

CHILD OF EVIL

By OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

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Cathedral Gardens was bathed in silver glow. Moonlight limned the old house sympathetically. A sign, tacked to a pine at the entrance to the Gardens, announced that inasmuch as this was the last night of the full moon, no tourists would be admitted on succeeding days after seven o'clock.

A young man and a girl left the house and walked toward the water. The young man was tall and straight



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and broad of shoulder. He walked slowly and gazed through the almost unearthly beauty of the Gardens with pardonable pride.

Jim Owenby, landscape engineer, had designed and built Cathedral Gardens. To a Beverly girl had been given the distinction of having created this beauty spot. Working from Mrs. Hamilton's original idea, fired by youthful ambition and possessing great technical skill, he had planned and supervised.

Margaret Hamilton was young, slender and unobtrusively beautiful. Her hair was ash-blond, and she wore it close against her small, perfectly shaped head. Her eyes were gray, like those of her brother. At the moment they were soft and gentle, perhaps because her hand rested confidently on the muscular arm of the young man at her side.

He helped her into a little bateau which was tied informally to a stake. He seated himself beside her, and handed her a paddle. "We'll both have to navigate this craft," he said lightly. "Unless you want me to sit in the back."

A boat came out of the darkness and lurched gently past them. A woman's voice, freighted with a sigh for the things that might have been, came to their ears. The voice said, "Did you see that young couple? It must be wonderful to be young—and to be here in the moonlight."

Margaret Hamilton touched the hand of the young man. The place was overpowering in its beauty. Unbelievable. Tiny islands, flaming with blossoms, seemed vague and unreal. There were no dimensions.

Jim Owenby propelled the little craft into a sheltered bayou. Here they were sheltered by a midnight blackness, and his arms went about the girl. He said nothing. He did not kiss her. Here was a communion which transcended the desire for demonstration and caresses, and if their bodies were vitally alive—if they were acutely conscious of each

"I understand. Let's go back, because we must talk."

They found a seat in an arbor which was mantled with wisteria, and Margaret said, "Now we can talk."

He took her hand. "It's about Kay Forrest," he said.

Margaret nodded. "I knew that." "I'm sorry for her. Sorry as hell."

"So are we all." Jim Owenby hesitated. "I've always known Kay. Since she was a kid. She's pretty swell."

"Barney thinks so." "Well, he's right." Jim changed the subject slightly. "You know, Barney has stuff I didn't think he had. I thought he'd go under when Kay married this Reynolds . . . but during the past week he's been taking it on the chin like a man."

She nodded. "We've been watching him, too, Mother and I. It's tough on him, but perhaps it's what he needed. A sort of tempering of the steel that we know is in him. I'm terribly sorry for him."

Jim shook his head. "Why did Kay marry Kirk Reynolds?"

Margaret said, "You tell me." "Right and I'll only be telling you what everybody in Beverly is saying. She was forced to marry him so that she couldn't testify against him if he happened to be tried for Harvey Jackson's murder."

"Of course." "She was with Reynolds that night. She saw what happened."

"Do you blame her for being afraid of him?"

"No. She's just a kid. And to see a murder . . . She's in a rotten spot, but that doesn't alter the fact that—unless we're wrong about everything—Kirk Reynolds murdered Harvey, and Harvey was my best friend."

"I see . . . And so?" "And so," he said bitterly, "I can't let matters stand where they are. I want to talk to Kay—want to see if she'll tell me the truth."

Margaret pressed his hand. She said quickly, "You mustn't."

"Why?" "It isn't fair. Kay came here to get away from the nasty gossip in Beverly. She's our guest."

"But suppose she knew that she was going to be protected?" "She couldn't know that. She'd only know that you'd be willing to do your best."

He said gravely, "In this State a woman may testify against her husband. The law merely says that she cannot be compelled to."

"You mustn't, Jim."

"But I must."

"Why?" "Because Harvey was my best friend, that's reason number one. Secondly, I'm fond of Kay."

Margaret was staring off into the night. She hoped that her voice was steady. "Suppose you knew that Kirk killed Harvey. What would you do?"

"I'm not sure." He paused briefly. Then, "Listen, dear—and try to understand. A man can't just sit back and do nothing. I can't . . . and neither can Barney."

"Barney?" "Of course. He's all shot by this marriage of Kay's."

"You and Barney have been discussing it, haven't you?"

"Of course. As a matter of fact, we haven't talked about much else."

"And so?" "We feel like a couple of prime saps. Or perhaps that sounds more flippant than I intend. What I'm driving at is that—for everybody's sake—we don't intend to let Reynolds get away with this."

"You know he's dangerous."

"What of it?" "This, Jim . . . and I'm trying not to be selfish. The past few years haven't been easy for us. You didn't know Dad—so you can't understand what his death really meant. Then the financial collapse and the sympathy of our friends—which was the wrong kind of sympathy. And Mother's worry over Barney which led to our coming down here so he could get away from wealthy friends who were too kind."

She paused and he touched her hand reassuringly.

"I know. Plenty tough sledding."

"It is. Beverly has done a lot for all of us. I've been happy—maybe because I found you. But whatever the cause, I'm jealous of my happiness. I don't want it destroyed."

Barney said, "I'm proud of you, Kay. My mother is proud of you. Margaret is proud of you. The cook is proud of you."

Kay laughed in spite of herself. "The third waffle?" she inquired.

"Plus grits and shrimp and what have you."

The girl rose from the breakfast-table and joined Mrs. Hamilton on the veranda. The morning was brilliant; pleasantly cool and crystal clear. Dozens of tiny bateaus were waiting patiently for passengers, and already several could be seen nosing quietly through the placid lagoons.

Barney came from the house and joined his mother and Kay.

Kay looked up into the clean-cut, boyish face. "Going into town?" she asked.

"Needs must. Heavy business."

There was a shadow of apprehension in her eyes. "Shopping?"

"Yes. For Mother." Strong fingers closed about her arm. "And that's all, Chica. My word of honor."

Kay followed him into the house, leaving Mrs. Hamilton alone on the veranda.

A bateau approached the shore, navigating an eccentric course. In the double, high-backed seat amidships, Mrs. Hamilton saw an elderly couple, and even at this distance it was apparent that the woman was more than a trifle nervous. The boatman was white, a long, angular individual who paddled the little craft viciously, to the further discomfort of his passengers. Mrs. Hamilton recognized the man. Jeff Butler, she remembered—and she had never liked him. He had seemed a sullen and resentful person. She knew instinctively that something was wrong, and this suspicion became certainty when Jeff drove the nose of the boat far up on the sloping bank with a last powerful stroke of his paddle.

Mrs. Hamilton rose to greet them. "Anything wrong?" she inquired.

"Yes." The man spoke in a high, excited voice. "Who's in charge around here?"

"I am. Why?"

"That fellow who had us in his boat . . ." He gestured toward the lagoon. "He was drunk."

Ruth Hamilton's eyes narrowed. "I'm terribly sorry . . ."

"I was so frightened," interjected the little woman. "I didn't know what was going to happen. I thought every minute he might drown us."

"That wouldn't be likely. The water is very shallow in most places. But that doesn't rectify matters. Sit down . . ." She designated chairs.

"Tell me just what happened."

"He acted queer right from the beginning. And when we got into the boat, he was ugly—"

"—And insulting, wasn't he, Arthur?"

"Quite. He kept paddling us, fast, when we wanted to stop and look at things. He wouldn't do what we wanted—"

"And he had liquor on his breath."

"Then he got very angry when we told him to bring us in. Now, we're not complaining . . ."

"But you have every right to complain. I know the man and I don't like him. I'm glad of this definite excuse to let him go."

The woman softened. "We don't want anybody to lose his job . . ."

"I can't have that sort of man around here." Ruth Hamilton looked up at Barney who had come from the house and had caught the end of the conversation. "My son," she explained, not without pride.

Barney said, "It's about time, Mother. I'll go down and pay him off."

The idle white boatmen were reclining against the wall of their cabin, awaiting calls. They were a lackadaisical lot, notable for their inertia.

Two or three of them nodded to Barney, but without waste of effort . . . though their eyes narrowed slightly when he inquired for Jeff Butler. They indicated direction with lazy jerks of their heads.

Mr. Butler looked up sullenly from the foot of a live oak. His watery eyes were clouded with liquor, his attitude sullen and resentful. Barney's voice was pitched low. He said, "You've been drinking again, Jeff."

"Well, what if I have?"

"You know that doesn't go around here."

The man's voice was whiney. "You-all ain't got no right tellin' a feller what he can an' cain't do."

coned himself. His bony figure towered over Barney's adequate height, and his voice took on an unpleasant edge. "You ain't firin' me?"

"I'm doing precisely that. You scared your passengers half to death. You've done it before. But you're not going to do it again."

"Ain't no man goin' to tell me what I can do."

"I believe you made that remark before. Here's the money I owe you. Now—get out."

Mr. Butler's dignity had been ruffled. He suspected that his companions on the other side of the log-cabin could hear the conversation. He said, "I'll git out when I'm good an' ready."

"So?" Barney's laugh was hard. "You'll get out damned quick."

"And if I don't?"

The young man's gray eyes were cold. "I'm advising you to get out, Jeff. That's all."

So far as being deprived of the privilege of daily labor, Jeff did not really mind. He had for some time resented the necessity of reporting for work every day, of being subjected to the task of paddling awe-stricken tourists through glades which were to them incredibly beautiful, but which—to him—were a lot of dawg-gone foolishness. For one thing, his role placed him (or so he thought) on a definitely lower social plane, and Jeff was fond of declaring (though not actually believing) that he was as good as anybody that walked.

(Continued Next Week)

Near Record

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