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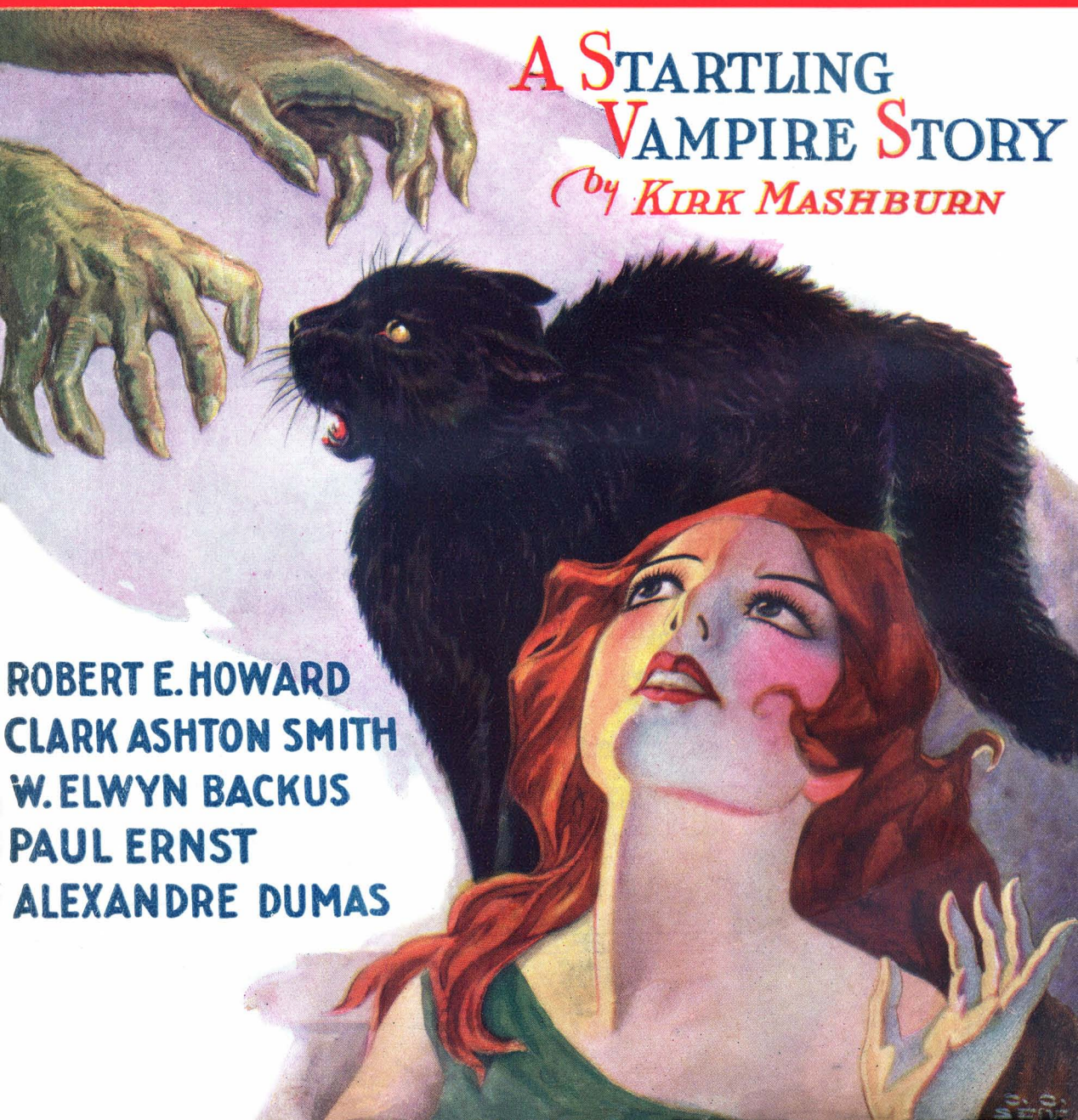

A STARTLING VAMPIRE STORY
By KIRK MASHBURN

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Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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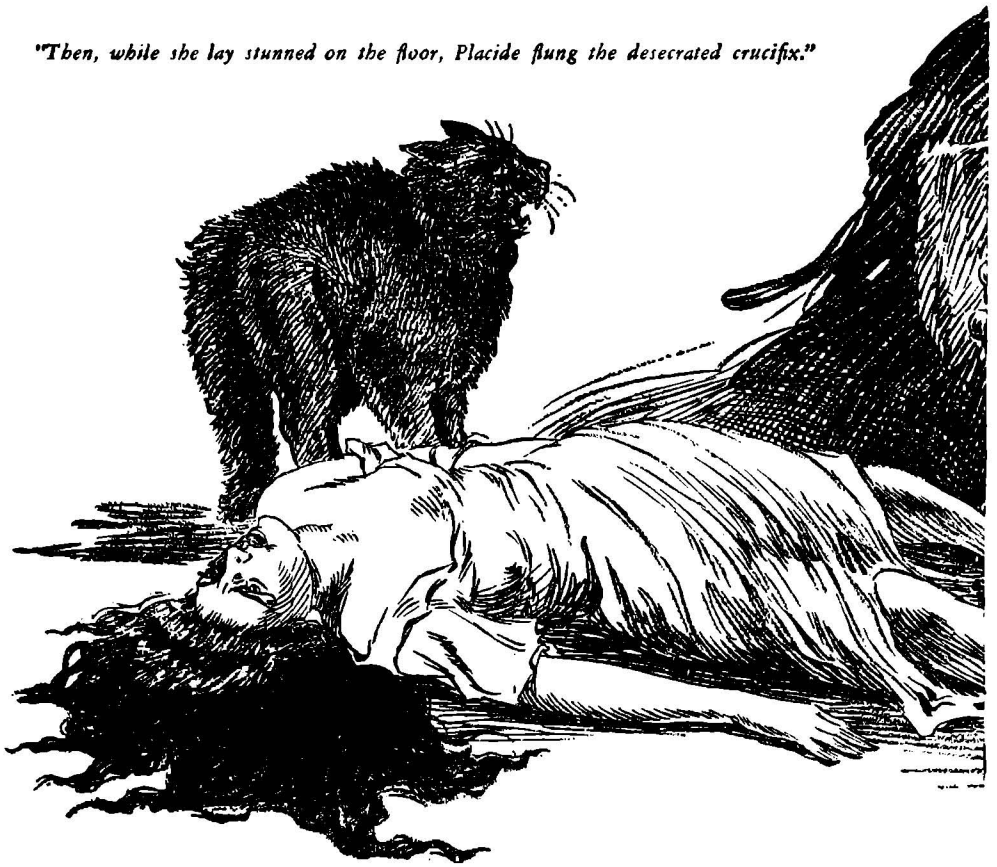
PLACIDE'S WIFE

By KIRK MASHBURN

A shuddery story of Louisiana Cajuns, of corpses that screamed in their graves, and a woman who would not stay dead



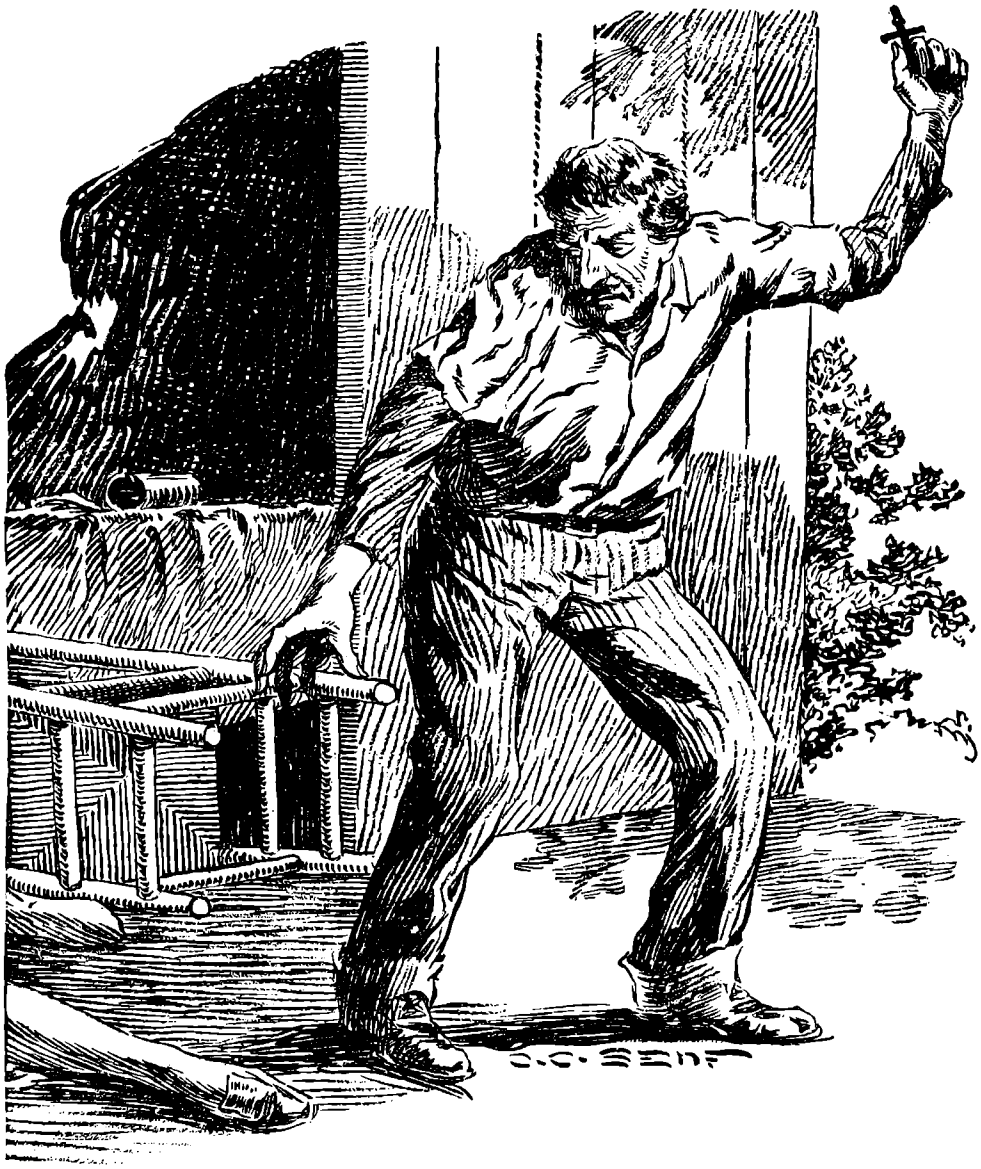
"Then, while she lay stunned on the floor, Placide flung the desecrated crucifix."

FROM the depths of the dank, moss-festooned woods, a long-drawn howl quavered upward to a cloaked and sullen moon. There was a sinister, unearthly quality about the ululation that set it apart from the orthodox lament of any random, mournful hound.

It startled us, gathered there in the temporary shack that served the road-building crew for office and commissary combined. The dull buzz of conversation stilled for a long minute. I saw more than one stolid Cajun farmer — road-builder, *pro tem*—furtively sign the cross; chairs and packing-boxes croaked under the sudden uneasy shifting of their burdens.

"Placide's wife——" I heard some one's perturbed mutter.

It was old Landry, gnarled and seamed



and squat of body, ordinarily taciturn to the point of sourness. A half-dozen pairs of eyes flashed distrustfully in my direction, then settled in common focus upon the speaker. The rebuke and its intimation were plain: I was a State Highway Department engineer, an alien in their midst; and whatever old Landry had meant, it was one of those many things, ranging from the utterly trivial to the supremely tragic, of which no discussion is had with strangers. If one be a French-descended "Cajun" of the southwestern Louisiana parishes, suspicious of all unproved folk, one does not speak haphazardly concerning obscure local matters.

Landry withdrew even more deeply into his shell of taciturnity; there was an ineffectual attempt or two to resume talk, but a damper seemed to have been put upon any further desire for conversation. In twos and threes, but never singly, the

members of the group drifted away to their bunks in close succession. I was left alone with Delacroix, the young commissary clerk and timekeeper for the road gang.

"What was there about what the old man said, to sour the balance of them so thoroughly?" My curiosity prompted the question.

My companion hesitated about replying. He was of the locality, and even though of a finer breed than the teamsters and laborers of the crew, he possessed, in less degree, some of their instinctive clannishness. Still, when one is working one's way through the engineering school of the State University, there is evidence therein of qualities superior to the inhibitions of simplicity. Delacroix shrugged his shoulders.

"There is a story behind it," he admitted.

"Tell it," I urged. It was still too early for bed.

Once more, before he could comply, that weird latration from the forest set the night a-quiver. We listened in silence until it ended.

"So!" observed Delacroix.

Then he told me of one, Placide, and of Placide's wife; and this is the substance of his story:

PLACIDE DUBOIN [said Delacroix] spent thirty of his nearly fifty years of life peacefully upon one patch of bayou land. His paunch was kept satisfactorily heavy with beans, and with rice which he grew more by the kindness of heaven than any great exertion of his own. Sometimes he wheezed down the bayou in an ancient oyster-boat, with the running of which the indulgence of Providence may also have had a hand, judging by the neglected condition of its decrepit engine.

In the bay, Placide caught shrimps; in the winter, he sporadically trapped muskrats and shot ducks. Always, he had enough black perique for his pipe, and a little wine to wash down his food. Rarely, he would go to town and get very drunk. For a man with no wants beyond his creature comforts, and a masterless, indolent existence, it was a good life.

Then the time came when oil was found in the neighborhood of Placide's quarter-section, and he sold the ground that he had homesteaded thirty years before, for more money than Placide had any business with. Some people said he got ten thousand dollars; the highest estimate placed the amount at five times as much. At any rate, it was enough to be Placide's undoing.

He moved to town. Now, Labranch is a village to you or even to me, a sleepy little town of some three thousand souls; but, to this old one, it was a veritable city. Not that it made any difference: Placide could loaf as well as, or even better, in the town than on the bayou, and he held on to his money with tight fingers.

Placide loafed too well! Not content with a full belly and freedom, with no more burden upon his shoulders than holding fast to the wealth with which accident had endowed him, he had so much time on his hands that he filled it in by marrying a woman out of a visiting carnival troupe. Having lived womanless for nearly fifty years, this stupid one, this great clod, must marry a gipsy-looking wench from a street fair. A snake-charmer! Eh!

True, she was young, and more than good to look at (so they say), with her olive skin and black hair, and dark, inviting eyes that turned upward a little at the corners. Nita, her name was; and though the women of Labranch snubbed her for the memory of her snakes, and for marrying old lazy Placide for his money—it *had* to be his money!—the men were

friendly enough, behind their women's backs. Too friendly!

Placide, seeing his wife's flirtations, stolidly packed her off to another shack on another bayou where oil had not as yet been found, and where there were fewer men for her to dally with, beating her methodically when she rebelled. He had a certain respect for his own rights, Placide.

So Nita ate red beans and rice, and was lucky to have a pair of shoes. . . . You have heard it said, that the way to keep a woman virtuous is to keep her barefooted? Well! And all the time, Placide's money rotted wherever it was buried in the ground. (No banks for that one!)

And Nita, having sold herself to Placide and been cheated of her purchase price, soured inside herself, hating Placide more with each dull day. Her only companion was a great black cat that had come with her to Labranch, along with the snakes; only, one supposes that Placide had objected to the snakes, if they did not belong to the carnival, anyway.

This cat of Nita's had yellow eyes, out of which it glared hate at all the world except its mistress. The cat hated Placide more even than Nita did: it would stare at him for minutes on end, its eyes smoldering; or, sometimes, it would arch its back and yowl at him like a fiend.

The cat would spit, also, at Henry Lebaudy and the few others who sometimes hunted or fished with Placide. It scratched Lebaudy, for no reason whatever; so Lebaudy, not liking this—and not liking cats at all, and this one even less—gabbled at Placide to kill the *sale bête noir.*

Placide—he likes the idea, him! So he shoots the cat. That is, Lebaudy swears to this day that he did—shot it at least a dozen times, loading and reloading his shotgun. Placide was a crack shot, you comprehend, and grew angrier and more determined with each belch of his gun. He did not like to miss, especially this cat.

Finally, Placide begins to be afraid he is *not missing*—although the buckshot does not kill the beast, nor even seem to hurt it. Placide is very superstitious Probably his hand trembles, and he tells Lebaudy:

"Sale bête noir, yeh!—*du Diable!"* Dirty black beast, yes—of the Devil!

They look at each other—one pictures them. They look back at the cat. But the cat is gone, disappeared. Afterward, Lebaudy admits, they let it alone, and signed the cross whenever it came near—which, Henry says, the cat did not like, and would go howling and spitting away. Well!

So only Nita loved the cat, and the cat loved Nita: both hated Placide. As for him, this dumb Placide, he grew more sullen and suspicious than ever, without knowing exactly why, but went about his dull affairs as usual.

Sometimes he still rattled down to the bay to catch shrimps. That meant a day and part of the night away from home, even if the engine in his boat gave no trouble—which was not always, nor even often. On one such day, a vagabond gipsy peddler drove his wagon along the bayou, and stopped eventually at Placide's house.

This peddler was a bright-eyed ruffian, with dark hair falling over his forehead; not unhandsome, in a sly, evil way. Pierre Abadie, who passed Placide's shanty twice during the day, and stopped once to ask for matches to light his pipe, said that Nita and the peddler spoke together in a strange, outlandish tongue, neither French nor English. The peddler's horse was unharnessed, and grazed about the place, all through that day. Placide heard of it, and he beat Nita. Naturally!

THE peddler set up a tent, outside Labranch, and mended pots and pans, and without doubt engaged in other less open practises. He seemed unconcerned, once, when Placide came by and stopped a moment in front of the tent, saying nothing, but glowering sullenly. So, after a bit, Placide went on to the shack where yellow Marie sold vile bootleg whisky, and hatched viler schemes in her festering old brain.

This Marie—if she had any other name, none knew, nor cared—was a quadroon woman who had lived in a tumbledown hovel on the fringe of town for as long as most people remembered. Some of the oldest *habitants* said she had once been a wildly beautiful creature, much as a sleek, cruel, yellow tigress is beautiful; but now she was a wrinkled old hag, a dispenser of vicious liquor, a procuress when chance offered—and, so the blacks and the ignorant whites whispered, a witch. The people of Labranch would have liked to have packed her off elsewhere, but there she was, and there she stayed.

Eh? Oh! The sheriff, among others, was one of those old men who had memories of Marie's golden days. . . . You comprehend! Then, too, this Marie was clever, discreet, you understand. Nobody knew anything against her except rumors —nobody, that is, who cared to tell. So Marie stayed on.

The old hag had no love for Placide, and he had less for her. But the one had liquor that was as cheap as it was powerful, and the other had a thirst which a perpetual regard for economy required him to quench with as little expense as might be.

Now, Placide ordinarily drank almost not at all, except reasonably of wine with his supper; but on this day, he had quarreled again with Nita, and beat her without afterward feeling the proper satisfaction. He felt that even when he knocked her half senseless, she was still the stronger of the two. His sullen spirits needed further outlet.

You have noticed, have you not, how a very little thing can set in train a whole series of events? Well! A little thing it was that Placide, the tight-fisted, should unreasonably insist upon old Marie taking drink for drink with him of her corrosive whisky. Even though Placide paid for it, it was almost as unreasonable for Marie to accept, knowing as she did the truth about what she dispensed. That is what greed for money will do: I have many times remarked that it is not a good thing.

So Placide and Marie drank together; and, after a while, Placide's sullen tongue loosened enough to where he growled of his wife to the yellow woman. That was not a good thing, either. . . . But, then, what to expect, it being that Placide?

Marie, being a she-devil sober, and a more malicious she-devil in liquor, twitted him about the peddler and his suspicions of Nita, even in the hearing of the other customers who sought her aid in poisoning themselves.

"Why she doan' leave yo', dat's all Ah doan' onnerstan'," gibed the hag, in Cajun-English like Placide's own.

"Aho!" says Placide, speaking in the reasonably pure French of his fathers, "she hopes to find the money I have buried in the ground— and she's not going to find it, I can tell you that!"

Marie was all ears, now, and her eyes glittered like a spider's watching a fly. Money in the ground! She attempted to draw more from Placide, but her eagerness betrayed itself, and he shut up like one of those oysters, suspicious.

He had right to his suspicions, for he caught her, the very next day, prowling around the woods near his cabin on the bayou. She was peering carefully at the

ground, scratching and probing here and there with a pole she carried. Now, Placide had been dully angry because he thought the peddler wanted his woman, but this Marie was after his money—and that was something else, altogether! The peddler got glares and sullen maledictions, but Marie got the beating of her life. Almost, Placide killed her; and she was just able, after a long time, to drag herself back toward town as far as the peddler's tent.

The peddler helped her as well as he could, while the hag cursed Placide and all his works. After a while she quieted, and talked long and earnestly with the gipsy, who listened more attentively as her talk went on.

Doubtless, Marie knew, as do all those who have a hand in such matters, that curses and spells and *gris-gris* charms work much better when the victim knows about it. (Maybe they would not work at all, otherwise!) She knew that Placide was very superstitious. So she was careful that it came to Placide's ears that she was going to put a *conjur* on him, and that it would be better for him to dig up his money and leave the parish. Nita, of course, would tell the peddler, in case her man took the warning to heart. She would know when Placide dug up his money. . . . After which, you speculate on the ending for yourself.

A queer thing is that Marie must have believed in her own *gris-gris* charms, especially as the peddler doubled it with a dreadful spell of his own. Doubtless they both believed in it, and it may be that they were right. Eh! Only, it may also be that they meddled with much more dangerous things than they knew; Marie especially. What the peddler thought or knew, only he could have told. At any rate, they did more than threaten Placide with a spell. They went about it, seriously.

Now, much of this story has to be surmised, and the gaps filled in between the fragments of known fact, which are fewer than they might be. But these people around here tell the whole story, when they tell it at all, with the sureness that comes of believing what one wishes to believe. . . . Very well! That is the way I am telling it to you.

One thing is known: This peddler bought a crucifix at Jules Froissard's store in Labranch, which was afterward seen in Placide's cabin. Froissard remembered it by its general shape and design, and particularly because there was a little of the end broken off one arm of the cross. The peddler got it cheaply for that reason. The crucifix later seen in Placide's shanty had this same shortened arm, but it had been painted black and changed in other ways. For one thing, a file had been used to change the Savior's face beyond recognition, and—good old Father Soulin wept bitterly when they showed him the blasphemy of it—a pair of tiny horns had been soldered to the head. The gipsy tinner's work, that! (Well, he paid for it!)

There was a little red bag tied around the cross—that was Marie. Eh? Yes, certainly; it was full of queer charms to make a spell on Placide. *Gris-gris.*

Well, the peddler carried it to Placide's woman, and one supposes that they plotted much together. One believes that the peddler wanted Nita as much as he wanted Placide's money; and it may be that Nita desired the peddler, *then*. . . . Afterward. . . .

THE women put the impious crucifix under the bed—and that is where she made a mistake. Placide had heard of the plot to put a spell upon him, only that day, and he was both angry and afraid. He had gone to Marie's place, but he found her absent, and the dive closed—which may have been well for

Marie. At the peddler's tent, Placide found the gipsy sitting crosslegged on the ground, elaborately whetting an edge upon a most ferocious-looking butcher knife. So Placide, not unreasonably, left the peddler at peace until he went back and got his gun, or at least, until he could deal with him on even terms. In the meantime, he doubtless argued that he could go home and beat Nita.

On the way back to his cabin, Placide drank from a flask he carried. Meeting with Henry Lebaudy, he would have given Henry a drink, but the bottle was empty. So Henry must come to Placide's cabin, where there was a whole demijohn of good wine, waiting to be drunk. It was not far off, and they would get drunk together.

At the cabin, Placide reached under the bed for the demijohn, felt something else, and—brought out that crucifix!

Now, Placide was superstitious: not religious, you will comprehend, but superstitious. The mutilated crucifix was an awful and startling thing to him; but whether he would have understood that it was evilly designed toward himself, without that little red bag tied to it, I do not know. The *gris-gris* he understood quite well. He went mad.

Lebaudy says he seized Nita as one might take a ten-pound sack of flour, and flung her hard to the floor. He was a bull for strength, Placide.

Then, while she lay stunned on the floor, Placide flung the desecrated crucifix full at her smooth throat. The cross was flat and thin, and its ends were flattened and beat into a design something like a wedge-shaped clover leaf. With Placide's great strength behind it, it is no wonder that it tore deep into Nita's round throat, where it stood upright. It wabbled drunkenly, sickening Lebaudy, while Nita quivered and twitched for a few moments; then she was still. The blood welled slowly from the wound, impeded by the instrument that caused it.

Then that great black cat bounded out of a corner, leaping over the body of its mistress as if to attack Placide. The beast thought better of it, perhaps; at any rate it turned back to sit upon the woman's breast. Lebaudy says it sat there and howled like one of those fiends in hell, while its yellow eyes blazed red fire. Heu!

Then the monster crept upward to Nita's throat. It licked away the dark blood; after which it started yowling with more energy.

All this, you understand, in just a very few minutes; while that stupid Lebaudy stood there, one assumes, with his slack mouth hanging open wider even than usual.

Both men looked long at the body of the woman: that was all—just looked. Then Lebaudy began to look at Placide, too. Sideways, you know, like that. Placide, he began to worry. . . . Well! It was time for him to worry, one comprehends!

"*Now* what you going to do, eh, Placide?" Lebaudy wants to know.

"Well," says Placide, speaking French like Lebaudy, and slow and heavy like he always talks, "I'm going to put her in the ground and bury her." Then he turns round and looks hard at Lebaudy, who said, afterward, that there was a red light in Placide's eyes.

"You're going to help me bury her—*and you're going to keep quiet, all the rest of your life!* Ain't you, Henry?"

"Heh?" gulps Lebaudy.

"Heh?" Placide says, too; but he says it a different way, and the veins kind of swelled in his forehead. He moved a step closer to Lebaudy.

"Yeh!" agrees this Henry, swallowing hard; "I'm going to help you bury

her." (Henry Lebaudy is a little man, and he knows it!)

"And—you're—going—to—keep—quiet!" grits Placide. Another step closer!

"I'm going to keep quieter than that!" Lebaudy is trying to swallow his tongue by this time, one supposes.

So Placide got spades, and they carried his woman out into the bushes a way, off behind the shack, and dug a deep hole. The cat went along, too, and spit and howled, and tried to claw Placide's legs. It hopped back and forth across the hole, after they put Nita in it and were ready to shovel the dirt on top of her.

Try as he would and did, Placide couldn't kill it with his spade. . . . What? Why, because he couldn't hit it, certainly. It dodged, you understand. Lebaudy says it *faded* from under the tool—and then there it was again, quick as a flash, just out of reach. (Of course, Lebaudy is stupid; likewise, he does not always tell the truth! No, not even now that he is an old, old man, who should be thinking seriously of his sins. . . . However, I am telling you what he said, and his salvation is the priest's business—not mine!)

WELL, they buried Nita, and left the cat sitting on her grave. Afterward, Placide sent Lebaudy on his way, first giving him two great cupsfull of strong wine, and growling a few plain threats in his ear—both of which were to stiffen Henry's resolution. So Lebaudy went.

Placide, you see, was not really a murderer; only a poor oaf to whom the good God sent too much money, and the Devil a woman. If he had been a murderer, he would have tried to cover up his crime by killing Lebaudy, too: even this stupid Placide must have known that one hangs but once, regardless of how many times one kills. Probably he thought Lebaudy would keep quiet for a little while, at least, and give him time to get his money and escape.

But Lebaudy did not keep quiet—not very long. He didn't know how! And he was, also, afraid.

So Lebaudy went straight to the sheriff; and the sheriff, being an old man, sent his deputy, Sostan LeBleu—no, not the one you know; this was a cousin—who talked only less than Lebaudy. And thus LeBleu told others, and several volunteered to go to Placide's place with him; and one or two saddled their horses and came along without even volunteering.

They passed by the peddler's on the way, and paused long enough to wake him and tell him where they were going, and why. The peddler climbed on his old nag without bothering to saddle it, and came with them.

Now, it is some miles from Labranch to Placide's old cabin, but it is not a long ride for men on horseback. LeBleu and his posse were soon there, demanding entrance.

There was a light inside the cabin, when LeBleu hammered on the door. After a moment, the door opened. LeBleu had his pistol in his hand, and it was a good thing it didn't have a hair trigger, because the deputy was so surprized when that door opened, he dropped the gun.

It wasn't Placide who opened—it was Nita!

"Wal," she says (Nita couldn't speak French), "w'at yo' want?"

LeBleu, having come to arrest her murderer, now didn't really know what he wanted, any more than she did!

"Ain't Placide killed yo'?" he blurts out. Somebody laughed (which, you can understand, almost any one *would!*), and LeBleu says, embarrassed, "I mean, where is Placide?"

"Inside," Nita tells him. "Come on in."

Placide was lying in the bed. He looked dully at LeBleu and the others, who noticed, without thinking too much about it, that there were several nasty marks on his face . . . like the claw marks of a beast, for instance . . . or a woman. . . .

There was a bandage around Nita's throat, also. That much, at least, of Lebaudy's story was true — Placide had hurled something at her throat. Well, they would doubtless be thinking, after Nita got up, she scratched his face: nothing strange about that! A man and his wife could fight it they wanted to, could they not? Naturally!

"Too moch wine: 'e's dronk!" Nita snarls. "'E got dronk wit' t'at Lebaudy, an' beat me." She shrugs her shoulders, which was to say: What is there of newness in *that?*

"Oho!" LeBleu says, as if comprehending much. "So Lebaudy was drunk! I s'pose the walk to town sobered him up some, otherwise I'd have seen it for myself."

"I was not drunk," Lebaudy indignantly protests. "Placide gave me only two cups of wine before I left—two cups, no more!" He points to a big cup, which will hold about a pint.

Everybody shouts and laughs. Lebaudy is one of those unfortunates who can not take one drink without it affecting his already dizzy brain. So much is known to all.

Somebody notices the paleness of Placide. A pale souse. He must be very drunk, and be in the habit of drinking, very heavily, in secret. Every one had thought differently. Ah, well!

So they decided to go back to town. You will see that there was little else they could do; and, besides, there was something about Nita that made them all uncomfortable. And uneasy. She seemed changed, in a way none of them could put a finger to; there were smoldering flames deep down in her slanting eyes, and there was something repulsive about the way she would run her red, thin tongue over her red, red lips, whenever she looked at them. More than one man caught himself making the sign of the cross, without at all knowing why. . . . Well, they say one can smell the Devil a long way off. So!

As they were going, some one saw Nita glide up to the peddler and make a swift motion with her fingers, while it seemed she hissed a few words in a tongue strange to all the rest of them. There was only one word that could be understood and remembered — no, I do not know what it was—but they say that it was afterward said by another gipsy who was asked, to mean *gold,* or *money.* . . . Later, too, one of those who saw, or heard of it, was inspired to show old yellow Marie, as well as he could remember, the sign he thought Nita made. And Marie, she laughed evilly. Being very drunk and in high humor, she finally gave a sly hint that it *might* mean something like *poison,* in a certain dark and secret sign language. (Have I told you it was said, by some, that Marie engaged in darker practises than the keeping of her dive?)

Afterward, Marie told Lebaudy that Nita probably was only fooling the peddler, so as not to frighten him. Placide, added this Marie, did not die of poisoning. More than that, she would not say a word.

One guess is as good as another; but they say there was a greedy look in the peddler's eyes as he listened to Nita. Perhaps there was a greedy look, likewise, in Nita's eyes. . . . But not for gold, one thinks. . . . The gipsy was a strong, full-blooded man—it may be that she wanted *him!*

WHATEVER it was that Nita said to the peddler, he went with LeBleu and the others when they rode back to town. For three or four days afterward, this peddler was busy mending his horse's harness and greasing his wagon; and he offered his stock of tinware at such cheap prices that he soon disposed of it. Getting ready to move on, he said. The third or fourth night, the gipsy disappeared.

Nobody was sorry to see him go, nor felt slighted that he left without saying good-bye. Then, a trapper stopped at Placide's cabin and discovered that it was deserted except for Placide himself, who was dead and therefore could hardly be said to count. He had been dead for some days and, it being warm as to weather, he was beginning to be unpleasant about it.

There was a curious wound, or maybe several wounds, in Placide's throat: part of him looked to have been eaten by a beast! Well, they buried him quickly.

I do not know what the coroner said about it, but other people lifted their eyebrows or shrugged their shoulders, saying:

"Placide died, or maybe his woman killed him; and the woman has run away with the peddler—after getting Placide's money! Ah, well, we are rid of the three of them: the peddler, Placide, and Placide's wife. . . . None of them amounted to much!"

Oddly enough, the peddler's horse was soon afterward found, dead and partly devoured, in a spot deep in the woods. Eh! People wondered at that, naturally. . . .

Then, one afternoon about a month after Lebaudy swore he saw Placide murder Nita, this same Lebaudy was back in the woods behind Placide's cabin, when he came upon a mound of freshly turned dirt that excited his curiosity.

The longer Lebaudy regarded the mound, the more excited he became. This looked suspiciously like a grave—and no human grave had the least right to be in that spot—that much he knew.

Now, it *was* a grave! When Lebaudy, with the aid of a shovel which he ran and fetched from Placide's old cabin, finally overcame his indecision and dug into the mound, he found a man's body! And whose do you suppose it was? *The peddler's!*

What? Indeed not! That is the curious part of it: this peddler's body was *not at all decomposed!* And there was the same sort of wound, or wounds, in his throat that Placide had — *and they were half healed!*

Lebaudy, one can imagine, was knocking about the knees. It was getting dusk, and that made things worse. He had reason enough to know that this body did not look as it ought to look, having been dead and covered with dirt. Whether it had been buried one day or ten, it looked too *fresh.* It surely wasn't breathing, it was dead, and yet—it looked as if there might be warm blood beneath its skin! And then——

Lebaudy leaned upon the wooden handle of the spade he had used, and which must have been cracked, already, for it snapped beneath his weight. He was thrown off balance, and, clutching the long handle of the spade tighter than ever, stumbled forward on the dry clods he had dug from the grave, and which rolled under his feet: he fell forward, you understand, with the spade handle thrust before him. And the sharp, broken end of the handle, with Lebaudy's weight behind it, *pierced the breast of the corpse at his feet!*

(Now, you will remember, this is Lebaudy's tale: I am only telling it for *him!* So!)

Well, this broken end of the spade handle, which was really a hardwood pole, was sharp and keen, and it pen-

etrated the corpse about where its heart should be. And the corpse *moved! The dead lips screamed!*

Then, the eyes opened wide (Lebaudy swears to this, although if *you* ask him, he will deny it!), with such hate in them that it was like a look into the mouth of hell. But the fury swiftly faded into a look of great *gladness,* like the eyes of a bird suddenly set free of a cage; the working features softened into a mask of peace and contentment; the eyes closed. While Lebaudy watched — *the body began to mortify!*

Lebaudy ran, to get out of that forest, where it was getting darker with each second—ran, too, to get away from that horror he had come upon. While he ran, it seemed that there was a patter of swift feet not far behind. Fear lent wings to his feet, until he came to the banks of the bayou upon which Placide's cabin stood.

THE woods did not come down quite to the bayou, where the land had been more or less cleared. It was lighter here, although the sun had sunk, and night was falling fast. Panting, Lebaudy stopped and looked back toward the trees. Running toward him from the forest was a woman, who slowed to a walk as he looked, too tired and shocked already to feel much fresh surprize at her appearance there. She came closer, so that he recognized her in the twilight.

It was Nita!

Lebaudy says she smiled at him; but it was the sort of smile that made new shivers crawl on that back of his.

"Good ev'nin'," he says, remembering that Nita did not speak French.

He wondered why Nita was licking her red lips with her redder tongue. (From the way he speaks of it, when he will, one understands that Lebaudy did not care for this, at all!) He felt uneasy, it was so queer, you comprehend, when Nita did not answer him. Not a word from her—just licking her lips, staring at him, with that strange smile.

Lebaudy, one assumes, was at a loss to understand this situation, the woman saying nothing, and looking at him in a way that he did not at all care for. Finally he tells her:

"I t'ought yo' run off wit' t' peddler?"

Nita laughed. . . . Lebaudy says he shivered at the sound!

It was getting darker all this time, and Nita moved closer to him: still not making a sound beyond that one hellish laugh. Lebaudy watched her with a funny feeling in his flat stomach; and then he let out a yell—or one assumes he did, knowing this Lebaudy!

He says that he was looking at the same eyes all the time (which one doubts, because he does not like to look people in the eyes!), but one minute they were the eyes of Nita—as he knew Nita—and the next minute they were the eyes of—well, what do you think? The eyes of a great bitch wolf! A great she-wolf with slavering jowls, and a red tongue running in and out between fangs that glinted faintly in the dusk!

The wolf (or whatever it was!) leaped at Lebaudy, who undoubtedly howled as much as any wolf as he also leaped—backward, into the bayou. Now, only a very stupid one, such as this one, would leap unthinking and unlooking when he knew he was standing on the bank of a bayou. Yet, it may be that this stupidity saved Lebaudy from death, or worse. He struggled in the water, while the wolf yowled and slavered on the bank. Lebaudy says its eyes were red as hell's fires by this time. Eh!

Well, one knows without being told, that a swamp rat like Lebaudy could swim, and the farther bank was not very

distant. He climbed up on it, and the wolf gave a last fiendish howl as Henry scampered off toward Labranch.

Wet and quaking, and feeling a certain need of stimulation, Lebaudy scurried in to old Marie's place, wet clothes and all. One drink, and Lebaudy would stand on his head. That is only an expression, you will understand, but it serves well for this old one, as what few brains he had would run out his mouth when he drank—which is a misfortune that might, perhaps, happen to a rattlebrain who stood too long upon his head in fact! However, if you understand me, he talked much when he drank a little.

He talked to Marie, telling her of his finding the corpse that was so different from other corpses, and of his meeting with Nita, or the wolf (or both-in-one), or whatever it was, on the bank of the bayou. Then he went back and told her the whole story in detail, from the time he had seen Placide throw Nita to the floor and hurl that desecrated crucifix into her throat. Before he had finished, Marie was so shaken that she was drinking her own rotgut liquor, and pouring more for Henry—all without charge to him!

"Ay-e-e!" she moaned. "The black crucifix, the black cat jumping across her body in the grave, licking her blood. Moonlight in her eyes while she's lying in her grave! Oh, Placide! Stupid Placide! Why did you not drive a stake through her heart when you buried her?"

"Eh?" says Henry Lebaudy, "What's all this you're talking about?"

"Loup-garou!" snarls Marie, who was raised among people who speak French much better than, and in preference to, English; and she had absorbed all the folk-lore of those French-descended people. (Marie's white blood, one assumes, came from the same sources as theirs.)

"Loup-garou!" shudders Lebaudy. (You comprehend that it is the French name for werewolf? So!) "I was afraid so, me!"

Marie brightens, after a minute.

"One good thing," she exults, "this Nita can't get off her island—and *I'm* not going *there!* Me, I don't intend to see her!"

Now, as you already know, Labranch bayou forks and flows into the bay in two separate streams, like a wishbone, making an island nearly fifteen miles long and about ten miles wide at the bay end. The point, you understand, is that the werewolf is supposed to be unable to cross running water. . . . What? The vampire, also? Exactly! This *loup-garou* which is, or was, Nita, is safely in a pen, unless she can get some one to carry her across the bayou in his arms—which I doubt!

There is only a little more to tell. Lebaudy, at Marie's urging, went with his tale to Father Soulin. Whether the good priest had a hand in it or not, I do not know: but the parish sexton (who, naturally enough, was not given to agitation in the presence of dead bodies) went into the woods and cut off the spade handle a little way above the peddler's body. After which he drove the end of the handle a little more firmly in the corpse, and then covered it up to rest in peace.

Now, of course, that left Placide to be looked after. The sexton sharpened the part of the spade handle (Placide's own spade handle!) that he had kept, and dealt with Placide as the peddler had been dealt with. *And Placide's wounds had healed,* although they had been greater by far than the peddler's; and he screamed and squirmed beneath the thrust of the stake, and settled back at peace, as the peddler had done. The sexton piled back the dirt on what had become, in a twinkling, a heap of bones and unpleasantness.

So (Delacroix concluded with a shrug of his shoulders), that is the tale as I have heard it. It happened, so they say, when I was a boy, and I did not live in this parish then. Father Soulin has been dead these four years past, so you can not ask him.

Me, I don't know. . . .

* * * * * * *

I DREW on my pipe for a couple of minutes, considering Delacroix's tale the while. Finally, I asked:

"What do you mean by saying you don't know? You don't believe any of that, do you?"

Delacroix merely gave repetition to his frequent and noncommital shrug; and I knew that, for all his better education and larger contact with the world, he would be as taciturn as any of his ilk when conversation took a turn he did not like.

I was sleepy, by this time, and smothered a yawn.

"All right," I laughed, "I'm going on over to my tent and turn in, and I hope none of those werewolves who have to lie in their graves between sun-up and sundown have come to life tonight, to catch me on the way, nor come uninvited into my tent."

"They can't enter a house without an invitation," Delacroix rejoined, in all seriousness, "and one supposes that will apply to a tent, likewise."

I was tempted to laugh at his earnestness, but I had no wish to wound his sensibilities, and so refrained.

"Perhaps, after all," he said, "it would be better if you were to sleep with me while you are here. . . . Yes?"

"No," I carelessly shook my head, "I'll go on over——"

At this moment I broke off, as there came a light tapping upon the door of the shack.

To this day, I do not know why one of us did not say, "Come in." Instead, Delacroix, who was sitting close to the door, merely reached out and lifted the latch, the poorly hung door swinging inward of its own accord. At that, surprize kept either one of us from speaking for a minute, although I had sufficient presence of mind to rise from my seat upon a cracker box and say, "Good evening."

Standing just outside the doorway, framed in the light from within, was one of the most beautiful women (she was, apparently, little more than a girl) that I have ever seen. She was clad in rough, serviceable corduroy riding-breeches and flannel shirt, and I could see a laced boot on the one leg that the shadows failed to screen from my view.

Even though she was so clad—I write these next words with considerable deliberateness!—*in garments that she could have obtained from any chance hunter in the swamps around us,* provided he were of slight stature; even, I say, though she was clad in such garments, there was no hiding the alluring femininity of her.

Before I could find wits and voice to speak to this astonishing apparition, the girl smiled and herself spoke—dashing my illusions. Her words, although there was an additional odd inflection, were the words of any unlettered Cajun girl of the swamp country.

"Ma car," she informed us, "it's bogged down on de ot'er side de bayou; an' ma ankle, Ah sprained it tryin' t' gat out. . . . Will yo' gen'leman he'p me?"

However, if her words were crude, her voice was not, and there was a wistful note in it that touched me. I could see, now, that she was leaning heavily on a stick, and the boot had been removed from one stockingless foot. She moved the foot, as if to ease its pain, so that it

was more in the light. . . . Unshod feet that are beautiful are a rarity in women. . . . I had been out in the swamps with a road camp for two long months; and, Cajun or no Cajun, this was Woman—and a beautiful woman, at that. As Delacroix would put it: Well!

"Certainly we will help you!" I was very gallant about it, hoping she would not be too fastidious to overlook my two days' growth of beard. I had another thought: bold, but maybe. . . . "And," I said, "as I see you can not stand upon that foot—I'll carry you back across the bridge!"

I started at the look of wild exultation that leaped into the girl's wonderful eyes, enchanting with their vague suggestion of the Orient, before she dropped her gaze.

"No!" yelled Delacroix, to my utter astonishment and indignation. *"Carry her across running water?* No! Never!"

My anger was flaring swiftly, and then I caught sight of the girl. I stopped the hot rejoinder I had upon my tongue for Delacroix, appalled with doubt and something more.

There was a positively feral light in those glorious eyes, now; and that seductive mouth had ceased to be such. With lips drawn back from her teeth (queer that I had not before noticed how sharp and cruelly pointed they seemed—like *fangs!),* she resembled more some slavering beast than the girl who, but a moment before, had made my pulses hum.

"Landry!" Delacroix was yelling, "bring your gun, the one with the silver bullets—*she's* here!"

The girl leaped away toward the swamp growth — there was no sign of lameness in her going. I had a vague, confused impression that she looked oddly inhuman, and *dropped to all fours* as she reached the shelter of the forest!

Old Landry, he of the weathered face and gnarled hands who had first mentioned Placide's wife that night, came running up. There was a huge revolver in one of those knotted fists.

Delacroix spoke to him in the French *patois* of the region, of which I knew enough to get the gist.

"Yes, it was *she*—but you are too late! She has reached the woods and you dare not follow—she and her pack would have your throat open before you knew they were near!"

"Silver bullets," was all I could understand of Landry's answer, taut as it was with suppressed emotion. Then, hoarsely, in which occurred the words, "My son," he croaked something else.

Delacroix shook his head. "Avenge him, and all the others, when the odds are even. Wait until you have another chance in the open."

"Eleven years!" said Landry, quite distinctly. "For so long have I carried this gun loaded with silver bullets blessed by the good Father—the only kind that can kill *them!*—waiting to use it."

Again Delacroix shook his head.

"We will be five or six months getting the road across the island. There will be other chances: you have waited eleven years, and you can surely wait a few months longer."

Delacroix slowly shut the door; and Landry plodded back to resume his disturbed rest . . . perhaps.

"You will sleep here tonight." It was a statement, simply made.

I nodded, as simply. Then, once more, I felt a shiver run along my spine——

From the forest, like the baying of Cerberus chained and lashed to fury by all the demons of the pit, came again that fiendish ululation—came the baffled howl of Placide's wife.