

The Lamia in the Penthouse



By Thorp McClusky

IT IS 11:00 o'clock in the morning, and the sunlight is streaming in brightly through my study window. Everything seems perfectly normal; the neat rows of books on the shelves, the ormolu clock ticking away serenely on the mantelpiece, the pile of yellow paper to the left of my typewriter, half a dozen uncompleted manuscripts and odds and ends of research stacked up on my right, and the smoking things comprising a small disorder at the extreme left, by the telephone.

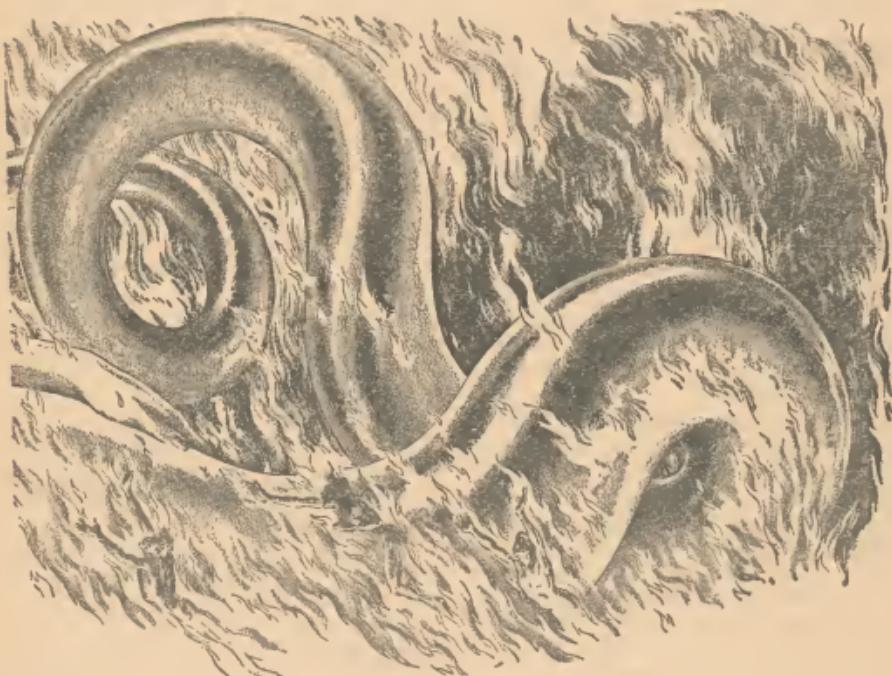
Yet two things are not "as usual." My wife Ruth, who seldom travels, is out in Colorado visiting her sister Ellen and family; the apartment seems lifeless with-

out her. And there's a manuscript I didn't write in the center drawer of my desk—a manuscript of strange fascination and horror. A manuscript that will never be published because it wouldn't be believed, even as fiction, and, more important, because decency forbids.

I am writing this, not for publication, but merely to ease my tautened nerves and organize my chaotic thoughts. I feel that if I didn't, I would really go mad.

It seems hard to believe that, for almost thirty hours, I have been first in a police station and later in a mental-patients ward at Bellevue Hospital, that I'm probably loaded with a sedative of some sort, and

... one guy in a million; he had a love affair with a female demon.



Heading by Virgil Finlay

that I've only been back here for two hours.

It seems hard to believe that, only three days ago, I was grinding along peacefully in my little rut, blissfully ignorant of the hell that was brewing. It seems a thousand years ago.

At about 4:00 on Monday afternoon—this is Thursday morning—my telephone rang. "Hi, Mac," announced a well-remembered voice, "this is Jack Winters. Remember me? I'm up in Grand Central Station; just got off the streamliner."

"Get down here, you old peavey-pusher!" I yelped gleefully. "If I'd known you were coming, I'd of baked a cake!"

Jack, of course, was one of my greatest friends. Funny, actually, how few close friends any of us have; if it takes the fingers of more than one hand to count them, we are unusually blessed.

I'd met Jack in an odd way. Four-five years ago, I was up on the Coeur d'Alene River in northern Idaho, doing a lumber-camp story. I was pretty well pooped when I arrived, and they assigned me to No. 9 bunkhouse—one of the modern ones—to stow away my gear and get a little rest. It was mid-afternoon; I was the only person in the snug little cabin.

I got my stuff disposed of and was starting to take off my clothes when I saw a portable typewriter on a little table in a corner. Beside it was one of those cardboard boxes that holds a ream of paper.

Well, I am a snoop both by nature and by trade. I opened the box and found inside it two or three extremely cordial letters from editors of well-known "slick" magazines, addressed to Mr. Jack Winters, this address, plus quite a lot of blank paper and

the rough draft of a gripping and fast-moving lumber-camp story.

Today, most everybody has heard of Jack Winters. His stories of lumbering, hunting, and farming in the Northwest are invariably gems, though he hasn't written many. Then, he was practically unknown; I, for one, had never heard of him.

Well, I thought he'd hint around that he was writing, but he didn't. Somehow I admired that. Three, four days went by, and still he kept mum, although he was pleasant and friendly enough. I wanted to open up on him with some comments on that rough draft, but of course I couldn't, because he would have known that I'd snooped. You don't last long in lumber camps after it's known that you have a habit of prying into other people's gear.

Finally I got my chance when another bunkhousemate let the cat out of the bag; Winters froze like a startled elk so I guessed that he'd tipped off the boys to keep their mouths shut about his writing. He was very diffident, actually shy. But the ice was broken, and our friendship grew from there.

Funny thing, I don't think I've seen Jack on more than four or five occasions since, usually when I was out his way on an assignment but once when he came to New York to look around and we put him up for a week. Yet he was as intimate a friend as I ever had, and I think he felt the same way about me.

HE STILL worked in the woods; he was the sort of man who needs vigorous exercise to feel his fittest. Lately he'd bought himself a pretty nice sort of rundown farm which he was fixing up when they weren't logging, and he'd got himself engaged to an eye-stopper who'd drifted in from Minneapolis or someplace and was working around the camps as a waitress. He was just about all set for life.

"How you feel?" he now asked. "How's Ruthie, your better nine-tenths?"

"Fine!" I chortled. "Only I'm sorry about Ruthie, she'd have wanted to see you, but she isn't here. She's out West visiting relations; I'm keeping bachelor hall. Get your stuff into a taxicab and hustle down here; I'm in the mood for company and no work."

Jack laughed, and for the first time I noticed that his voice sounded taut and harsh. Something was wrong; that wasn't like him.

"All right," he said, after a moment. "I'll be right down."

He was knocking on my door in fifteen minutes. He had two big suitcases with him. It looked as though he was going to be in town for awhile; maybe he had a TV contract.

We went into the livingroom and started in on the bourbon. After a little idle chatter that didn't fool either of us Jack said suddenly, "You got any idea of where I can get an inexpensive little apartment? They tell me it's tough finding places to camp in this town."

"Hell," I said, "you can stay here. Ruthie'll be gone another couple of weeks."

He shook his head. "I'm going to be here longer than that. I'm East for good. I never want to see the Coeur d'Alene again as long as I live."

"Well now—" I started, and closed my trap. I fixed a couple more drinks and we went to work on those.

Jack tensed his magnificent shoulders, then let them sag wearily. "I've busted up with Mary," he said. "It's no go. All that lumber country is full of memories of her; you know she worked around a lot. I want to forget her, completely."

The story came out only gradually; Jack is a gentleman. I didn't have it all until after midnight, until after we'd had a leisurely dinner at a hole-in-the-wall French restaurant I know of that doesn't make a fetish of hurrying people out even though they just sit and talk, until after we'd downed litres of sour burgundy and finally got soul-satisfyingly drunk on the last of my bourbon.

It appeared that Mary was a slut. A wanton with the face of an angel and the figure of a succubus. And the guile of a Jezebel. She'd two-timed Jack with a score of men in half-a-dozen lumber camps and with the farmers and the farmers' sons in the little valley where he'd bought the 160 acres.

"I can understand a girl being, well, man-crazy and weak in will-power," Jack said somberly. "I can pity a girl like that

and love her and by God even marry her, knowing in advance how people'll laugh at me behind my back, so long as I think I'm helping in some way to ease the torture that's driving her and know that she cares for me.

"But Mary was different. She doesn't care for man nor beast. She collects men like vicious little boys collect beetles on squares of cardboard, sticking pins through their squirming bodies. When men fall in love with her she laughs, twitches her hips, and leaves them. She's a sadist, through and through; not a physical sadist but a spiritual one, which is worse.

"People tried to warn me, but I didn't believe them. She's so skilfully diabolical. But gradually it sank in, and finally the picture of her true nature grew clear in my mind like, like—I remember reading a story once in which the outline of a decomposing body on the second floor of an uninhabited house gradually appeared on the ceiling below. It was like that, and it was just as terrible a picture.

"I even made the mistake of trying to reason with her, plead with her. She admitted everything, boasted about it, called me a sniveling fool, and laughed at me. God, you should have heard her laugh.

"So I packed those two suitcases and came East. My trunks'll be along soon. I've put the place up for sale. Oh, I suppose I'll go back sometime; it's corny and childish to say that I never will; but not now. Not for a long time.

"Mac," he said, "do you think there are some women who are not women at all, but incarnations of evil that look like women? Like the succubi and lamias, for example? Do you think that's possible?"

"Well," I said, pontificating as well as I could considering the liquid cargo I was carrying, "it could be. Something along the order of poltergeist entities, only a lot more powerful and malign and equipped with sex? Maybe, why not? Science now accepts the reality of poltergeist phenomena, you know. Or didn't you?"

"I didn't," he confessed.

"Oh yes. There was a poltergeist-haunted boy in Washington, D. C. not so long ago; he was plagued unmercifully. When he tried to sit in a chair or sleep in a bed

something invisible and malicious dumped him out; scientists from several universities and the Washington Society for Parapsychology investigated. There was a lot of puff in the papers. Dr. Rhine, down at Duke University, commented 'Most interesting'."

"Is he haunted now?" Jack asked.

"Fortunately, no. A Jesuit priest exorcised whatever it was; the priest himself called it a 'demon'. So you can see that there actually are mighty unpleasant and non-material 'devils' on this mundane planet of ours." I held up the bourbon and squinted through it. "Enough for two more drinks. Let's kill it."

JACK thought that over, twirling his glass in his hands. After awhile he laughed harshly and said, "Well, I'm the outstanding guy in a million. I had a love affair with a female demon."

I was just drunk enough to contradict him. "I doubt it," I said. "I think your Mary was just a very vicious, depraved, and cunning woman; you're lucky to be rid of her. If she were a demon she wouldn't be slinging hash in lumber camps."

He grinned wryly at that. "I guess you're right," he admitted. His face was suddenly savage, reckless. "Boy, I'd like to meet up with the real thing! All her deviltry wouldn't be any worse than the hell I've already been through. And she might know lots more about how to make love than Mary did, though I can't guess what."

Our glasses were empty. "All right," I said, "let's forget about Mary and get some sleep. Tomorrow's another day. You bunk on the davenport; I won't disturb you in the morning; you can sleep till noon if you want to. I'll get some blankets and sheets and pillowcases . . ."

I WAS awakened by the sound of my typewriter, rattling away a mile a minute in the study. I rolled over and peered blearily at the alarm-clock; it was twenty minutes of eight and I hadn't planned to get up until nine. Jack must have been hit by a flash of inspiration, I decided.

I got up and stumbled sleepily into the study. Jack looked fresh as a daisy; the big lean hulk of him hunched intently over the

machine, his powerful yet sensitive fingers flying. He looked up and grinned twistedly, and the clatter stopped.

"What's your idea on writing stories in the first person, Mac?" he asked.

"Lousy," I said instantly. "Fellow who has to do that admits lack of craftsmanship or he's trying to give a phony yarn realism it otherwise lacks."

"I'm writing this in the first person," he said.

I WENT over and picked up the sheaf of manuscript that lay face down on the desk. I didn't even bother to look at the page in the machine. There were about twelve pages of double-spaced copy.

"When'd you start this?" I asked.

"Oh, about five o'clock. I couldn't sleep."

I looked at the first page. The title jumped at me: THE LAMIA IN THE PENTHOUSE, by Jack Winters.

"Screwy," I said, and glanced at the first paragraph: *There are creatures of unspeakable evil haunting this earth who have the appearance of women. Yet they are not women, they are malign entities who assume female shape in order to lure to their doom unsuspecting men upon whose souls they feed. They are the snake-women of age-old legend—the lamias.*

My name is Jack Winters. I am a woodsman by occupation, a lumberjack. For amusement and pleasure and sometimes to tell people things I think they should know, I write short stories. You may have heard of me.

But this is a different story from any I have written before. This is a true story.

"It stinks," I said, "It takes a special knack to write this sort of thing, and you haven't got it. You don't expect to sell this tripe, do you?"

"I may not even try to sell it," he said quietly. "I'm all tensed up and this story just jumped into my head, complete, in the middle of the night. I've got to get it out of my system."

"Get Mary out of your system, you mean," I said shrewdly. "Spiritual purgative. Bust the boil of hurt and resentment you feel toward Mary by creating a much more evil female creature and then triumphing over her—or it. Good idea. Hop to it."

"I'm not going to triumph in the story," he said grimly. "The lamia is."

"Oh, hell," I said. "No happy ending?"

"No."

"Umm." I read a little further. *Though I had never been in love, I had often written about it. Then I, too, succumbed to the chemistry of romance. That was more than a year ago.*

But she was as evil as flesh and blood could be. She was a wanton with the face of an angel and the figure of a succubus. And the guile of a Jezebel. Her name was Mary.

"Brother, you're laying yourself wide open to a libel suit on this yarn," I snapped. "Mary'll be hopping mad . . ."

"Mary'll never read it," he said stonily.

"You sure have got angels versus succubi on the brain. You used the same phrases last night."

... I came to New York to try to forget my heartbreak. I thought a change of scenery would do me good, help me forget. I looked up an old friend, another writer, a fellow named Thorp McClusky. You may have read his stuff, too, from time to time.

"My sainted Aunt Sarah!" I yipped. "You've got me in here. I don't like this at all."

"All right," he said, "calm yourself. I told you I was not writing this for publication, but to get it out of my system. Anyway, you said it stinks. But if it's good enough, and I decide to publish it, do you think I'd let those names stand? Don't be an idiot; they'd be changed."

His wife was away, out West someplace visiting her relatives. He invited me to stay at his apartment, and I accepted gladly. I didn't know how long I was going to stay in New York, or where I might go from there, but I had one terrible desire—to meet a woman more evil than Mary, to make her fall madly in love with me, and then to spurn and humiliate her as Mary had spurned and humiliated me.

I didn't care how evil she was; if she had been a demoness straight from Hell I would have welcomed her challenge. In fact, I felt cheated that lamias and succubi don't exist.

I put the manuscript down. I knew the ending already. "Hell," I said, "if you're

set on meeting some Lucrezia Borgias, Messalinas, and suchlike around here, I'm afraid we can't oblige you. I haven't met a truly evil woman all the time I've been in New York, or anywhere else, for that matter."

"I'll find one," he said smugly. "That's part of the story."

"Okay," I said, "now look. You got your typewriter with you?"

"In the tan suitcase."

"Well, you don't have to bother to get it out today unless you prefer it to this one. I've got to meet an editor at 11:00, I've a luncheon date, and I'll be interviewing a guy all afternoon. So you just stay right here and get that story out of your system. Tomorrow, you can set up shop in the living room, or you can do whatever you damn please. I'm going to shower and shave now. How about breakfast in a little while?"

He nodded. As I walked out of the study, the furious clacking resumed.

THIS part I have to guess at. Not really guess—I know; I've read Jack's manuscript. I can see him sitting there at my desk as the hours flew by, utterly engrossed, pouring out a distillate of the evil in women (some women, of course, and some men too; he made it clear that the race is basically good) and building up, page after page, a madder and madder frustration.

He couldn't find a woman evil enough. They were all so obvious to him, so transparent in their motives, so limited.

I lost track of the days as I searched the city. I had money; I brought more than \$5,000 with me and I had ten good stories in my head that I could write and sell quickly if I needed more. Besides, I wasn't spending except as bait; I was making them spend—of their material resources if they had any, of their persons and of their twisted and slimy souls . . .

Mac was busy; he quickly got used to my erratic comings and goings and didn't say much except to ask me when I thought I'd finally burn my fury out. I had a key to his apartment, of course . . .

There were the pickups in bars—the classiest places too—who thought I was a drunk and lured me to rooms where I was

to be rolled or blackmailed. There were the phony husbands who showed up unexpectedly, full of righteous indignation, and the little punks who were supposed to mug me. How many of those fellows I beat up I don't remember, but there were quite a few.

There were the ones who tried to dope me.

These were all merely vicious and obvious. They bored me.

On a slightly more challenging level were the ones who, rotten with disease, lied and didn't care what happened to me so long as they profited. There were the ones who offered to introduce me to "important" people when they thought I had money, but turned indifferent when I admitted that all I possessed was the few dollars in my pocket. There were the ones who were very anxious to help me stop drinking until they learned that I was broke. There were the turncoats, beggars, cheats and snivelers.

None of these were truly evil; they were just more ingenuous.

There were the ones who were anxious to marry me right away when they thought I was rich, but changed their minds when I confessed I was lying. Though they wore a price-tag, some of them called me a heel.

None of these were truly evil; only fearful and commercial.

There were the ones who, when I told them I was married and rich, tried to implant in my mind the idea that my wife was somehow unworthy of me, and that they were the ones destiny had ordained for me. Without any help from me, they searched for weak places in my non-existent wife's armor, and when I obliged them, stabbed away mercilessly. They, I think, were truly evil, and more clever than poor Mary had been.

There were the ones who were willing to desert husbands who loved them dearly for me, because I was more handsome, or more virile, or more distinguished, or richer. They too, I thought, were truly evil.

Finally there were the ones—the great majority—who were kind and sweet. These I did not harm, but tried to help. Nor did I harm the ones who were mentally ill.

But nowhere did I find a woman more

wanton and sadistic than Mary had been. Apparently there was a limit to human evil.

THIS section of Jack's manuscript, of course, was much longer than the excerpts I am copying. It was full of long case-histories, complete with minute details of appearance, conversation, and action.

Like most interviews when you're doing a feature profile, my confab with the world-celebrity who was just passing through and had to be caught now or never ran into more time than I had expected. At 7:00 I was nowhere near finished and he invited me to dinner. I phoned the apartment and told Jack I'd be late, to go ahead and eat alone. "How's the story going?" I asked.

He sounded very gay. "Great!" he exulted. "Magnificent psychological study of female evil, only I can't make them evil enough. All dreamed up out of my hat. I'm getting it out of my system, though."

"Good!" I said. "That's the ticket. See you later."

It was after one in the morning when I snapped my notebook shut and crammed it into my pocket. "I've got a good story here," I said with satisfaction.

The Important Person gave me a final scotch-and-soda as a token of amiable parting. As I walked out of the lobby of the Waldorf I ran into an old friend I hadn't seen for months—you do that sometimes—and we dragged each other back for a drink. One drink led to two and two to three and I finally got the bright idea of phoning Jack and having him join us. We were all writers, and it would be a good chance to sit around and swap lies.

"Hi, peavey-pusher lost in the Big City!" I yelled when he answered the phone. "I'm in the Men's Bar at the Waldorf. Get in a cab and come on up here; I want you to meet a friend of mine."

"Lord," he said, "I can't do that. I'm not shaved and I'm in my bathrobe. And it's almost three o'clock in the morning."

He had something there; the bar closed at four. "Well, I'll make a date for the three of us for later in the week," I decided. "Okay?"

"Okay."

"How's the story going?"

"Just about finished," he said, with obvious satisfaction. "Almost sixty pages. How's that for jet propulsion? I thought up a swell name for my lamia."

"What?"

"Why, *Lamia*, of course. *Innocente Lamia*. How's that for a name? Sort of Spanish or Italian or something. Exotic. And get the play on words. *Innocent* and *lamia*. Tricky." He was laughing uproariously, something entirely foreign to his quiet nature. He sounded almost like a stranger, and a bitter, cynical one.

THE writing-therapy hadn't helped much, I decided. We'd go into that later. "Well," I said, "You better be careful about those names. I think *Lamia* is a fairly common name, and I'm sure *Innocente* is. You don't want to get the pants sued off of you for libel."

"This name will stay," he said coldly. "Anyway, the story probably will never be published."

"I'll be along when the pub closes."

"Okay. See you."

. . . All disappointments; all falling so pitifully short of the ultimate in pure evil. I gave up my search in disgust, and amused myself for an entire day and far into the night writing down the story of my futile quest.

My thoughts kept returning again and again to the idea of a lamia. Now there was evil in female form for you! I looked up the word in Mac's big Webster's: "One of a class of man-devouring monsters, commonly represented with the head and breast of a woman and the body of a serpent. They were believed to assume the forms of beautiful women to allure young men."

Bring on your lamia! I thought. Oh Satan, whether you're a spirit or just the abstraction for very real evil that's present in us all, produce me a lamia! I'll take my chances!

If I wished hard enough, could I materialize a lamia out of thin air? Were there energies that assumed corporeal reality in wish-fulfillment? Were there malign entities that could materialize in the presence of persons receptive to them? Could demons be summoned up or banished at will, and did they sometimes get out of control?

I knew all about hallucinations and I didn't want any. I wanted the real thing.

Am I crazy? I thought. No, coldly sane; just experimenting.

I even thought of a good name for my lamia: Innocente Lamia. Boy, that was rich! She would be the most exquisite, magnificent, voluptuous, seductive, fascinating, witty, brilliant, amorous, and evil being in female form man had ever experienced.

Then the phone rang. I was angry at the interruption. It was Mac, half-drunk at the Waldorf. He wanted me to come out and meet some friend of his, but I was glad that it was too late—almost three o'clock in the morning—and that I had the further excuse of not being shaved or dressed. He asked about the story I was writing about my experiences with women, and I told him it was just about finished. I told him that I was going to bring in a lamia—we'd talked about that idea before, how long before seems hazy now—and that I had a name for her, Innocente Lamia. He warned me about the possibility of libel and wanted me to change the name, but I wouldn't.

I was relieved when he finally signed off. Now I could get back to my lamia. If I thought hard enough, would she come to me, or would I go to her? Oh, I guessed I'd go to her; she had come-hither wiles that brought men running.

Where would we meet? Why, in her place of course. What would it be like? Well, not poor, certainly. Lamias don't have to live in rooming-houses. A suite at the Waldorf? No, too many people around who might wonder about the strange procession of men that kept arriving and after awhile left—strangely changed. Or didn't the men leave at all; maybe she absorbed them? Or maybe she sucked their blood, and after they were dead had her henchmen—demons too, no doubt—take them away and maybe sink them far out at sea? That might account for a lot of disappearances.

No, she'd have to have a discreet place, where no questions would be asked about her guests, and where odd happenings would be discreetly ignored. Some place if there were screams, the other tenants would not hear them.

A penthouse, of course. A penthouse on the roof of a second-rate, fairly small apart-

ment house, where there'd be a self-service elevator and no lobby staff to snoop and pry. The approach to the penthouse might be dingy, but once you were inside you'd see a place of fantastic opulence—the most magnificent rugs and tapestries and porcelains and jades the world afforded; a scene Aladdin himself had never dreamed of. That would be it.

Well, what would happen after I got there? There'd be the most intriguing preliminaries, of course—exotic drinks and foods and eerie, blood-chilling music and fantastic conversation. I'd drink in her beauty and gloat over her consummate evil, knowing I could have them both forever if I wished. She would make love to me, at first delicately then with wild abandon, and I would refuse myself. She would become angry, pleading, threatening and humble by turns. And I would laugh at her. "You do not deceive me," I would say with calm coldness. "I know what you really are; not only is your name Lamia but you are also one of the snake-women of legend, a true lamia. You are not human, you are an incarnation of evil. Go ahead, desire me, but you shall not have me, for the price of your love is my soul, which I refuse to pay."

Then she would change her tactics. She would intensify her efforts to seduce me, but she would also bargain with me, offering me riches, power, fame—anything on Earth man could desire—if I would only be hers. She would creep closer into my arms and entwine herself about me like the universal serpent, her forked tongue would probe my mouth deliciously, and I would love her, love her, love her . . .

Wait a minute. This story is getting away from me. Loving her is just what I'm not going to do. I'm going to spurn her and smash her pride—even demons have pride—just as Mary spurned me and smashed my pride. I'm going to turn on my heel and walk out of her penthouse laughing.

Yes, that's the way it's going to be. Then I'll be proof forever against the evil in woman. Then I'll be able to search with my soul at peace for a good, true woman to love and adore.

But where's my lamia? How will I find her? I can't walk up to a pretty girl in the

street and say to myself, "That's her, that's one of them." Or can I?

Maybe she'll give me a sign. An odd "Come hither" I'll recognize. Or maybe she'll phone me up. Get a wrong number, maybe, and start talking. "Oh, I'm sorry, but aren't you Jack Winters? My name is Innocente Lamia. Now that we've met in this odd way . . ."

Well, why the hell doesn't she phone? She knows I want her to, or does she? At that, I guess I didn't say so. Innocente Lamia, phone me up. Innocente Lamia, phone me up. Innocente Lamia, phone me up . . .

I'll keep on calling her until she answers.

IT WAS a quarter after four when I climbed out of the taxicab, feeling somewhat unsteady on my pins but extraordinarily brilliant, and made my way up to my apartment. I called jovially to Jack, but there was no reply. I went into the living room, and there was no Jack snoozing on the divan. I went into the study, and I found the brief note on a fresh white sheet in the typewriter:

"Gone to keep a date with Innocente Lamia. We finally made connections. Wish me luck. Jack."

Somewhat I felt relieved. Jack had looked bad, hyper-tense and on the verge of hysteria. He'd been typing about twenty-two hours at top speed, if the thick pile of manuscript turned face down beside the typewriter was any clue. Probably he'd felt just ready to blow his top, and had gone for a walk to let off steam. Or even prowl for a woman. I didn't care what he was up to; any distraction was better than just sitting and rehashing that Mary business.

I saw that his blue serge was gone and that he'd shaved. I grinned. Maybe he *had* got a date somehow. I went to bed and was sound asleep before my head hit the pillow.

IT WAS awakened almost instantly, it seemed, by a dream or vision that flashed through my slumber like lightning through closed eyelids. I saw an exotic room that was dominated by an enormous low divan that almost merged in the rich rugs surrounding it. Unlike most dreams, which are in black and white, I saw a fantastic variety of color—the deep reds and blues in

the divan and the rug, the green of jade statuettes, the soft amber of lights that seemed to come from candles or oil lamps. I smelled the cloying odor of heady incense, the unpleasant muskiness of a snake-pit, and the sharp acrid odor of fear.

On the divan lay what I at first thought was a woman, clad in a long garment so black that it reflected no light. I could see the milky white of her bare shoulders and arms, and the cloud of her ebon hair that was as black as her gown. She lay on her face, and for an instant I believed that she was alone, until I saw a twitching beneath her. Then I realized that she was embracing the body of a man in a blue-serge suit, pressing herself against him, actually entwining herself around him, as though her limbs were boneless and the train of her sable gown was many yards in length. I could not see her feet, nor could I see the face of the man she loved with such abandon.

His body heaved convulsively, and a wordless appeal for help smashed into my brain. The sudden spasm of struggle had thrown her head upward, and for an instant she arched it higher, so that I saw how long and exquisite and white her neck was. Then her head dropped flatly like the head of a striking serpent, and the long black hair dropped once more across the ashen face of my friend. The black coils of her amorphous figure seemed to tighten about him.

I sensed a cry in which there were no words but only meaning, and the meaning was *conquered and lost*. Then, like the sudden breaking of a cinema film, the dream ended and I awoke, to find myself sitting bolt upright in bed, sweat pouring from every pore.

They say that at the moment of death, or as the threat of imminent death looms close, the human brain in a supreme effort sometimes projects a vision of tragedy to loved ones, not infrequently over vast distances. I have read of so many of these alleged instances of telepathic power when great emotional tension existed that I have no reason to disbelieve in their possibility. Was Jack in terrible danger, and had his mind sent me such a message?

I was out of bed and dressed in about nothing flat. Then, however, I stopped

short, I hadn't the faintest idea where he had gone, or whom he was with.

Why I did what I did then I'll never know. There was no sense in it whatever. But my mind was in a sort of somnambulistic state in which everything and nothing was real. I went to the telephone book and started flicking through the Ls. I was running my finger down a column when it stopped as though transfixed, and cold sweat sprang out on my forehead.

"Lamia, Innocente," I read, in small, demure type. The address followed. It was just around the corner, almost.

Then there was an Innocente Lamia, and Jack had hit upon her name for his story by sheer, blind chance! I wondered if I wrote a story and called one of my characters Diablo Mephisto I'd find out that a gentleman by that name actually existed.

My hands were shaking—I tried to convince myself that it was from the liquor—as I picked up the phone and dialed her number. A delicious voice answered, "Yes?"

"I'd like to speak to Miss Innocente Lamia, if I may, please. Please forgive my calling at this hour, but . . ."

"This is she," the cello-like voice answered. There was a little laugh, almost like a throaty hum. "You're Thorp Mc-Clusky, aren't you?"

"Yes," I stammered, "but, but . . ."

"Jack Winters is here, you know," the voice went on calmly yet liltingly. "He hoped you might call."

That sounded strange. How the devil did he know I'd find out where he was?

Why, you fool, the note he left in the typewriter, of course.

"Put him on the wire. I want to talk to him."

"Uhh, uhh." I sensed that she was shaking her head, and for some reason or other I got a clear mental image of her as having exquisite white skin and ebon-black hair. "No can do. Your little friend from the lumbercamps has passed out cold. I gave him some of my very, very special cordial, and I guess he misjudged its wallop.

"But I'll talk to you, though," she added brightly, each syllable seductive with invitation. "If you're as nice and gentlemanly and obliging as he was—my, my, my!"

"Whaddo you mean, *was*?" I snapped.

My head was beginning to clear and I wanted to get the thing over with. I'd forgotten all about the dream that woke me up.

SHE laughed again; it was both tinkly as glass and deep as space.

"Well," she pointed out reasonably, "I do mean *was*. He's very much in the past tense now; you'd understand if you saw him. And he's no good to me or anybody else if he's passed out, is he? He *was* before, but now he ain't no more." This time her laughter pealed.

I had to laugh myself. "Lady," I said, "I must admit you're funny. What are you going to do about Jack?"

"Um," she said. "Well, I was going to let him sleep here, but now that you've called I think you'd better come and get him. You know, I hoped you'd call; I rather wanted to see what you looked like."

"Oh now, cut that out," I said. "I'm an old happily married man; been married these umpteen years. Jack's single, young, handsome and on the rebound. Bowl in one alley and you'll get more strikes." I was getting peevish; I wasn't able to cope with her in wit; and I felt damnable sleepy.

"Okay," she agreed instantly. "But if I make a play for you you'll know it. Coming to get the body?"

"Be right over," I said. "What's the apartment number?"

She assumed an affected drawl. "Why, the penthouse, of course, my deah. What did you expect?"

I hadn't expected anything; for all I knew, she lived in a barrel.

Then she laughed again. "Penthouse sounds gaudy, I know, but this is really a rundown old place, turtle-slow elevators, nothing chi-chi. Once you get up here, though, it's pretty nice."

"All right," I said, "I'll whistle up my kiddie-car."

"You won't need a taxi; it's only a five-minute walk."

That was true; the address—270 East 16th Street—was only a couple of corners and a couple of short blocks from my place. I tried to remember what her house looked like; it wasn't the big one on the corner of Third Avenue, obviously; it must be quite a way further down.

I walked. I passed the big church and crossed a narrow up-and-down street and there it was—270. It was an old place with iron fire-escapes zigzagging across the front, about eight stories tall. I went through the silent lobby with the cracked marble-and-plaster walls and the worn rugs on the checkerboard marble floor and got into the rickety, open-grille elevator that had been modernized by the installation of push-button controls. I pushed the button that said "Penthouse" and the elevator creaked slowly upward. When it halted the grille-door slid back and I stepped out. I was in a little brick hallway that was actually the top of the stairwell. Across the landing a door stood open. From a large room beyond poured soft, shimmering light that seemed to come from many sources and to have picked up the hues of many wonderful objects. Leaning against the doorjamb was the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.

She was young, no more than twenty-three. She was just an inch or two taller than average and her long white neck supported her head proudly. The lines of her body flowed rather than curved, and the low-cut, obsidian-black evening-gown she wore fitted her exquisitely voluptuous figure so perfectly that it might have been painted on.

Her mouth was sensitive and full of promise; her eyes large and black and smouldering, yet humorous too. Her ebon hair lay like waves from the River Styx across her milky shoulders; apparently she had already started to prepare for bed. Her lips were startlingly red against the pallor of her face; she had, I supposed, just put on fresh lipstick.

She stood in an odd position, with her arms folded. A slow smile grew on her face.

"Well *darling!*" she said. "Come right in!" As though by sudden impulse she stepped forward with an odd, serpentine, *boneless* undulation. Her white arms slid around my neck, I felt a soft hand pressing my head forward and downward, and then her warm, pulsing lips hungrily, thirstily found mine.

Now wait a minute, I thought, and raised both arms to gently loosen the clinging

ing grasp about my neck. Her hands seized my wrists in grips of steel. . . .

"**O**KAY, buddy," a masculine voice snapped sharply. "Don't try to hit a cop, or you'll get pulverized. Relax now, and let them hands down easy."

The vision faded. I was standing just inside the stone gates of a public park I knew well—Stuyvesant Park, which runs from 15th to 17th Street just east of Third Avenue. Before me stood a beefy and very real policeman, gripping both my wrists. A few feet away was another cop, watching alertly. The pearly gray of dawn was faintly tinged with gold, and I knew that an instant before the sun had risen.

I let my arms relax. Tried to collect my thoughts. "We been trailing you for ten minutes," the second cop said, not unkindly. "You came down Third Avenue walking like a blind man and over into the park. You hopped up?"

The other cop looked closely at my eyes. He shook his head. "You have spells or anything?" he asked.

I shook my head vaguely. "No, never before this." I looked around unbelievingly—at the shadowy trees, the gray fountain, the vacant benches, the plots of sorry grass surrounded by low fences.

Then I screamed.

On the grass, partly hidden by a row of benches and not twenty feet away, lay the body of a man in a blue-serge suit. I knew instinctively that it was Jack. And I knew too that he was dead.

I REMEMBER little about the wailing radio-patrol cars that arrived swiftly, the throng of cops and ordinary citizens that appeared from nowhere, the ambulance that pulled up close, its red beacon flashing. I remember them taking me away in some kind of a vehicle, and I remember flashes of a police station and my apartment. I remember men asking me questions, questions, questions . . .

Later I remember a white hospital bed and men in white jackets and also in business suits talking to me and cracking my knees and other things. I remember thinking *It was just day, then night, now it's day again; the time's going too fast*. And

I remember being told with what seemed unnecessary kindness and consideration that I could go home now.

SO HERE I am. I have read last night's and this morning's papers; they make sorry reading. I am free from suspicion; the police version is that I must have gone out looking for my friend, come upon his body, and suffered temporary derangement from shock.

I don't even know whether or not the police read Jack's manuscript. It was still lying face down on the desk when I returned this morning.

But I have read it, every word. It ends like a fiction story with a post-script tacked on. There are pages and pages of description about an adventure with a lamia who—so goes the story—telephoned Jack after he'd concentrated on wishing her to telephone for a very long time. By an amazing coincidence, she appears to be exactly the same woman, or being, or entity, that he described so beautifully and in such detail before—again in the story—she responded to his thought-summons to call. And the same black-white slithery creature I had seen in my dream, and later when I had the hallucination in the park.

His story appears to end in triumph. He repelled the being's advances and spurned her bribes, and left her penthouse treading on air while she wailed a dirge of the damned. And though, many times since, I have walked the streets of that neighborhood searching for the entrance to that dingy little apartment-house where Innocente Lamia had her strange existence, I have never been able to find it, he concluded. I have searched for her name in the telephone book; it is not there. Sometimes I am inclined to believe that the experience was all a dream, an hallucination born of my evil hatred of a real woman I should have pitied, regardless of her faults. May God forgive me for my blindness and false pride.

Then came the post-script (not the right word for it, of course), which continued immediately after the above ending: I have smoked a couple of cigarettes and have been thinking things over, and I do not think this story is half bad. It is not the sort of

thing I have been accustomed to doing, of course, but I feel that the conceptions of varying degrees of evil in woman, and finally the ultimate evil in a being that is woman only in form and allure, comprise a really good study in abnormal psychology—maybe my own—which should be published. And the conflict and triumph of a man who seeks to find for himself the goodness in woman through spurning the evil I consider not half bad, too.

I think that if I fix this story up it will find a market. Certainly I feel much more at peace merely through having written it. One thing bothers me; I can change all the names easily enough with the exception of Innocente Lamia—that one appears to me so dramatic, though perhaps corny, that I want to keep it. Mac said something about libel; I shall look her name up in the telephone book.

Dammit, there is an Innocente Lamia in the telephone book. She even lives very near here—270 East 16th Street.

Well, how about another name?

I can't think of any one-tenth as good.

I wonder if she would object to my using her name and switching the locale of the story away uptown somewhere.

I wonder if I could get around it by saying there are actual flesh-and-blood girls by the name of Innocente Lamia in New York—all very normal, sweet girls indeed and not snake-demons?

I better call her up.

She'll bawl the devil out of me; it's in the middle of the night.

Better wait until morning.

I can't wait until morning; I'll go crazy waiting. I'm going to phone her now.

Well, I've phoned her. She was very reasonable. In fact, I didn't even wake her up; she said she'd been at some late affair or something and was still wide awake. She said, "Sure, go ahead and use my name, but for Pete's sake change the address; if I'm as evil as your story makes out I can't very well sue you for libel but I don't want the neighbors crossing their fingers when they see me coming on the street." She's got a marvelous sense of humor and a beautiful speaking voice.

Then she said something odd. She asked me if I believed in telepathy and I said I

didn't know: I'd never experienced it. But she said that she'd been sitting up because she had a hunch that a man named Jack Winters would call and that just this conversation would take place. And, of course, I did call. And I had been thinking about her name, thinking very hard about it and on purpose. So I guess that proves telepathy in my own personal experience.

There's something still odder. She lives in a penthouse. I know because she invited me over for a drink—"If we're en rapport we needn't be conventional about an introduction or the time of day or night, need we?" she said—and I'm going.

I'll just get a quick shave, put on my blue-serge, leave a note for Mac telling him we made connections, and be on my way. I'd like to see his face when he reads that note.

THAT was the way his manuscript ended, in the middle of Page 72.

So I sit here, my thoughts swirling, wondering. I looked up Innocente Lamia in the telephone book; the name isn't there, though I could swear I read it clearly last night. There is a Jack Lamia in the New York

telephone book; he's the only Lamia in the Manhattan directory.

That address I thought I read—270 East 16th Street. There isn't any such address; if there were, however, it would be in Stuyvesant Square Park, about where I was standing when the police found me. East 16th Street breaks off on one side of the park and resumes again on the other.

Except for the first page, I read none of Jack's manuscript until this morning, after I was released from Bellevue. But his written description of the dingy apartment-house, the penthouse, and the hallucination or thing that called itself Innocente Lamia tallies with my own.

Finally, there is the mystery of why, how, and by whom Jack was murdered. I know the police will never find the motive nor the murderer, for neither was human.

What puzzles them most is the *how*. For Jack's body, when it was found, was completely drained of blood, though there was not a mark of violence on it anywhere. *And almost every bone in his body was broken, as though by the embrace of a monstrous python.*

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