

A Thief in the Night—by Howard M. Hoke

BARBARA PERTH sat alone in the library. A June shower drummed on the graptolitic walk, which approached the old, ivy-grown stone building as if conscious that it was an upstairs. For a time she tried to detach the music of the rain from the splash of the fountain under the oaks; then strongly inclined to be meditative on such an evening she took a volume of essays from a remote and sepulchral alcove, kept sacred to the memory of the obsolete, and returned to her librarian's chair.

A step sounded on the vestibule tiles. She saw a stranger there, holding his soft hat under his arm, as if he had preferred to let the drops fall upon his iron-gray, curly hair, from which they trickled to his broad shoulders. With practised eyes Barbara studied him during the half minute he stood flipping the water from his hat, and, with a bound of interest, decided that no one like him had ever crossed the tiles.

"Pardon me," he said, with decorous humor, as he walked to the exchange counter. "May a descendant of Noah come in out of the deluge?"

"The library is open to everybody," she responded, rising. "I would not dare keep Noah himself out."

"I was afraid I might have to be one of a favored few," he said, his eyes twinkling with appreciation of her reply. "I've been in libraries, great and humble, all over the world, and some of them have rules like the chains on ancient Bibles. I haunt libraries wherever I go, and I suspect I've been a joafer and a nuisance in many a pue."

His delicately chiseled face glowed with such an affection for his book-loving memories, and under his sprightliness lurked such a suggestion of deep seriousness, that Barbara awoke with a start to the embarrassing discovery that she had been staring at him ever since he had given her a courtly bow.

"I'm sure you never could have been either," she caught herself saying, and blushed helplessly. She was now thrillingly certain that, during all her years of service there, no such man had come to the counter.

"Have patience and you'll see," he laughed. "How can I get the right to take out books?"

"Present an application signed by two responsible citizens."

"Bless me, I don't know a soul here, responsible or irresponsible. Perhaps I may come and read."

"Oh, yes," she replied; then, frightened by the enthusiasm of her assurance, she added: "Everybody is welcome who is respectable and knows how to handle books."

"I have only my word for the first," he chuckled, "but I can prove the second. With my eyes closed I'll tell you whether the book in your hand was made in England or America."

She gave him the volume, and he continued:

"See, my eyes are closed. I press the book opened in the middle, against my forehead. So! Perhaps I ought to utter talismanic words in a satanic voice, but I'm no strolling magician. In plain, every-day Anglo-Saxon, then, I pronounce this an English book."

With a facetious imitation of a prestidigitating flourish he returned the volume to her as she said, with frank wonderment, that it was an old copy of Addison.

"What a necromancer I'd make," he joked. "But it's simple—as all good tricks are. English glue has a stronger odor than ours, that's all. Get an American book and note the difference."

"Why, it is very different," she said, after testing the two volumes. "What an odd point to know!"

"That odor is a fragrance to us booklovers," he said, more seriously. "And it never leaves a book. The Attar of Roses, as you know, is a lasting perfume, and I like to think of this fragrance of books as the attar of old romance. Ridiculously sentimental for this prosaic age, isn't it?"

"Not at all," she differed, enthusiastically. "Nine out of ten marked passages in books here are the sentimental digressions."

"Oh, we're all sentimentalists if we'd fuss up," he declared. Then the sparkle vanished from his face and he added: "If only all mysteries could be as easily explained, I'd like to solve the mystery of this night—to know that it will not leave me any of its shadows. I—

pardon my bad habit of thinking aloud. May I know your name?"

She pointed to a card bearing the library rules, and he said, with a flicker of his humor:

"Mine is Alfred Yeargood. That might signify that some one year of my life has been good or some one is going to be. The one to be must improve mightily, then, over the has-beens. But I see it is time for you to close. So I'll bid—listen how it rains. Have you an umbrella?"

"No. I came before the shower."

"You couldn't walk a block without being drenched. Wait."

He was gone before she could stop him. She went back to her desk with the book, but saw no word on its yellow pages. This stranger's fancies were like measures from a beloved melody not heard for years. She had learned to smile at the egotistical days when she had been sure of a romance in her life. Now, the gleam on a handsome face, the music of a voice, a knightly manner, a hint of mystery, and she was again in a time of rosy expectation—without the smile.

Steps sounded. There he was again, puffing a little, but laughing youthfully and holding a dripping umbrella.

"But what will you do?" she asked when he handed it to her.

"Oh, I'd enjoy a good June soaking," he answered, "and I'll get it before I turn in. I'm very restless at night. Constitutional, perhaps. Sometimes I prow until daylight and—I note your embarrassment. I'll not insist upon being your—umbrella carrier. Good-night."

In the vestibule he turned to bow, and she noted that all of his gaiety had died from his face, leaving there an expression of deep anxiety.

She walked slowly to the house where she made her home with a Mrs. Dace. From the porch she glanced back along the street. At the corner, beyond the row of maples, was a figure in the electric shine. From the flower-beds rose the perfume of Spring; in her heart was the attar of old romance.

The evenings brought to the library the usual patrons—old readers with tastes as fixed in their orbits as the Summer stars in theirs; feathery people who brushed among the lint and dust of fiction; solemn people steeped in tragedy and tears; women from the sumptuous suburban residences, craving the latest sensational stories of the opulent; and lads and lassies who came not for books, but to see one another and play life's melody to the tune of a minuet. But the one who was different from all of them did not come.

The ways and thoughts of the villagers had never been Barbara's and she now felt more than before like an alien. She wondered how their babble had ever interested her. Her sense of isolation had wrought perfect frankness regarding her own emotions; so she owned to herself that she hoped the stranger would come again and was disappointed when he did not.

But one evening, a week later, she suddenly saw him among the group at the counter. She was not surprised that her heart beat rapidly. Smiling recognition, he obtained a magazine from her and went with it to one of the reading tables. A few minutes before nine, when all other patrons had gone, he brought it back.

"I've neglected your library shamefully, haven't I?" he asked.

"How could a booklover stay away so long?" she asked in return.

"I haven't been one since I was here," he replied, with a disturbed hesitation. "I haven't read anything. How hard life does fustle us at times! I have had to prowl while other good folk were asleep. But—with a chuckle he broke away from the thought—"I know the countryside by heart. The glaring newness of the Summer homes on the edges makes the village all the more venerably beautiful. Did you ever think that a moonlight night is the time to— but, there, I'm riding my hobby. It's your time to close."

"Yes," she said, with a glance at the clock.

"Would you?"

He stopped, holding her eyes irresistibly. Then he ventured: "The air is delightful and we still have a piece of the moon. Walk with me for fifteen minutes. Pardon me, do you know you have



"It is the fearful possibility of a great sorrow, a disgrace, that I ought not to ask you to bear," he said with a sob as he extended his hand in farewell.

a gift—a rare one—and I need it to-night. You can drive away the blue devils, and they're swarming to-night. I haven't found any one else in the village who can do it."

This corroboration of her unboastful self-estimate thrilled her, held her tongue fast—but she went with him.

Their stroll was the first of many that turned all other Junes and Julys into commonplace fragments of time. Often it was eleven o'clock before he bade her good-night at Mrs. Dace's door. It seemed to her that he was the medium by which the great world, which she had so longed to see and in which she had hoped to play a part, was being made an intimate part of her existence. He spoke of cities and countries with the familiarity of her village acquaintances in referring to the towns and townships of the county.

Barbara did not hold the friendship at arm's length and scan and question it and try to make herself believe it was only ordinary. She encouraged it to grow into the very fibres of her soul, and so it grew. She knew it was the romance she had expected in her girlhood.

More and more she felt like an alien. The village news had no personal appeal. Even the sensation that was exciting it from end to end did not quicken her pulse.

In the minutest detail the library patrons discussed every evening the burglaries that were being committed with startling frequency among the homes of the wealthy residents, but, like the Indian plague or the Messina earthquake, these crimes were terrible, but distant and not of consequence to her. What was there in the statements that the criminal was recklessly bold and the most skilful that had ever baffled the police to one who was living in a world of exquisite tenderness, starry nights and love?

One evening as she was preparing to go to the library, Mrs. Dace knocked and came in at her invitation. Having no children of her own, the widow had assumed a maternal attitude toward all the world, and this sometimes impelled her to take vigorous measures in the way of advice and restraint. As Barbara looked at her then she knew she had come for such a duty.

"Barbara," she began in her affectionate manner, "I have missed you dreadfully in the evenings this Summer. You remember that you used to come and we had pleasant talks on the porch or strolled together. So I thought I would ask you this evening if you ever knew this Mr. Yeargood before?"

"No," Barbara cried, detecting disapproval in her pronunciation of the name, "but—oh, he is the most!"

She cut off the words that would

have confirmed the truth betrayed to the keen listener by the impulsive "Oh!" and questioned instead:

"Why do you ask?"

"My dear," Mrs. Dace said, "don't you know how the village is stirred up about the burglaries? You must have heard about them. And hasn't it ever occurred to you that this man is a total stranger? No body knows anything at all about him and—and—this burglar is a daredevil and won't stop at anything."

The warning voice broke off, and the village gossip rushed like a poisonous air into the librarian's fairy realm. She had not foreseen that a thing so beautiful as her love could scarcely outlive a rose-leaf. The awful suspicion benumbed her. As if the words came from a great distance she heard Mrs. Dace say:

"Has it gone so far as this, Barbara?"

"You have seen, Mrs. Dace," she answered, rising stiffly.

She went to the library as if groping through a fog. It followed her into the shelved room, and it made those who came for books dim and spectral. One man, whose home had been broken into a few weeks before, gave the details of the latest burglary:

"The scoundrel shot at Graham night before last. But he'll soon be up against it good and hard. Several of the best detectives from New York came down the other day, and they have a plan that will soon put the villain where he belongs. He will do just about one more robbery and then they'll have him."

Barbara was conscious that each word was a stab, but she was unable to suffer. An icy numbness held muscle and nerve and brain.

At 8:45, his time for coming, she was alone. She felt that she must not see him, yet she could do nothing to avoid the meeting. Presently his step sounded on the tiles, alert, eager as it always was when he came. She rose dazedly from her chair. She was not afraid—only numb. He came to the counter out of the fog.

Then, instantly, by the magic of her love—muscle, nerve and brain were released. Never before had she seen such a smile upon his face. It told of some new expectation, some new ground for perfect happiness. She rose into supreme exaltation. Something had driven away the anxiety that always lurked under his smile.

"Barbara," he said, in a voice that uttered and echoed his gladness, "I am a boy to-night. I have had such news. No—not to-night. I may be deceived—as I've been before. But God forbid, I shall be away to-morrow, but I shall come in the evening as usual, and then—I will tell you all. It is almost time for me to go to the train, but come with me a little way."

She delayed as she took her hat from a hook. Why was he going away? Had he heard of the plans for capture and was he merely

making a vulgar escape? For an instant the numbness held her again, but she drove it away. She would be happy. She would never let him know that she had harbored the suspicion for a second. Yet all their evenings together had given her a right to know the truth, and, returning to the counter, she said:

"I am excited to-night, Alfred. Everybody is talking of the dreadful burglaries. They say the man is a terrible, murderous criminal, and everybody is alarmed. But he can't keep on with his crimes very long. A man was here this evening and he said that the police have plans that will soon lead to his capture."

The book in his hand fell to the floor. He stooped for it, but not before she saw that anxiety had rushed back to his face. But when he rose he was smiling again, almost as sunnily as before.

"Why should we waste our few precious moments discussing such a thing, Barbara?" he asked. "What is it to us if some man has a misguided notion of the rights of property? Why should we distress ourselves if a millionaire loses a few trinkets? Instead of that we should be happier than we have ever been."

In a twinkling she was scolding herself. It was almost sacrilege to suspect this man of low thievery. What if his prowling at night and his reticence regarding himself had troubled her? She would not let them do so again. She wished to be happier than before, and she would be. He saw some reason why they should be. She would trust everything to him.



"This burglar is a daredevil, and won't stop at anything."

It seemed to Barbara as if all previous evenings had prepared for the sweetness and peace of this short one. His cheeriness, his strength, his unquestioned integrity were keeping everything that threatened at bay. Her faith in him was as deep as the sky and as bright as the stars.

They came to a rustic seat in a small park near her home and sat upon it for a few minutes.

"Barbara," he said, led to the declaration by their previous words, "this Summer has had a meaning to me that no other one ever had. Has it not had to you?"

The words struck her into silence. They brought a sharp realization of the situation. Suppose the suspicion were true. Could she tell him—a thief—the sacred meaning of her Summer? She loved the refined booklover, the traveler, this man of the world—but this other, the night marauder? Suppose they were the same?

Suddenly he sprang up and stood before her, his hands clenched, terror upon his face.

"Forget what I have said, Barbara," he cried. "I should not have spoken—yet. It was my new hope that led me to it. But it may fail me again—as it has done before. If it does, then the happiness I have dreamed of for us—is impossible."

She rose to speak, but a chill dread held her silent.

"To-morrow night I will know if the burden I have carried so long is gone," he went on. "If not, I shall never return and—"

She swayed. He caught her, held her fast in his arms and kissed her. Then, as if struck by a lash, he started from her and cried:

"What have I done? Forgive me, Barbara—if it is forgivable."

In a moment he was hurrying through the dim moonlight. She stood tensely gripping her hands and staring. Had she been kissed by a thief? Had he, among his crimes, not scrupled to rob her of her peace?

The night dragged. During the periods of belief in him his kiss rested upon her lips like a blessing; in the blackness of doubt it had the sting of degradation. She hurried from the house in the morning before Mrs. Dace appeared. In the tumult of emotion a substantial support like her regular duties was necessary. Besides, the long day must be passed until evening should bring him again or his failure to come would tell her that her romance had come and ended.

Soon after the doors were opened a woman hurried in. She was much excited, and said:

"Have you heard the news, Barbara? The whole village is upset, but, thank goodness, we can sleep peacefully now. James Caruthers, the grain commission man, caught the burglar in his house last night about two o'clock. The robber shot at him, but missed, and Mr. Caruthers shot and killed the scoundrel."

"Killed him?" Barbara repeated, her own voice sounding far away. The earth seemed to lurch, then stand horribly still. The numbness gripped her again, but more icily. She turned away to record the

number of the book chosen, and when she looked around several other patrons had come and all were discussing the sensation, repeating again and again its most exciting details. From them she learned where "the dead burglar" had been taken. Then, when the patrons left, she asked herself again and again whether he had had a presentiment, when he said he was going away, that he was to take this black journey.

When she closed the library for the noon hour she walked slowly to the place where she might stand in the presence of the dread certainty. Her right to go was clear in her own mind. What would the criticism of the villagers amount to? It could not make the tragedy more terrible. In any case, she must bear the blow alone, for, under the circumstances, no one would truly sympathize.

Within a few minutes she walked from the undertaker's place. The earth was reeling as if it would never again be still. The face she had seen was his. Upon its changeless expression was the whimsical, adorable smile. Who could have believed that it had masked the instincts of a criminal?

The evening hours slipped toward the closing time. It seemed to Barbara that some one, far distant, was suffering agony—some one with whom she ought to sympathize but could not. Something held her fast, as if time and circumstances were in a blinding swirl, and she was a moveless clod that could not feel or suffer.

With the doors still open, a few minutes before nine, she left the counter to prepare for going out. She intended to walk along one of the ways they had blissfully taken together. She could not go home and endure any motherly kindness from Mr. Dace. She needed silence, a vast solitude, to think it all out alone.

A step sounded from the tile. She stood motionless. Another step—startling in its familiarity. Staggering from the corner, she looked. For an instant the chill of the supernatural clutched her, but in a moment she knew. It was Alfred, in the flesh, but haggard, broken as she had never seen him. The slight caught the swift rise of her emotions from the depths into a great joy and held her fast over an abyss of blank perplexity. Then she crept forward to the counter as he tottered to it.

"Barbara," he said, hoarsely. "I told you I would not come back if I found I must go on carrying my burden. My hope of last night is dead. I must never let it deceive me again. But I could not stay away from you. I needed you—your gift of comfort. And you have the right to know what my burden is."

He stopped, his lips quivering, and she said:

"Let us go out, Alfred, under the stars, and you can tell me there."

"No," he said, "I want to tell you here where I first met you. I must not ask you to accept me as a companion until you know all. Listen! The man who has been robbing the houses here all Summer—I have followed him all over the world, pleading, pleading with him to stop his crimes."

He paused as if recalling the painful incidents of the strange association. Barbara waited, her eyes upon the distressed face.

"He laughed at me until yesterday afternoon," he went on at last. "Then he promised that he would meet me in New York this morning and we would arrange for him to go to some obscure place far away and take up some worthy occupation. That promise thrilled me with happiness last night. I believed that I was at last to be free. But, Barbara, he did not come—he did not come."

"Alfred," she said, "I—"

"Please," he stopped her, "until you have heard everything. What I have suffered is not only a burden—it is the fearful possibility of a great sorrow, a disgrace, that I ought not to ask you to share. The burglar is my brother, Barbara—my twin brother."

A sob shook him and he bent over the counter, broken in spirit, extending his hand in farewell. She caught it convulsively between both of hers and said:

"Then you do not know, Alfred?"

"Know?" he repeated, looking up at her dazedly.

"That all you have told me cannot make any difference between us," she said. "Your burden is gone, but you must be strong to hear how it has been taken away. Come, we will take our pleasantest path and I will tell you."

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