

***STANLEY
G. WEINBAUM***



***THE DARK
OTHER***

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The Dark Other

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1. PURE HORROR

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THAT isn't what I mean, said Nicholas Devine, turning his eyes on his companion. "I mean pure horror in the sense of horror detached from experience, apart from reality, Not just a formless fear, which implies either fear of something that might happen, or fear of unknown dangers. Do you see what I mean?"

"Of course," said Pat, letting her eyes wander over the black expanse of night-dark Lake Michigan. "Certainly I see what you mean but I don't quite understand how you'd do it. It sounds—well, difficult."

She gazed at his lean profile, clear-cut against the distant light. He had turned, staring thoughtfully over the lake, idly fingering the levers on the steering wheel before him. The girl wondered a little at her feeling of contentment; she, Patricia Lane, satisfied to spend an evening in nothing more exciting than conversation! And they must have parked here a full two hours now. There was something about Nick —she didn't understand exactly what; sensitivity, charm, personality. Those were meaningless cliches, handles to hold the unexplainable nuances of character.

"It is difficult," resumed Nick. "Baudelaire tried it, Poe tried it. And in painting, Hogarth, Goya, Dore. Poe came closest, I think; he caught the essence of horror in an occasional poem or story. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," said Pat. "I've forgotten most of my Poe."

"Remember that story of his—'The Black Cat'?"

"Dimly. The man murdered his wife."

"Yes. That isn't the part I mean. I mean the cat itself—the second cat. You know a cat, used rightly, can be a symbol of horror."

"Indeed yes!" The girl shuddered. "I don't like the treacherous beasts!"

"And this cat of Poe's," continued Nick, warming to his subject. "Just think of it—in the first place, it's black; element of horror. Then, it's gigantic, unnaturally, abnormally large. And then it's not all black—that would be inartistically perfect—but has a formless white mark on its breast, a mark that little by little assumes a fantastic form—do you remember what?"

"No."

"The form of a gallows!"

"Oh!" said the girl. "Ugh!"

"And then—climax of genius—the eyes! Blind in one eye, the other a baleful yellow orb! Do you feel it? A black cat, an enormous black cat marked with a gallows, and lacking one eye, to make the other even more terrible! Literary tricks, of course, but they work, and that's genius! Isn't it?"

"Genius! Yes, if you call it that. The perverse genius of the Devil!"

"That's what I want to write—what I will write some day." He watched the play of lights on the restless surface of the waters "Pure horror, the epitome of the horrible. It could be written, but it hasn't been yet; not even by Poe."

"That little analysis of yours was bad enough, Nick! Why should you want to improve on his treatment of the theme?"

"Because I like to write, and because I'm interested in the horrible. Two good reasons."

"Two excuses, you mean. Of course, even if you'd succeed, you couldn't force anyone to read it."

"If I succeed, there'd be no need to force people. Success would mean that the thing would be great literature, and even today, in these times, there are still people to read that. And besides—" He paused.

"Besides what?"

"Everybody's interested in the horrible. Even you are, whether or not you deny it."

"I certainly do deny it!"

"But you are, Pat. It's natural to be."

"It isn't!"

"Then what is?"

"Interest in people, and life, and gay times, and pretty things, and—and one's self and one's own feelings. And the feelings of the people one loves."

"Yes. It comes to exactly the point I've been stressing. People are sordid, life is hopeless, gay times are stupid, beauty is sensual, one's own feelings are selfish. And love is carnal. That's the array of horrors that holds your interest!"

The girl laughed in exasperation. "Nick, you could out-argue your name- sake, the Devil himself! Do you really believe that indictment of the normal viewpoint?"

"I do—often!"

"Now?"

"Now," he said, turning his gaze on Pat, "I have no feeling of it at all. Now, right now, I don't believe it."

"Why not?" she queried, smiling ingenuously at him.

"You, obviously."

"Gracious! I had no idea my logic was as convincing as that."

"Your logic isn't. The rest of you is."

"That sounds like a compliment," observed Pat. "If it is," she continued in a bantering tone, "it's the only one I can recall obtaining from you."

"That's because I seldom call attention to the obvious."

"And that's another," laughed the girl. "I'll have to mark this date in red on my calendar. It's entirely unique in our—let's see—nearly a month's acquaintance."

"Is it really so short a time? I know you so well that it must have taken years. Every detail!" He closed his eyes. "Hair like black silk, and oddly dark blue eyes—if I were writing a poem at the moment, I'd call them violet. Tiny lips, the sort the Elizabethan called bee-stung. Straight nose, and a figure that is a sort of vest-pocket copy of Diana. Right?" He opened his eyes.

"Nice, but exaggerated. And even if you were correct, that isn't Pat Lane, the real Pat Lane. A camera could do better on a tenth of a second's acquaintance!"

"Check!" He closed his eyes again. "Personality, piquant. Character, loyal, naturally happy, intelligent, but not serious. An intellectual butterfly; a dilettante. Poised, cool, self-possessed, yet inherently affectionate. A being untouched by reality, as yet, living in Chicago and in a make-believe world at the same time." He paused, "How old are you, Pat?"

"Twenty-two. Why?"

"I wondered how long one could manage to stay in the world of make-believe. I'm twenty-six, and I'm long exiled."

"I don't think you know what you mean by a make-believe world. I'm sure I don't."

"Of course you don't. You can't know and still remain there. It's like being happy; once you realize it, it's no longer perfect."

"Then don't explain!"

"Wouldn't make any difference if I did, Pat. It's a queer world, like the Sardoodledom of Sardou and the afternoon-tea school of playwrights. All stage-settings and pretense, but it looks real while you're watching, especially if you're one of the characters."

The girl laughed. "You're a deliciously solemn sort, Nick. How would you like to hear my analysis of you?"

"I wouldn't!"

"You inflicted yours on me, and I'm entitled to revenge. And so—you're intelligent, lazy, dreamy, and with a fine perception of artistic values. You're very alert to impressions of the senses—I mean you're sensuous without being sensual. You're delightfully serious without being somber, except sometimes. Sometimes I feel a hint, just a thrilling hint, in your character, of something dangerously darker —"

"Don't!" said Nick sharply.

Pat shot him a quick glance. "And you're frightened to death of falling in love," she concluded imperturbably.

"Oh! Do you think so?"

"I do."

"Then you're wrong! I can't be afraid of it, since I've known for the better part of a month that I've been in love."

"With me," said the girl.

"Yes, with you!"

"Well!" said Pat. "It never before took me a month to extract that admission from a man. Is twenty-two getting old?"

"You're a tantalizing imp!"

"And so?" She pursed her lips, assuming an air of disappointment. "What am I to do about it —scream for help? You haven't given me anything to scream about."

The kiss, Pat admitted to herself, was quite satisfactory. She yielded herself to the pleasure of it; it was decidedly the best kiss she had, in her somewhat limited experience, encountered. She pushed herself away finally, with a little gasp, gazing bright-eyed at her companion. He was staring down at her with serious eyes; there was a tense twist to his mouth, and a curiously unexpected attitude of unhappiness.

"Nick!" she murmured. "Was it as bad as all that?"

"Bad! Pat, does it mean you—care for me? A little, anyway?"

"A little," she admitted. "Maybe more. Is that what makes you look so forlorn?"

He drew her closer to him. "How could I look forlorn, Honey, when something like this has happened to me? That was just my way of looking happy."

She nestled as closely as the steering wheel permitted, drawing his arm about her shoulders. "I hope you mean that, Nick."

"Then you mean it? You really do?"

"I really do."

"I'm glad," he said huskily. The girl thought she detected a strange dubious note in his voice. She glanced at his face; his eyes were gazing into the dim remoteness of the night horizon.

"Nick," she said, "why were you so—well, so reluctant about admitting this? You must have known I—like you. I showed you that deliberately in so many ways."

"I—I wasn't quite sure."

"You were! That isn't it, Nick. I had to practically browbeat you into confessing you cared for me. Why?"

He stepped on the starter; the motor ground into sudden life. The car backed into the road, turning toward Chicago, that glared like a false dawn in the southern sky.

"I hope you never find out," he said.

2. SCIENCE OF MIND

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SHE'S OUT," said Pat as the massive form of Dr. Carl Horker loomed in the doorway. "Your treatments must be successful; Mother's out playing bridge."

The Doctor gave his deep, rumbling chuckle. "So much the better, Pat. I don't feel professional anyway." He moved into the living room, depositing his bulk on a groaning davenport. "And how's yourself?"

"Too well to be a patient of yours," retorted the girl. "Psychiatry! The new religion! Just between friends, it's all applesauce, isn't it?"

"If I weren't trying to act in place of your father, I'd resent that, young lady," said the Doctor placidly. "Psychiatry is a definite science, and a pretty important one. Applied psychology, the science of the human mind."

"If said mind exists," added the girl, swinging her slim legs over the arm of a chair.

"Correct," agreed the Doctor. "In my practice I find occasional evidence that it does. Or did; your generation seems to have found substitutes."

"Which appears to work just as well!" laughed Pat. "All our troubles are more or less inherited from your generation."

"Touche!" admitted Dr. Horker. "But my generation also bequeathed you some solid values which you don't know how to use."

"They've been weighed and found wanting," said Pat airily. "We're busy replacing them with our own values."

"Which are certainly no better."

"Maybe not, Doc, but at least they're ours."

"Yours and Tom Paine's. I can't see that you young moderns have brought any new ideas to the social scheme."

"New or not, we're the first ones to give 'em a try-out. Your crowd took it out in talk."

"That's an insult," observed the Doctor cheerfully. "If I weren't acting in loco parentis—"

"I know! You'd give me a few licks in the spot popularly supposed to do the most good! Well, that's part of a parent's privilege, isn't it?"

"You've grown beyond the spanking age, my dear. Physically, if not mentally—though I don't say the process would hurt me as much as you. I'd doubtless enjoy it."

"Then you might try sending me to bed without my dinner," the girl laughed.

"That's a doctor's prerogative, Pat. I've even done that to your Mother."

"In other words, you're a complete flop as a parent. All the responsibilities, and none of the privileges."

"That expresses it."

"Well, you elected yourself, Doc. It's not my fault you happened to live next door."

"No. It's my misfortune."

"And I notice," remarked Pat wickedly, "that you're not too thoroughly in loco to neglect sending Mother a bill for services rendered!"

"My dear girl, that's part of the treatment!"

"So? And how?"

"I furnish a bill just steep enough to keep your mother from indulging too frequently in medical services. Without that little practical check on her inclinations, she'd be a confirmed neurotic. One of those sweet, resigned, professional invalids, you know."

"Then why not send her a bill tall enough to cure her altogether?"

"She might change to psychoanalysis or New Thought," chuckled the Doctor. "Besides, your father wanted me to look after her, and besides that, I like having the run of the house."

"Well, I'm sure I don't mind." observed Pat. "We've a dog and a canary bird, too."

"You're in fine fettle this afternoon!" laughed her companion. "Must've been a successful date last night."

"It was." Her eyes turned suddenly dreamy. "You're in love again, Pat!" he accused.

"Again? Why the 'again'?"

"Well, there was Billy, and that Paul—"

"Oh, those!" Her tone was contemptuous. "Merely passing fancies, Doc. Just whims, dreams of the moment—in other words, puppy love."

"And this? I suppose this is different—a grand passion?"

"I don't know," she said, frowning abruptly. "He's nice, but—odd. Attractive as—well, as the devil."

"Odd? How?"

"Oh, he's one of those minds you think we moderns lack."

"Intellectual, eh? New variety for you; out of the usual run of your dancing collegiates. I've often suspected that

you picked your swains by the length and lowness of their cars."

"Maybe I did. That was one of the chief differences between them."

"How'd you meet this mental paragon?"

"Billy Fields dragged him around to one of those literary evenings he affects—where they read Oscar Wilde and Eugene O'Neil aloud. Bill met him at the library."

"And he out-shone all the local lights, I perceive."

"He surely did!" retorted Pat. "And he hardly said a word the whole evening."

"He wouldn't have to, if they're all like Billy! What's this prodigy's specialty?"

"He writes. I think—laugh if you want to!—I think perhaps he's a genius."

"Well," said Doctor Horker, "even that's possible. It's been know to occur, but rarely, to my knowledge, in your generation."

"Oh, we're just dimmed by the glare of brilliance from yours." She swung her legs to the floor, facing the Doctor. "Do you psychiatrists actually know anything about love?" she queried.

"We're supposed to."

"What is it, then?"

"Just a device of Nature's for perpetuating the species. Some organisms manage without it, and do pretty well."

"Yes. I've heard references to the poor fish!"

"Then they're inaccurate; fish have primitive symptoms of eroticism. But below the vertebrates, notably in the amoeba, I don't recall any amorous habits."

"Then your definition doesn't explain a thing, does it?"

"Not to one of the victims, perhaps."

"Anyway," said Pat decisively, "I've heard of the old biological urge before your kind analysis. I doesn't begin to explain why one should be attracted to this person and repelled by that one. Does it?"

"No, but Freud does. The famous Oedipus Complex."

"That's the love of son for mother, or daughter for father, isn't it? And I don't see how that clears up anything; for example, I can just barely remember my father."

"That's plenty. It could be some little trait in them swains of yours, some unimportant mannerism that recalls that memory. Or there's that portrait of him in the hall—the one under the mellow red light. It might happen that you'd see one of these chaps under a similar light in some attitude that brings the picture to mind—or a hundred other possibilities."

"Doesn't sound entirely convincing," objected Pat with a thoughtful frown.

"Well, submit to the proper treatments, and I'll tell you exactly what caused each and every one of your little passing fancies. You can't expect me to hit first guess."

"Thanks, no! That's one of these courses when you tell the doctor all your secrets, and I prefer to keel what few I have."

"Good judgment, Pat. By the way, you said this chap was odd. Does that mean merely that he writes? I've known perfectly normal people who wrote."

"No," she said, "it isn't that. It's—he's so sweet and gentle and manageable most of the time, but sometimes he

has such a thrilling spark of mastery that it almost scares me. It's puzzling but fascinating, if you grasp my import."

"Huh! He's probably a naturally selfish fellow who's putting on a good show of gentleness for your benefit. Those flashes of tyranny are probably his real character in moment of forgetfulness."

"You doctors can explain anything, can't you?"

"That's our business. It's what we're paid for."

"Well, you're wrong this time. I know Nick well enough to know if he's acting. His personality is just what I said—gentle, sensitive, and yet—it's perplexing, and that's a good part of his charm."

"Then it's not such a serious case you've got," mocked the doctor. "When you're cool enough to analyze your own feelings, and dissect the elements of the chap's attraction, you're not in any danger."

"Danger! I can look out for myself, thanks. That's one thing we mindless moderns learn young, and don't let me catch you puttering around in my romances! In loco parentis or just plain loco, you'll get the licking instead of me!"

"Believe me, Pat, if I wanted to experiment with affairs of the heart, I'd not pick a spit-fire like you as the subject."

"Well, Doctor Carl, you're warned!"

"This Nick," observed the Doctor, "must be quite a fellow to get the princess of the North Side so het up. What's the rest of his cognomen?"

"Nicholas Devine. Romantic, isn't it?"

"Devine," muttered Horker. "I don't know any Devines. Who are his people?"

"Hasn't any."

"How does he live? By his writing?"

"Don't know. I gathered that he lives on some income left by his parents. What's the difference, anyway?"

"None. None at all." The other wrinkled his brows thoughtfully. "There was a colleague of mine, a Dr. Devine; died a good many years ago. Reputation wasn't anything to brag about; was a little off balance mentally."

"Well, Nick isn't!" snapped Pat with some asperity.

"I'd like to meet him."

"He's coming over tonight."

"So'm I. I want to see your mother." He rose ponderously. "If she's not playing bridge again!"

"Well, look him over," retorted Pat. "And I think your knowledge of love is a decided flop. I think you're woefully ignorant on the subject."

"Why's that?"

"If you'd known anything about it, you could have married mother some time during the last seventeen years. Lord knows you've tried, and all you've attained is the state of in loco parentis instead of parens."



3 . PSYCHIATRICS OF GENIUS

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HOW do you charge—by the hour?" asked Pat, as Doctor Horker returned from the hall. The sound of her mother's departing footsteps pattered on the porch.

"Of course, Young One; like a plumber."

"Then your rates per minute must be colossal! The only time you ever see Mother is a moment or so between bridge games."

"I add on the time I waste with you, my dear. Such as now, waiting to look over that odd swain of yours. Didn't you say he'd be over this evening?"

"Yes, but it's not worth your rates to have him psychoanalyzed. I can do as well myself."

"All right, Pat. I'll give you a sample analysis free," chuckled the Doctor, distributing his bulk comfortably on the davenport.

"I don't like free trials," she retorted. "I sent for a beauty-culture book once, on free trial. I was twelve years only, and returned it in seven days, but I'm still getting sales letters in the mails. I must be on every sucker list in the country."

"So that's the secret of your charm."

"What is?"

"You must have read the book, I mean. If you remember the title, I might try it myself. Think it'd help?"

"Dr. Carl," laughed the girl, "you don't need a book on beauty culture—you need one on bridge! It's that atrocious game you play that's bothering Mother."

"Indeed? I shouldn't be surprised if you were right; I've suspected that."

"Save your surprise for when I'm wrong, Doc. You'll suffer much less from shock."

"Confident little brat! You're apt to get that knocked out of you some day, though I hope you never do."

"I can take it," grinned Pat.

"No doubt you can, but you're an adept at handing it out. Where's this chap of yours?"

"He'll be along. No one's ever stood me up on a date yet."

"I can understand that, you imp! Is that the famous Nick?" he queried as a car purred to a stop beyond the windows.

"No one else!" said the girl, glancing out. "The Big Thrill in person."

She darted to the door. Horner turned casually to watch her as she opened it, surveying Nicholas Devine with professional nonchalance. He entered, all, slender, with his thin sensitive features sharply outlined in the light of the hall. He cast a quick glance toward the Doctor; the latter noted the curious amber-green eyes of the lad, set wide in the lean face, Deep, speculative, the eyes of a dreamer.

"Evening, Nick," Pat was bubbling. The newcomer gave her a hasty smile, with another glance at the Doctor. "Don't mind Dr. Carl," she continued. "Aren't you going to kiss me? It irks the medico, and I never miss a chance."

Nicholas flushed in embarrassment; he gestured hesitantly, then placed a hasty peck of a kiss on the girl's

forehead. He reddened again at the Doctor's rumble of "Young imp of Satan!"

"Not very good," said Pat reflectively, obviously enjoying the situation. "I've known you to do better." She pulled him toward the arch of the living room. "Come meet Dr. Horker. Dr. Carl, this is the aforesaid Nicholas Devine."

"Dr. Horker," repeated the lad, smiling diffidently.

"You're the psychiatrist and brain specialist, aren't you, Sir?"

"So my patients believe," rumbled the massive Doctor, rising at the introduction, and grasping the youth's hand. "And you're the genius Patricia has been raving about. I'm glad to have the chance of looking you over."

Nick gave the girl a harassed glance, shifting uncomfortably, and patently at a loss for a reply. She grinned mischievously.

"Sit down, both of you," she suggested helpfully. She seized his hat from the reluctant hands of Nick, sailing it carelessly to a chair.

"So!" boomed the Doctor, lowering his great bulk again to the davenport. He eyed the youth sitting nervously before him. "Devine, did you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knew a Devine once. Colleague of mine."

"A doctor? My father was a doctor."

"Dr. Stuart Devine?"

"Yes, sir." He paused. "Did you say you knew him, Dr. Horker?"

"Slightly," rumbled the other. "Only slightly."