skull which was bald.

"Ex-doctor," he said, bowing stiffly on his crutch.

"Doctor Wirt means that he isn't practicing," Warner said smoothly. "Wirt, this is Nina Benson, engaged to young Bill Merritt."

"Benson—Benson, did you say?"

"Daughter of the late Doctor Benson," Warner added.

"Quite so," the cripple rasped, and his eyes glowed even more sardonically. "I remember Doctor Benson quite well."

Doctor Warner looked at him a little sharply, as though detecting an undertone of hidden meaning in the apparently innocent words.

"Doctor Wirt, although he doesn't practice," Warner said, "is still connected with the Center. Brain work is his specialty. You're going to be a doctor's wife, so you should know these things."

"Bill has told me about Doctor Wirt," Nina said, smiling, though somehow she had to force the smile. "How he maintains residence in the Center, though retired, and engages in research which I am sure will lead to valuable results. . . ."

Nina became aware of a sudden strong desire that Bill would come. She was aware also of a feeling of repulsion. Yet she told herself that the feeling was unjust—this man could not help the fact that he was a cripple and that his skull had been so strangely branded, echoing the question mark that seemed constantly to shine out of his eyes. . . .

Memory grew hazy for Nina Benson. The past that would join the present and thus assure her that she was not dreaming, was now blurred.

"Would you like to visit my workshop downstairs," she seemed to recall a voice saying—and if the same voice had said: "Will you walk into my parlor, said the spider to the fly," it somehow would have sounded the same.

And then there was a sickish sweet smell, a

choking, a moment of heart-stopping fear—then sleep . . . and dreams.

**I**N the dreams a voice spoke, half familiar, half strange, charged with anger and hate and grief, sad with memory and glad with the anticipation of some mysterious vengeance. There was no sickish, sweet odor now, so closely resembling chloroform—there was no smell at all. But the voice said:

"He cut off my leg and cut off my hand. He was a butcher. He could have saved them and he didn't. Had *he* been on the operating table, and had *I* been the man in white, I would have saved them. But he left me to be a hobbler to the end of my days, half a surgeon and half a man. 'Amputate!' he said. 'If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off!' But my right hand did not offend me, it offended him. Head Surgeon he wanted to be, and I threatened that ambition. So he turned a simple job of antisepsis into an amputating butchery, and thus won to the position that should have been mine! Any other man would not have had that ambition, and I would have had my leg and hand.

"Oh, I see it—I see how it happened. The accident—the crash of automobiles! Then the ambulance—and where should I be brought but to my own hospital! By all the malignant fates, it had to be here! Then the conference of the surgeons, debating over the patient who was their professional colleague.

"The invocation of the standing custom—that surgery on a hospital colleague was to be anonymous insofar as the patient was concerned. Whatever the result, good or bad, he was never to know who the operator had been. The case was an emergency—septic poisoning never waits—it was too late to call in an outside surgeon. One man takes the job, the others stand by. No nurses present, only doctors, and all sworn in honor to secrecy. And who is the surgeon? Who can it be—who else could it be—but Butcher Benson!"

**N**INA awakened out of her nightmare, hearing her name called—awakened to reality. And the reality was not the end of horror but the continuation of it! Flight in her dream and flight in reality were alike impossible. Just as she had been unable to move in the one, she was now immobile in the other.

The smell was not a thing in the past but in the

present. It was not chloroform, it was blood. The great slab she lay on was stained with it, impregnated with it. Gyves encircled her upper arms, gyves themselves attached to the slab, and her feet were linked to the slab with chains.

Over her bent the figure of her dreams, cadaverous, sardonic, curious.

"Awake, my dear?" he questioned. "Welcome to my Golgotha. Yes, that's what I call my little laboratory—the place of skulls. See, twist your head a little, and you will see them—skulls. I'm a brain man, remember—at least I was one, until a butcher made a hobbler out of me. I could not make the butcher pay for that. Death robbed me of him. In fact, I did not always know that he had been the one. You're not the butcher, but you're the butcher's daughter—so be it, I am satisfied. For my hand and leg, your skull, golden-haired. It will look very much the same as the others when I am through with it, but I will recognize it, and, looking at it, will forget my leglessness and handlessness. Something that cries in me will be appeased and my mind will have rest.

"Do not look for help. None will come. No one comes here unless sent for—they respect my privacy here. I observe your nostrils twitching. Is it the smell of blood? No, my dear, it is not human blood. Just guinea pigs. You are the first live human to be stretched out on that slab, and you will be the last. What's that—you said something?"

Terror filled Nina Benson, but she was fully awake now and her mind was functioning. Out of her dream, which she now recognized as only half a dream—out of what she had heard—she was able to grasp something of the meaning behind the madness that animated this new acquaintance of hers. When he had been brought in from that accident, he had been operated on by one of his colleagues. This operation, in accordance with longstanding custom, had been anonymous. Yet somehow, subsequently, this poor wretch of an ex-doctor had learned, or at least thought he knew, who the operator had been.

Victor Benson—her father!

And the twisted brain now sought assuagement for its misery in making a skull out of the daughter of the man who, Doctor Wirt mistakenly thought, had amputated not out of necessity but out of malice and ambition.

"Doctor Wirt," she choked. "Let me go! My father, if he really was the one who amputated,

could only have done so because he had to do it to save your life. My father was one of the finest men who ever lived, Doctor Wirt. You don't know what you're doing—"

"I know exactly what I'm doing!" came the rasping answer. "Look! Look up!"

**N**INA looked up and saw suspended directly over her neck a terrible instrument of destruction. It was a tremendous, crescent-shaped thing of steel, with a razor-sharp edge, and it was suspended on a rope from a rafter.

Doctor Wirt's purpose was plain when he drew a knife from his pocket. He meant to cut the rope, and the scimitar-like thing of steel would fall and sever her head from her body.

"A trophy from a Turkish doctor, presented to me long ago. I have at last found a use for it. Even a one-handed surgeon can cut a rope—"

"Doctor Wirt, you're mad! Even if you killed me, you can't dispose of my body. You'll be convicted of my murder, you'll be executed—"

"Even so," came the insensate response, "one spurt of blood from your white neck will repay me for all of that torture—"

He suddenly broke off.

"What's that!"

The door to the cellar-like laboratory crashed inward, and a figure in trousers and white shirt catapulted forward. The automatic in the figure's hand spat fire, the knife in Wirt's hand clattered to the stone floor. The next instant a fist crashed into the doctor's jaw. He slumped.

Bill Merritt knelt, pawed the body, came up with keys. The next instant Nina Benson was free. In a blend of hysterical laughter and tears she told Merritt what had happened.

"I met Warner in the corridor," he said quickly, explaining his unlooked-for advent. "He told me he had left you with Wirt. I looked for you, couldn't find you. I got busy on the callaphone. Wirt didn't answer. I got Warner. We both thought of the same thing at the same time—that Wirt had somehow guessed who had operated. That's why I came with the pistol. When I knocked for a full minute without getting an answer, I knew I'd need it. Well, we'll take Wirt over to the Psychiatric. That's where he should have been sent long ago. Poor fellow—crazy, of course. Darling, it must have been terrible—"

"It's all right now," she whispered.