

Sinister House

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Margaret stretched in hypnotic sleep

Criminals Creep at Night, but then Lee Richmond, the Nocturnal Detective, is a Night Owl Himself!

THE lean-jawed, dark-haired man in the dinner jacket studied the girl who had just been shown into the library. He waited for her to speak first.

"You are Lee Richmond?" inquired the girl unnecessarily. She too was in evening dress.

"And you," said the man, "are Avis Fenton, the younger of the two Fenton sisters who live with their uncle on Park Avenue. Two months ago you and your sister each received fifty thousand dollars that was being held in trust for you until

you were twenty-one and twenty-five respectively."

"How did you learn all that?" demanded Avis Fenton in amazement.

"I never forget anything I read in the papers—and I read at least two or three of them every day. That is why I'm called the Nocturnal Detective. I only work nights—the days I spend in reading and resting."

He regarded her keenly.

"You didn't come here tonight to have me tell you your name," he said. "What's worrying you, Miss Fenton? Something is, I know."

"Mr. Richmond," Avis Fenton burst out, "you must help me! You know that old brownstone house the family owns on Seventy-Second Street? Well, it's not untenanted, although it's supposed to be.

Early this evening my sister Margaret and I drove by the house on our way to the theater. We were early for the show and I suggested that it might be fun if we stopped for a few minutes and looked through the old house. After all, we lived in it as children."

"Yes?" Richmond prompted.

"I had a key to a rear door. To our surprise we found that the house was dimly lighted. At first we were a bit frightened, and then we decided that the real estate agent might be showing some one the place. It's for sale or rent, you know, furnished."

Richmond listened intently to the rest of the story. The two sisters had gone upstairs. There were lights burning in all of the rooms. Heavy drapes had been fastened across the windows and doors so that the lights could not be seen from outside the house.

"Then we saw him," said Avis. "A tall man with a thin satanic face, and a beard at the point of his chin. We were paralyzed by the suddenness of his appearance. He came silently toward us and fixed his eyes on Margaret's face.

" 'You must sleep,' he said. 'Sleep!' My tongue stuck, I couldn't cry out."

"Go on," said Richmond.

"Margaret, always more suggestible than myself, walked over to a divan at the command of the tall man, and stretched out, apparently asleep. The man turned his eyes on me. I pretended to respond to his hypnotic power. I dropped to the floor, played possum. He thought he had me and he left the room. I lost no time in sneaking out of the house and coming to you."

"Why not to the police?" asked the detective.

"The publicity," said Avis. "I had heard friends speak of you, so I came here. Won't you help me, Mr. Richmond?"

"Of course I will. Don't worry. We'll

get your sister out of this, whatever it is."

Fifteen minutes later with his hand on the gun in his pocket, Lee Richmond pushed the door of the dismal brownstone open. A dim light burned in the hall.

"Follow me," he whispered.

A VIS silently closed the door from the inside and then followed Richmond along the hall. The detective paused to listen. The old house was grimly silent.

Abruptly the dim light in the hall went out. Richmond caught the girl by the arm with his left hand while he drew a gun with his right.

"Quiet!" he whispered. "I think he knows we are here."

Richmond saw a tiny object glowing on the side wall. He recognized it at once as a little radium-treated knob at the end of a hanging light chain, placed there so that the light could be found in the dark.

He released his grip on the girl's arm and advanced toward the light chain. He reached out to touch it. As he did so he felt what appeared to be a thread snap as his hand brushed against it. He reacted to the warning instantly, leaped back. A heavy object, falling from a height, struck the floor.

The hall light came on again abruptly. Richmond found himself gazing down at a heavy dagger that had been suspended above the light fixture by a thread.

"Somebody around here has cute ideas," he muttered.

"We like to entertain our guests," said a suave voice! The dark man described by Avis suddenly appeared from behind a curtain. He frowned as he saw the gun in Richmond's hand.

"I'm afraid that is hardly necessary, Mr.—"

"Lee Richmond," said the detective. "Perhaps you have heard of me, Doctor Dothan."

"You know my name?" asked the tall man, his eyes glittering.

"And your reputation, Doctor," said Richmond. "Barred from the medical profession for malpractice. Convicted on a charge of blackmail and given seven years in jail. Released in nineteen thirty-eight and then disappearing."

"My friend," said Doctor Dothan, "you know too much. You've practically signed your own death warrant."

"Cut the melodrama," said Richmond. "You forget I've got you covered."

"Look out!" screamed Avis suddenly.

Richmond whirled, and caught a glimpse of a weird looking face.

In that instant Doctor Dothan acted. He leaped forward, a gun in his own hand.

"Drop that automatic!" he snapped.

Richmond obeyed, knowing that a dead man would be of no help to the two sisters.

"I don't understand how you have been getting away with this, Doctor," said Richmond slowly.

"It's quite easy, I assure you," said Dothan, his tones heavy with vanity. "Like you, I work only at night, when the real estate agent is not likely to be showing the house. My friend, I shall have to hold you prisoner."

Dothan raised his voice. "Belchar!" He called. "Belchar!"

OUT of the shadow at the end of the hall, loomed a weird figure—a tall man clad in a red robe, the upper part of his face hidden by a black mask, and his round head completely bald.

He looked like the priest of some strange foreign cult.

"You called me, O Enlightened One," said Belchar. Evil eyes glittered through the holes in the mask. "Are these the ones?"

"They are, Belchar," said Doctor

Dothan. He pointed dramatically to Avis. "This girl, can't you see that she is a power for evil which we must conquer?"

"What's all this rigmarole?" Richmond snapped.

"Belchar is the high priest of the Cult of Flame," said Doctor Dothan. "He regards all evil as feminine, and is pledged by the Cult to root it out."

"Bunk!" said Richmond.

The nocturnal detective had noted the brown oxfords that were revealed beneath Belchar's robe. Dothan moved closer to Richmond.

Abruptly Richmond lashed out with a hard right that caught Dothan squarely on the chin. The bearded man dropped to the floor.

Belchar uttered a roar of rage, leaped, flashing a wicked looking knife.

Richmond ducked, Belchar cleverly blocked the blow. The man in the red robe knew how to fight.

Again he lunged forward, the keen blade plunged toward Richmond's heart.

Richmond flung himself to one side, avoided the thrust by a hair's breadth.

"Drop that knife!"

It was Avis who spoke. The girl had grabbed up Richmond's automatic from the floor and was covering Belchar with the gun. The red-robed man turned with a snarl. As he saw the gun, his expression changed. He uttered a howl of fright, dashed down the hall and disappeared.

For the first time Richmond noticed that Doctor Dothan was also missing. Evidently he had managed to get away while the detective had been fighting with Belchar.

"Now to get Margaret," Richmond panted. "She must still be somewhere in the house."

Avis handed him the automatic. Cautiously they advanced along the hall, reached a living room, found it deserted.

Richmond uttered a soft exclamation as he saw a wax statue standing on a mantel. It was the head of a girl, life-size, and it had been painted realistically.

"Looks enough like you to be your double, Avis," Richmond said. "How come?"

"Father had queer ideas. Thought he'd like to have something like that in case I passed on before he did. When he died, I had it sent over here."

"It's going to come in handy," Richmond said grimly.

He took the statue and placed it on a pile of books he stacked up on the seat of a big arm chair. Then he found a scarf and draped it over the shoulders of the statue.

From the rear it looked as though it was Avis sitting there. To make it even more realistic, Richmond drew out an ivory cigarette holder, placed a cigarette in it, then lighted it. He placed the burning cigarette down on an ash tray on the arm of the chair.

"Now let's get behind that screen," he said softly.

FOR a few moments the room was silent. Then the red-robed man appeared. He saw what appeared to be Avis Fenton sitting motionless in the chair. Belchar drew his knife and stealthily advanced toward the chair. He reached it and raised the knife to strike.

"All right, Belchar," said Richmond, covering him with the automatic. "We've got you. Drop that knife."

Belchar let the knife fall to the floor. From the doorway behind him came the

roar of a gun. Richmond fired as a bullet whistled by his head. Doctor Dothan dropped with a bullet in his shoulder.

"You can take off the mask now, Belchar," said Richmond. "I know you. You're Egg Mullin, cheap crook who has been working with Doctor Dothan." His voice grew hard. "And if Margaret Fenton has been harmed, you'll get the electric chair."

"Aw, she ain't been hurt none," said Mullin. "She's tied up in the other room." He pointed toward a closed door.

Avis ran to the door and drew it open. An instant later she was back with her sister.

"I've got to admit," said Richmond, "that you tried to work a little different angle on the usual kidnaping racket, Doctor. You and Mullin moved in here hoping that the Fenton girls would appear here alone to look over their property. When they did so tonight you were all ready to kidnap them and hold them for ransom. Unfortunately for you Avis got away and came to me—"

"But the weird cult and the man in the red robe?" said Avis wonderingly.

"All a lot of bunk to impress and frighten you two girls into acquiescing in anything they instructed you to do." He smiled. "There is no such thing as the Cult of the Flame. At least I haven't read about it in the papers. And," the Nocturnal Detective concluded, "I don't think this precious pair will do any night work for a long time to come."