

THREE SHUTTERED HOUSES

By BEN AMES WILLIAMS

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THE STORY

CHAPTER I.—Driving home through a torrential rain, young, well-to-do Clint Jervies picks up a girl, scantily clad, running in terror-stricken flight down the road. She rides a short way, leaves the car and runs into the woods. He decides to talk to his dear friends, Inspector Tope and Miss Moss, about his adventure. Clint still thinks of her as Miss Moss, his former guardian, though she and the Inspector are married. Clint, having settled down, now manages the Jervies estate himself.

CHAPTER II.—In three shuttered houses, all gloomy and forbidding, on Sycamore Hill, near where Clint picked up the frightened girl, lived three families. In one house lived old Denman Hurdur, his wife, who had been Ella Hennesaw, and his daughter, Kitty Leaford. Next door was dark and silent too. Also there saw, far off, a flicker in the sky; she even heard the rumble of thunder. Yet the storm might not come this way, or if it did, her mother might not waken. She got into the big bed and lay without drawing any covering over her, for the night was hot, and the air was lifeless and still. The old house creaked all around her; mice scurried in the walls.

She must have slept at last, and for an indeterminate time. It was a gust of wind which woke her, a sudden quickening in the tempo of the night. Then lightning etched a net of flame across the sky, and the crashing thunderburst burst in her ears.

June was not afraid of thunder-showers; but her mother, despite the drug she had taken, might have wakened; June decided to go in and see. She knew the older woman would be, if she were awake, covering now, and crying out as though from an actual physical pain. The girl got out of bed and crossed the hall to her mother's door.

Without opening the door, she listened, but she heard no sound from within. Yet still June hesitated, uncertain, uneasy for no reason. In the end she opened the door and spoke softly into the darkness.

"Mother, are you all right?" But there was no reply, and June was reassured. She was about to return to her own room, when lightning flashed again, close by, and the glare of it was bright in the window by Kitty Leaford's bed. So June saw her mother for this instant, clearly.

And when the lightning passed, the girl stood still, her eyes dilated. There had been something alarming in her mother's posture, in the way she lay along the bed.

With an abrupt movement June turned on the light. An air-current coming from the open window in her own room blew her door shut with a reverberating crash; and she leaped with dismay at the sudden sound. But her mother had not roused—did not move as June bent over the bed.

Mrs. Leaford lay on her side, her head pillowed on her left arm; her right arm limp along the coverlets. June had seen her in a drugged sleep before, and there was nothing patently alarming in her appearance now. But though her mother lay on her side, her head was turned so that her face was upward. The posture looked uncomfortable; and June very gently tried to move her mother's head to the left so that it might be at ease.

But when June touched Kitty Leaford's cheek smeared with unguents, her heart turned cold. June caught her mother's shoulders. She shook them; she cried: "Mother! Mother!"

But Kitty Leaford made no response. June might as well have shaken a bolster loosely stuffed with sand.

The girl backed away from the bed, her hands pressed to her lips. She turned and ran down the stairs to the telephone in the hall.

The instrument was dead. She snapped on the hall light—an electric bulb hanging by one wire in the midst of the gas chandelier—and in that naked illumination she tried the telephone again, without response.

Terror was clamoring in her; she tried to fight it down, to think what she should do.

Grandpa and Grandma Hurdur were asleep at the end of the hall, but she knew there was no help in them. Even if there were help anywhere.

Then the electric light faded and died, and June stood in the dark hall like a tomb. She was stifled

at the head of the stairs she pressed long enough to be sure the others were leaving. She heard someone slide the bolt on the front door, heard Uncle Justus say: "I've fastened it, Denman."

Then murmuring voices toward the kitchen. They all went out that way; and after a moment Grandpa and Grandma Hurdur returned to go into their own room, on the ground floor, in the east wing. Her mother's room and her own were in the west wing, over the big sitting-room.

A deep uneasiness possessed June. When her own door was closed and she was alone, she stood still, even her eyes unmoving. It might be, she thought, the sullen electric air which made her thus restless and full of a vague foreboding.

CHAPTER III

June undressed slowly, listlessly. There was nothing in life as she knew it which could provoke her to eagerness. Her movements were automatic, her thoughts went round and round a familiar circle.

This was her world. These folk who had been here tonight, and Uncle Jim, who lived in the but by the pond. She thought of him now with a faint smile. There was sound mirth in him. He used to laugh at these people here; contrived nicknames for them all to make June smile. Grandma Bowdon was the Iron Hand, Aunt Evie the Velvet Glove. Grandma and Grandpa Hurdur were the Conquered Provinces.

He never sought to make June laugh at her mother, she remembered now. Once or twice she had tried to persuade Kitty Leaford to go with her to meet Uncle Jim. "You'd like him, Mother," she had urged. "I know you would."

But her mother would never go. The girl went mechanically about the business of preparing for the night. Her eyes drifted half-resentfully around the ugly room. She loosed her hair and brushed it slowly for a while, watching her reflection in the mirror above the marble slab. The house long since was still. When at last she turned out her own light and opened one of the tall windows, she saw Aunt Evie's house next door was dark and silent too.

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by the blackness; she gasped for breath; and the front door blew open, banging against the wall, and the girl choked back a scream.

She was swept by desperate and nameless terror; a gust of rain came sweeping in, and June ran blindly to meet it, out through the door, into the full beat of the rain. The touch of it was sweet and cool.

Then she remembered that the front door was always locked and bolted. Uncle Justus had bolted it tonight. Why had it opened of itself?

Blind panic possessed her utterly; yet she clung to one thought: she must fetch Doctor Cabler.

She might have roused Rab or Ass, asleep next door. Rab had even a car. But she took no time to think of these things. She was already racing across the lawn; she found the gate in the hedge, and felt the smooth hard macadam under her feet, and ran swiftly. Occasionally lightning flashes illuminated her way, kept her in the road.

She had gone halfway to Doctor Cabler's house when a car came down the hill behind her. She tried to run faster, to escape this pursuer; but this was vain, and she turned off the road, and fell, and scrambled to her feet and stood like a wild creature brought to bay.

The car stopped beside her, and someone asked a question. She stammered something, for this was a man's voice, and June was not habituated to encounter strange men. But instantly, while he used some persuasion, she found herself in the seat beside him.

He offered her his coat, but she refused it. Then this young man beside her turned out the dash-light so that darkness drew a protective garment over her, and she was warm with gratitude to him. She said: "Thank you—" She watched him covertly, controlling her breath.

He asked some question, suggesting that she was afraid, and she told him that she was not afraid. Yet her knees were trembling and her fingers pressed her palms.

He spoke again, but she did not hear him. She watched the road, and at the beginning of the path through the wood to Doctor Cabler's house, she bade this young man stop the car. He did so, and she alighted, and ran away along the path.

But hidden in the wood, she stopped to look back; and she stayed there till he drove on, watching the headlights of his car till their gleam was lost behind a screen of trees.

When he was gone, she stood like one bereft, as though with him a part of herself had departed too. But then, in the darkness and the rain, terror returned to spur her on. She ran up the path and so came pounding on the Doctor's door.

At length a flashlight's beam came down the stairs; she could see it through the panel of the door. It struck her in the eyes through the glass; and at the same time the door opened. The light was in her eyes, and Doctor Cabler exclaimed: "June! God bless me!"

She whispered: "Come quick, Doctor Cabler!" "Come in, June," he commanded, and led her into the hall and shut the door. "You're drenched. What is it?"

"Oh, hurry, hurry!" she cried. "It's Mother. She's dead!"

The word on her own lips struck her like a blow. She had not till this moment shaped this word even in her thoughts. "Oh, hurry," she repeated; and thought in a dispassionate apathy that the injunction was absurd. If her mother was dead, there could be no reason for haste. This had not occurred to her before.

"Eh?" the Doctor exclaimed. "Dead?"

"Yes," said June, in an empty tone. Even though the admission convicted her of folly, convicted her of having lost her wits, of having run without the slightest occasion half a mile through drenching rain, yet she had no doubt that what she said was true.

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(To Be Continued)

ATTEND MEETING

J. A. Best, Supt. Public Welfare, Wayne County, went to Gastonia Sunday to take two crippled children. He will also attend the 27th Annual convention of the North Carolina Conference of Social Service, in Charlotte, which convenes Sunday night and runs through Tuesday.

Mrs. Rutledge and Mrs. Campen, from the Department of Public Welfare, accompanied him. They will

be back in the office Wednesday morning.

GIFTS

J. C. Eagles of Wilson has donated one registered Holstein bull calf, one registered Guernsey heifer calf, and one registered Guernsey bull calf to 4-H Club boys of Wilson county. Delmon Williamson of the Rock Ridge 4-H Club received the Holstein bull calf. The other two animals will be placed later.



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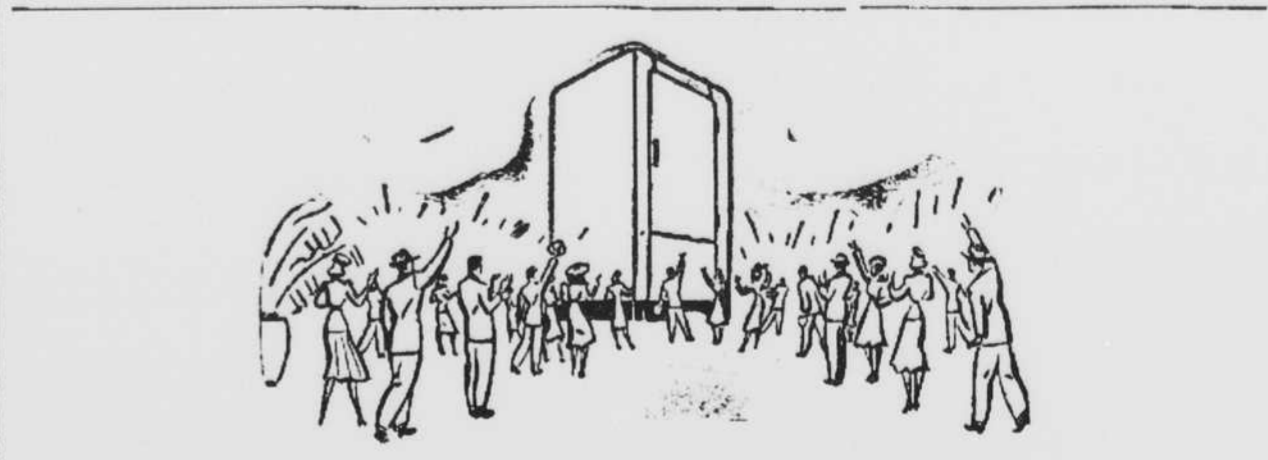
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