

Arthur Leo Zagat

*The Hound
of Hell*

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I. — MENACE OF THE DOGS

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"I AM convinced," Rennold Forson said heavily, "that there is something definitely wrong in Oaklake." He stood, tall and thin, in the center of the living room, and there was a queer glow in his narrow, piercing eyes. "Some strange peril hangs over our little community like a cloud; the fear of some weird, uncanny evil is creeping into every home, touching every life. I am worried for you, my dear, living out here on the edge of the town, alone and unprotected."

Sandra Crane appeared slender, fragile, sitting in the deep chair near the window. "I am not afraid," her tired contralto responded. "Not at all afraid."

"I don't get you," Wally Leeds drawled, his gangling, loose-jointed frame slouched on the sofa. "You aren't really jittery over the gossip of a few shopkeepers and the howling of a dog at night? That's all there is to the whole thing!"

Forson's sharp-edged, pointed features turned to the youth. His thin lips twitched in what might have been a humorless, saturnine smile. "Gossip! A dozen people have *seen* the dog—a shadowy beast skulking through the fields at night. They say that his eyes glow with a red fire that strikes terror into them, as if the devil himself were glaring at them."

"Imagination, aided by one or two too many drinks at the Seven Gables!"

"Oh, of course." The older man made no effort to disguise the animosity in his tone. "You can explain anything by that. It might even account for the fact that night before last,

when the Talmadges' cottage caught fire at two in the morning, only about five of the volunteers answered the alarm, and that the rest of the company refused to explain where they had been, except that they were not at home."

"Well..."

"I was talking to Father Fasey today," Forson continued. "He tells me his congregation has dropped off about half, and that even of those who attend Mass, only one man has accepted Communion in weeks. He is quite convinced that Satan has invaded Oaklake and he intends to exorcise him next Sunday."

Somehow, as he said that, the atmosphere of uneasy dread he had managed to create in the little parlor deepened. The beaming, rotund little priest was very wise. If *he* put so great stress on the whisperings...

"Faugh. I can't stand this sort of talk." Wally pushed himself to his feet, jerked around to Sandra. "Good-night, Miss Crane. I'm going home and try to write." He flung himself out through the curtained archway into the foyer.

Forson's lip curled. "Good riddance. I can't see how you stand him around."

A fleeting smile illuminated the girl's wan features. "He is a trifle *gauche*. But then he's had an awful struggle, writing for years and not selling a thing. I think..."

"Oh, let's forget him!" The man lunged across the room, towered above Sandra. "I can say what I want to, now that he's gone. Sandra, my dear! Why won't you consent to marry me at once? Why won't you give me the right to protect you?"

"To protect me? Against what?"

"Oh, Good Lord! Haven't you been listening to me at all? Don't you remember what your father said to us, with the grey of death masking his face?" Forson's voice was tortured; he was quivering. "Sandra! He was already almost in that Other World when he spoke those last words. A knowledge not given to living men must already have been filtering into his soul. He begged you not to wait because of mourning; he begged you to marry me at once! Have you forgotten?"

The girl was erect now. Her brown eyes were deep, somber wells.

"I remember." She made a little, helpless gesture. "But I can't. Not yet. Oh, Rennold, not yet!"

"Darling! There is danger abroad. Some horrible, foul danger whose nature we do not know. But your father knew, when he gasped out, 'I want to feel that you are safe, dear!' and died."

"Safe!" Sandra jerked it out. "Why shouldn't I be safe here? With Alice, and—and Scratch? Father gave me Scratch to protect me!"

Forson twisted away from her, twisted back. "Scratch!" His face writhed with some obscure emotion. "Sandra! I didn't want to point it out before, but it is Scratch himself whom I fear—for you. The hound that haunts the night is black, and the only black dog in town is—*Scratch!*"

There was a moment's silence, tense, quivering. It was broken by a moan from the girl, a low moan: "No! I can't believe it! Scratch loves me. He would give his life for me; certainly he would never hurt me."