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# House of the Lizard

By HAROLD WARD

*The newspaper reporter underwent a ghastly experience in that house built on the quicksands of a swamp*

THE place was little more than a dugout set in the brow of the hill. The exposed portion was of limestone, stained and yellowed with age. A creeping vine, tangled and untrimmed, clung tenaciously to the fissures in the rocky wall alongside and flung its rebellious tendrils across the bit of roof in a riotous mass. The afternoon's rain had covered everything with moisture; above the swamp rose a foggy, stinking vapor. Located at the end of a prolongation of the mainland, the miserable habitation reminded one of the abiding-place of some poisonous denizen of the swampy morass which surrounded it on three sides. The gathering darkness was dropping down over everything like a black mantle; yet there was still light enough for me to get a good view of the old man who stood in the doorway and blinked at me drowsily as if just awakened from a sound sleep.

I stated my mission. The old man, his huge head cocked to one side, chuckled throatily. Short, pot-bellied, bandy-legged and fat, his eyes droopy and heavy-lidded, his lipless mouth a great slit extending, it seemed, almost from ear to ear, he reminded me, somehow, of a big frog that had escaped from the near-by muck and assumed the form of a man. Now, as he spoke for the first time, his voice added to the illusion, for it was deep and rumbling.

"Newspaper man, eh?" he gurgled in his hoarse bass. "Sent down to get a feature story for your Sunday paper, eh?" He chuckled again. "Maybe I——"

He stopped in the middle of the sentence as if struck by a sudden thought.

"Come in," he commanded, throwing the door open a trifle wider. "Maybe there has been some queer goings-on around here—things that seem odd to

other people. But me—I'm used to 'em."

He led the way into the single, tiny room. It was gloomy as a tomb. Feeling his way, he scratched a match and lighted a candle, which he stuck in a sconce above the huge, stone fireplace. Its feeble glare threw the interior into a sort of semi-darkness. As I took the seat he indicated, I glanced about. Two chairs, a rude table and a pallet of straw in the corner were all the furniture the room contained. On the farther wall were a number of box-like shelves; strangely enough, they reminded me of crypts.

For a single instant the old man stood gazing at me. Then, with a word of apology, he lighted a second candle from the flame of the first and, pulling up a trap-door in the floor, descended into the cellar. He returned almost immediately with a platter of cold meat, half a loaf of bread and a bottle of wine.

"'Tain't likely you've et, seein's you said your car broke down a ways back," he rumbled, placing the frugal meal on the table before me.

To tell the truth, I was hungry; for, as he had said, I had hurried on account of the breakdown. And, too, I wanted to get back to the city to keep an appointment.

He sat in silence until I had completed my repast. Then, my pipe filled and lighted, I turned to him.

"I——"

He stopped me with a gesture.

"Hear it?" he whispered. "It's at it again."

I listened. With the coming of night the noises of the day had died out. Now there was silence—silence unbroken save for a peculiar *cl-u-u-unk . . . cl-u-u-unk . . . cl-u-u-unk*. It sounded like the efforts of a plumber to force a sink

with a vacuum pump. For a moment it puzzled me.

"It's the swamp," the old man whispered tremulously. "Nights like this you can hear it plainer than when there's a moon. It's getting closer an' closer—just eatin' an' suckin' away at the ground the way a cancer works on human flesh. It used to be more'n a quarter of a mile away. Now it's almost here."

FOR a moment I smoked in silence. There was something about the old fellow—something sinister, foreboding; yet I was forced to admit to myself that he had been courteous enough. I glanced across the table at him. His face, half in the shadow, was more frog-like and repulsive than ever. He made a peculiar ducking noise. A small lizard darted out from a crack in the floor and, running up the old man's trousers leg, perched itself upon his breast. He clucked again. The creature's head raised; it seemed to balance itself upon the end of its tail and its hind legs. The yellow and light green of its belly writhed and twisted snakishly as the old man stroked the top of its head with his stubby forefinger.

"This one's the tamest of the bunch," he went on as if breaking into his own chain of thought. "See her little collar?"

He set the reptile atop the table, where it lay blinking its tiny eyes at me contentedly. Lizards and snakes and spiders and the like have always been especially repugnant to me. To touch one of the creatures invariably sends a chill down my spine. Yet for the sake of the coming story, I held a crumb of meat between my thumb and forefinger and allowed the green-coated horror to nibble at it daintily. Then, conquering my nerves a bit more, I made shift to examine the thin circlet of metal about the tiny neck. Corroded, covered with greenish mold, there were

yet traces of engraving upon it. Interested in spite of myself, I bent my head for a better view of it.

It was a woman's wedding ring, without a doubt.

The old man, noting my interest, blinked his froggish eyes excitedly.

"It was a woman's finger ring, all right," he explained, sensing my unspoken question. "I found it layin' outside one day——"

He dropped his voice to a rumbling whisper.

"'Twas on a bit of bone washed up by the swamp," he went on. "Maybe it was Laura's in the beginning—I always call her Laura—the lizard, I mean. She knows her name and answers to it. That was the name of Laspard's wife. Maybe Laura, here, is her."

He scratched the lizard's head again with his stubby forefinger.

"She was a little thing, then, and the ring slipped down over her little head fine. It's a tight fit, now, but she doesn't seem to mind it."

The lizard cocked her head sideways as if listening. The old man stopped suddenly, and he, too, listened for an instant.

"She hears the swamp calling," he said in a low tone. "It's suckin' an' eatin' all the time—gettin' closer an' closer."

The atmosphere, the darkened interior—everything—was beginning to get on my nerves. I shuddered in spite of myself.

"The story they tell about this bit of swamp land?" I reminded him gently.

He shrugged his pudgy shoulders.

"I was just coming to that," he answered. "You see, Laura sort of fits in."

Again he stopped. From a distant corner came a rasping squeak. I turned my head in time to see another lizard dart across the stone floor and disappear in the darkness. Laura slid from the table onto

the old man's lap and thence to the floor. An instant later she joined her companion in the corner.

"I have to put up with 'em," the old man ruminated. "And maybe they're as human as you and me."

He pushed the wine-bottle across the table to me. As an act of courtesy I drank.

"This was his house—the house of Pierre Laspard," he said suddenly. "That is, all that's left of it. A storm took the rest years ago."

He hesitated an instant. Then, as I made no response: "It was here—right here in this very room—that he killed 'em: Laura, his wife, and John Davis, her lover. They were sitting in that very chair you're sittin' in, she on his lap, her arms about him, kissing and loving, when Pierre Laspard came in suddenly and caught them. He shot them."

I stirred uneasily. The old man chuckled mirthlessly.

"Their blood was on the floor where your feet are. I scrubbed most of it up, but it sunk into the stone. You can see it when the light's good."

The candle guttered, almost went out from some faint draft. I felt a chill pass over me. The dancing light threw grotesque shadows upon the walls. The old man, hunched over the table, looked more frog-like than ever. His voice, dropping to a rumbling whisper, took on the deep bass of a bullfrog.

"He killed himself here in this room, too," he said suddenly. "They say that he comes back—that he returns to the scene of his crime every night—that he is tied to this bit of old stone house until the swamp swallows it up and releases him."

I filled and lighted my pipe nervously. The old man's head dropped to his breast. His eyes closed as if he slept.

*"Cl-u-u-u-unk . . . cl-u-u-u-unk . . ."*

It was the swamp. The lizards squeaked in the darkness. The old man stirred from his reverie.

"Hear it?" he questioned. "Laura hears it." He held up his finger for silence. "It's gettin' closer an' closer—nearer and nearer to old Pierre Laspard. It won't be long now.

"**H**E WAS an old man, Pierre Laspard was," he said, changing the subject suddenly. "Much too old for a girl like Laura La Rue. But he loved her and with his money he always got what he wanted. She was a beautiful girl—the belle of the countryside. All of the young fellows were after her, but she'd have nothing to do with them, loving only one—a gay young blade named John Davis. She and Davis were secretly engaged. But in those days the word of the parents was law. They forced her to marry old Pierre Laspard and his money. And she—she obeyed in spite of her love for John Davis.

"You can't keep young love apart. One day Pierre Laspard went away expecting to be gone for a day or two. He returned unexpectedly. He found his wife sitting on her lover's lap. He had his gun with him. You can imagine the rest, for Pierre Laspard was a hot-tempered man in spite of his years."

Again he bowed his head in thought. Then:

"He carried the bodies across the fields and threw them into the swamp. It was the same then as it is now, always sucking and dragging and pulling like a live thing. It's the quicksand as does it. It swallowed 'em up. Laspard gave it out that they had run away together. People wagged their heads and said nothing, knowing as they did, how Laura and her lover had been carrying on behind old Pierre's back."

*"Cl-u-u-unk . . . cl-u-u-unk . . ."*

"Hear it?" he whispered. "It's getting closer all the time—just gnawing away at the ground in order to get at old Pierre."

Again I had a feeling of coldness. Involuntarily I shuddered. The old man leaned closer.

"Old Pierre couldn't stand it," he went on. "One day they found him sittin' in that chair you're sittin' in. His throat was cut from ear to ear. He had committed suicide.

"On the table, here, he'd left a confession telling how he had killed them."

He rose to his feet and stood leaning over the table, his fat, pasty face gray with terror. Great beads of perspiration stood out upon his forehead.

"She wasn't dead when he threw her into the swamp!" he said in an awed whisper. "Think of it, she wasn't dead!

"She recovered consciousness just before the mud and ooze sucked her down. There she lay, just her face and breast above the water, the blood flowing from the gaping wound in her white breast and coloring the wet, soggy sand around her, and cursed him—cursed Pierre Laspard, the man who had killed her.

"'It'll get you!' she shrieked with her dying breath. 'It will get you just as it's getting me! You can't get away from it, Pierre Laspard! Try as you will, you can't escape it! It will get you. I'm coming back—John and I—to see that my curse comes true! It will get you . . . suck you in . . . in . . . in . . .'

"Then the swamp gave a heave and a gurgle and she was gone. But the curse still remains."

The old man dropped back into his chair again, trembling like a leaf in the wind. Then, for the first time, I saw it.

*There was a white scar across his throat—a scar extending amongst the folds of fat from ear to ear!*

Suddenly the full horror of the thing swept over me! This man—this fat, paunchy, frog-like thing with the bony legs—was the shade of Pierre Lespard!

I ATTEMPTED to leap to my feet. I was chained to the floor as by invisible bands. I tried to shriek. My mouth was dry and parched. I could make no sound.

"Cl-l-u-u-unk . . . cl-u-u-unk . . ."

The sound was closer now. It was almost at the door. The floor was writhing and twisting and squirming as the water undermined it. In the corner the lizards squeaked excitedly. The old man was on his feet now, his arms extended toward the swamp in an attitude of devotion.

"Hear it? Hear it?" he croaked exultingly. "It comes—it comes for me. The curse will soon be ended."

Stone was grinding upon stone. The front of the place fell with a terrific crash. I looked out through the opening upon a starless, moonless night. Another grinding! A smashing crash! More stone fell. And still I sat there, unable to move.

A portion of the hillside fell as the water undermined it. Then the swamp was upon me. The sticky, oozy flood closed about my legs. I was drawn down . . . down . . . down. . . .

Then consciousness left me.

I WAS awakened by the feel of arms beneath my shoulders. I opened my eyes. A man was standing, waist-deep, in the mud. Naked, his muscular arms were about me and he was straining to drag me out of the vortex that was sucking me in.

I heard a woman's voice.

"Hurry!" she seemed to say. "The time is almost up!"

I managed to turn my head. Tall, slender, her white skin showing plainly against the darkness of the night, she stood close beside me and stretched forth

her hand. My fingers grasped hers. She gave a pull. The man gave a mighty heave. The sticky flood groaned and sighed. Then I felt myself being dragged to safety.

From the swamp came a shriek. It was bass and throaty and rumbling. It sounded like the thunder of a bullfrog that has been frightened. Yet, too, it had the tone of a man who has just escaped from hell.

"Laura! Laura! I come! I come! The swamp has taken me at last!"

The woman squeaked like a lizard. The soft hand was jerked from my grasp. Then came oblivion again.

IT WAS daylight when I awoke. The sun was shining brightly through the foliage atop the hill. For a moment I lay there. Then recollection swept over me and I leaped to my feet.

Of the old stone house there was not a trace. The swamp swept along the rocky base of the hill.

"WHAT sort of story are you trying to feed me?" the Sunday editor demanded angrily, glaring at me over his glasses. "Have you been on another bend-er? You promised me that the last one would be—"

I interrupted him with a gesture. Taking something from my pocket, I handed it to him.

"I found this in my hand when I woke up," I answered. "I must have jerked it from the girl's finger when she pulled her hand from my grasp."

The Sunday editor swore fluently as he examined the thing that I had handed to him.

"She had to leave me when the curse was fulfilled," I went on.

The thing I had handed him was a woman's wedding ring. Green and corroded though it was, inside one could still see the engraved initials, "L. L."