THE HOUSE IN THE MAGNOLIAS

AUGUST DERLETH AND MARK SCHORER

AUGUST (WILLIAM) DERLETH (1909–1971) was born in Sauk City, Wisconsin, where he remained his entire life. He received an M.A. from the University of Wisconsin in 1930, by which time he had already begun to sell horror stories to *Weird Tales* (the first appearing in 1926) and other pulp magazines. During his lifetime, he wrote more than three thousand stories and articles, and published more than a hundred books, including detective stories (featuring Judge Peck and an American Sherlock Holmes clone, Solar Pons), supernatural stories, and what he regarded as his serious fiction: a very lengthy series of books, stories, poems, journals, etc., about life in his small town, which he renamed Sac Prairie.

Derleth's boyhood friend and frequent collaborator, Mark Schorer (1908–1977), was born in the same town and attended the same university. He published his first novel, *A House Too Old* (1935), about Wisconsin life, while still a graduate student. He went on to a distinguished career as a scholar, critic, writer, and educator, holding positions at Dartmouth, Harvard, and the University of California (Berkeley). He won three Guggenheim scholarships and a Fulbright professorship to the University of Pisa. In addition to writing for the pulps, he sold many short stories to such magazines as *The New Yorker, Esquire,* and *The Atlantic Monthly,* but his most important work was his biography, *Sinclair Lewis: An American Life* (1961). He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

"The House in the Magnolias" was first published in the June 1932 edition of *Strange Tales;* it was first collected in *Colonel Markesan and Less Pleasant People* by August Derleth and Mark Schorer (Sauk City, Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1966).

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THE HOUSE IN THE MAGNOLIAS

IF YOU HAD seen the magnolias, you would understand without further explanation from me why I went back to the house. My friends in New Orleans realized that it was just such a place as an artist like myself would light upon for his subject. Their objections to my going there were not based on notions that the house and its surroundings were not fit subjects for really excellent landscape paintings. No, they agreed with me there. Where they disagreed . . . But I had better fill in the background for you before I get too far ahead in my story.

I had been in New Orleans a month, and still had found no subject in that old city that really satisfied me. But, motoring one day out into the country with Sherman Jordan, a young poet with whom I was living during my stay in the city, we found ourselves about four miles out of New Orleans, driving along a little-used road over which the willows leaned low. The road broadened unexpectedly, and the willows gave way to a row of sycamores, and then, in the evening dusk, I saw the house in the magnolias for the first time.

It was not far from the road, and yet not too close. A great veranda with tall pillars stretched its length in front. The house itself was of white wood, built in the typical rambling Southern plantation style. Vines covered great portions of its sides, and the whole building was literally buried in magnolias—magnolias such as I have never seen before, in every shade and hue. They were fully opened, and even from the road I could see the heavy waxen artificiality of those nearest.

"There's my picture!" I exclaimed eagerly. "Stop the car, old man."

But Sherman Jordan showed no inclination to stop. He glanced quickly at his watch and said by way of explanation: "It's almost six; we've got to get back for our dinner engagement." He drove on without a second glance at the house.

I was disappointed. "It would have taken only a minute," I reproached him.

I must have looked glum, for just as we were driving into New Orleans, he turned and said: "I'm sorry; I didn't think it was so important." I felt suddenly, inexplicably, that he was not sorry, that he had gone past the house deliberately.

I said: "Oh, it doesn't make any difference. I can come out tomorrow."

He was silent for a moment. Then he said:

"Do you really think it would be such a good picture?"

"I do," I said, and at the same instant I thought that he didn't want me to paint that house. "Will you drive me out tomorrow morning?" I added.

"I can't," he said shortly. "I've promised Stan Leslie I'd go boating with him. But you can have the car, if you really insist on painting that house."

I said nothing.

As we left the car he turned and said almost sharply: "Still, I think you might find better subjects if you tried."

A cutting reply about my wasted month in New Orleans was on the tip of my tongue, but I held it back. I could not understand my friend's utter lack of enthusiasm. I could not chalk it up to an inartistic eye, for I knew Sherman Jordan could be depended on for good taste. As I went upstairs to dress, there remained in my mind the picture of that lovely old house, surrounded by rich magnolias, marked off by the swaying sycamore trees.

My eagerness had not abated when I stepped from Jordan's car next morning, opened the gate, and went up the path under the sycamores to the house in the magnolias. As I mounted the steps, walked across the veranda, and lifted the knocker on the closed door, I thought of painting a close-up of magnolias. I was turning this idea over in my mind when the door opened suddenly, noiselessly. And old woman stood there, apparently a Negress, dressed plainly in starched white. Her face held me. It was peculiarly ashy—really gray—unhealthy. I thought: "The woman is ill." Her eyes stared at me; they were like deep black pools, bottomless, inscrutable, and yet at the same time oddly dull. I felt momentarily uncomfortable.

"Is the master in?" I asked.

The woman did not answer, though she continued to stare at me. For a moment I thought that perhaps she was deaf. I spoke loudly, and very distinctly, repeating: "Is your master in? May I see your master?"

A faint shadow fell across the floor of the hall behind the servant, and in an instant, a second woman appeared. "What is it?" she asked sharply, in a deep, velvety voice. The woman was so astonishingly attractive that for a moment I could not speak for admiration. She was almost as tall as I was, and very shapely. Her hair was black and drawn back loosely from her face. Her complexion was swarthy, almost olive, with a high color in cheeks and lips. In her ears were golden rings. Her eyes, which were black, shone from dark surrounding shadows. She wore a purple dress that fell almost to the floor. Her face as she looked at me was imperious; behind her dark eyes were smoldering fires.

She waved the servant aside and turned to me, repeating her question: "What is it, please?"

With my eyes on her face, I said: "I am John Stuard. I paint. Yesterday, driving past your place here, I was so attracted by the house that I felt I must come and ask your permission to use it as a subject for a landscape."

"Will you come in?" she asked, less sharply.

She stepped to one side. I muttered my thanks and went past her into the hall. Behind me I could feel the woman's alert eyes boring into me. I turned, and she gestured for me to precede her into the drawing room leading off the hall. I went ahead. In the drawing room we sat down.

"You are from New Orleans?" she asked. She leaned a little forward, her somber eyes taking in my face. She was sitting in shadow, and I directly in the light from the half-opened window.

"No," I replied. "I live in Chicago. I am only visiting in New Orleans." She looked at me a moment before replying. "Perhaps it can be arranged for you to paint the house. It will not take long? How many days, please?"

"A week, perhaps ten days. It is quite difficult."

She appeared suddenly annoyed. She was just about to say something when some distant sound caught her ear, and she jerked her head up, looking intently into a corner of the ceiling,

as if listening. I heard nothing. Presently she turned again. "I thought it might be for only a day or two," she said, biting her lower lip.

I began to explain when I heard the old servant shuffle toward the door that led out to the veranda. The woman before me looked up quickly. Then she called out in a low persuasive voice: "Go back to the kitchen, Matilda."

Looking through the open drawing room doors, I saw the servant stop in her tracks, turn automatically, and shuffle past the door down the hall, walking listlessly, stiffly.

"Is the woman ill?" I asked solicitously.

"*Non, non,*" she said quickly. Then she said abruptly: "You do not know my name; I am Rosamunda Marsina."

Belatedly, I said: "I am glad to know you. You live here alone?"

There was a pause before she answered me. "The servant," she said, smiling lightly. She looked a little troubled. I felt that I should not have asked.

To cover my embarrassment, I said: "You have a nice plantation."

She shook her head quickly. "It is not mine. It belongs to Miss Abby, my aunt Abby. She is a Haitian."

"Oh, I see," I said, smiling; "She lives in Haiti?"

"No, she does not live in Haiti. She did live there. She came from there some years ago."

I nodded, but I did not quite understand. Looking about me, I could see that everything was scrupulously clean and well taken care of, and this was certainly a large house for a single servant to keep so well. I had seen from a glance at Miss Marsina's hands that she had no share in the labors of the household.

Miss Marsina bent forward again. "Tell me, say, I give you permission to paint the house—you would stay—in the city?"

My eyes dropped confusedly before hers, and at her question my face fell, for my disappointment was evident to her. I had hoped she would ask me to live in the house for the time that I painted it. Once more I started an explanation to Rosamunda Marsina, suggesting that I might find some place in the neighborhood where I could get a room for the time, but throughout my explanation, I openly, shamelessly hinted at an invitation from her to stay here.

My speech seemed to have its effect. "Perhaps I could give you a room for that time," she said reluctantly.

I accepted her invitation at once. She fidgeted a little nervously, and asked: "When do you wish to begin painting?"

"I should like to start sketching tomorrow. The painting I shall have to do mostly late in the afternoon. I want to get the half-light in which I first saw the house—"

She interrupted me abruptly. "There will be some conditions to staying here—a request I must make of you, perhaps two." I nodded. "I am not a very sociable creature," she went on. "I do not like many people about. I must ask you not to bring any friends out with you, even for short visits. And I would rather, too, that you didn't mention your work out here unless necessary—it might reach the ears of Aunt Abby; perhaps she would not like it."

I saw nothing strange in her request, nothing strange in this mysteriously beautiful woman. "I shouldn't think of bringing anyone, Miss Marsina," I said. "I feel I am presuming as it is."

She stopped me with a quick, abrupt "*Non,*" and a slightly upraised hand. Then she smiled. "I shall expect you tomorrow then."

Both of us got up and walked to the door. I said, "Good-by," almost automatically. Then I started walking down the path, away from the house, feeling Rosamunda Marsina's eyes on me. Suddenly I heard running footsteps, light footsteps, and turned to meet Miss Marsina.

"One thing more, Mr. Stuard," she said hurriedly, talking in a low voice as if afraid of being overheard. "Tomorrow—is it necessary for you to bring your car? Cars disturb me." She looked pathetically at me.

"I shall not bring the car," I said.

She nodded, quickly, shortly, and ran back into the house without pausing. Looking back

from the road, I saw her standing at the open window of the drawing room, watching me.

I found Rosamunda Marsina waiting for me next morning. She seemed a little agitated; I wondered whether anything had gone wrong.

"Shall I bring in the equipment and my easel?" I asked.

"Matilda can bring it to your room," she said. "Come with me. I am going to put you on the ground floor."

She turned and led the way into the house and down the hall. Opening a door not far beyond the drawing room she stretched out her arm and indicated the charming old chamber which I was to occupy, a room with great heavy mahogany bureau and four-poster, with a desk, and windows opening directly on the garden at the side of the house.

"It's lovely," I murmured.

She looked at me with her dark eyes, not as sharp today as they had been the day before. They were limpid and soft, tender, I thought. Then abruptly I caught a flash of something I was not meant to see; it was present only for a moment, and her eyes veiled it again—unmistakable fear!

She could not have known that I had seen, for she said: "You must not venture off the grounds, and not behind the house. And you will not go to any of the other floors?"

I said: "No, certainly not."

Matilda shuffled into the room, and without a word or a glance at us, put the equipment down near the bed. She departed with the same dragging footsteps.

"A curious woman," I said.

Rosamunda Marsina laughed a little uncertainly. "Yes; she is very old. She came here with my aunt."

"Oh," I said. "Your aunt is *here,* then?"

She looked at me, shot a quick startled glance at me. "Didn't I tell you?" she asked. "I thought I told you yesterday—yes, she is here. That is why I have made so many requests of you; it is because I don't want her to know you are here." Her voice betrayed her agitation, though her face remained immobile.

"She can hardly help seeing me some time, I'm afraid."

"*Non, non*—not if you do as I say." Once again fear crept into her eyes. She spoke quickly in a low voice. "She is a near-invalid. She has a club foot, and never leaves the back rooms of the second floor because it is so difficult for her to move." Rosamunda Marsina's hand was trembling. I took it in my own.

"If she would object to my being here, perhaps I had better go to one of your neighbors," I volunteered.

She closed her eyes for a moment; then flashed them open and looked at me calmly, saying impetuously: "I want you to stay. My aunt must not matter—even though she does. You must stay now; I want you to stay. She is not really my aunt, I don't think. She brought me from Haiti when I was just a little girl. I cannot remember anything. She is much darker than I am; she is not a Creole."

Again I had an uncomfortable feeling that something was wrong in the house, and for a moment I had the impression that Rosamunda Marsina was begging me to stay. "Thank you," I said; "I'll stay."

She smiled at me with her lovely dark lips and left the room, closing the door softly behind her.

That night the first strange thing happened. Rosamunda Marsina's suggestive attitude, the vague fear that haunted her eyes, the sudden inexplicable agitation of her voice—these things had prepared me. Perhaps if I had gone to sleep at once, I would have known nothing. As I lay there, half asleep, I heard a distinct sound of someone walking on the floor above me, in some room farther back than my own. I thought of Miss Marsina's aunt Abby at once, but recollected that the woman was a cripple and a near-invalid, and would not be likely to be up and about, especially not at this hour. Yet the footsteps were slow and dragging, and were accompanied by the sound of a cane tapping slowly at regular intervals against the floor. I sat up in bed to listen. Listening, I could tell that

it was only one foot that dragged. Abruptly, the footsteps stopped. Miss Abby had gotten out of her bed somehow, and had walked perhaps to the wall of the room from the bed. I heard guttural sounds suddenly, and then the dragging footsteps retreating. The woman talking to herself, I thought.

Then, above the dragging footsteps, I heard a disturbing shuffling which seemed to come from somewhere below, followed by sounds as of doors closing somewhere. In a moment, all was quiet again; but only for a moment—for suddenly there came a thin, reed-like wail of terror, followed at once by a shrill scream. I sat up abruptly. A window went up with a bang, and a harsh, guttural voice sounded from above. The voice from above had a magic effect, for silence, broken only by the sudden shuffling of feet, fell immediately.

I had got out of bed, and made my way to the door leading into the hall. I had seen on my first visit that the house lacked artificial light, and had brought an electric candle along. This I took up as I went toward the door. I had it in my hand as I opened the door. The first thing its light found was the white face of Rosamunda Marsina.

"Someone called . . . I thought," I stammered.

She was agitated; even the comparatively dim illumination from the electric candle revealed her emotion. "*Non, non*—there was nothing," she said quickly. "You are mistaken, Mr. Stuard." Then, noticing the amazement which must have shown on my face, she added, uncertainly: "Perhaps the servants called out—but it is nothing; nothing is wrong."

As she said this, she gestured with her hands. She was wearing a long black gown with wide sleeves. As she raised her hands, the sleeves fell back along her arms. I think I must have started at what I saw there—at any rate, Rosamunda Marsina dropped her arms at once, shot a sharp glance at me through half-closed eyes, and walked swiftly away, saying, "Good night, Mr. Stuard." For on the white of her arms, I saw the distinct impressions of two large hands—hands which must have grasped her most cruelly, and only a short while before. Then, so suddenly as to leave me gasping, it came to me that Rosamunda Marsina had been waiting for me in the hall, waiting to see what I would do—and, I felt sure, sending me back into my room against her will!

I slept comparatively little that night.

In the morning I wanted to say something to my hostess, but I had hardly come from my room before she herself spoke. She came to me at the breakfast table, and said: "You must have had a powerful dream last night, Mr. Stuard. There was nothing wrong as you thought—nor did the servants call out!"

At once I understood that she was not talking for me. Her face was white and strained, her voice unnaturally loud. As quickly, I answered in an equal raised voice. "I'm sorry. I should have warned you that I am often troubled by bad dreams."

Miss Marsina lost her tensity at once. She shot me a grateful glance, and left the room immediately. But I sat in silence, waiting for a sound I felt must come. I had not long to wait—a few moments passed—then, from upstairs, came the soft sound of a door closing. Someone had been listening, waiting to hear what Rosamunda Marsina would say to me, what I would answer!

From that moment I knew that I would get no more painting done until I knew what mystery surrounded the house and Miss Marsina.

I sketched my landscape that morning, and my hostess stood watching me. I liked her lovely dark face peering over my shoulder as I worked, but both of us were a little uneasy, and I could not do my best work. There was about her an air of restraint which interposed itself mysteriously the moment she tried to enjoy herself. She seemed a little frightened, too, and more than once I caught her eyes straying furtively to the second-floor windows.

The second night in the house was a hot, sultry night; a storm was brooding low on the

horizon when I went to bed, but it must have passed over, for when I woke up somewhere between one and two in the morning, the moon was shining. I could not rest, and got out of bed. For a few moments I stood at the window, drinking in the sweet smell of the magnolias. Then, acting on a sudden impulse, I bent and crawled through the open window. I dropped to the ground silently and began to walk toward the rear of the house unconsciously, forgetting my promise to Miss Marsina. I remembered it suddenly, and stopped. Then I heard a slight sound above me. I stepped quickly into the shadow of a bush, just at the corner of the house, where I could see both the side and rear of the house.

Then I looked up. There at the window of the corner room I saw a bloodless face pressed against the glass; it was a dark, ugly face, and the moonlight struck it full.

It was withdrawn as I looked, but not before I had got an impression of malefic power. Could it have been the face of Aunt Abby? According to what Rosamunda Marsina had said, that would be her room. And what was she looking at? Over the bushes behind the house, beyond the trees—it would be something in the fields. I turned. Should I risk trying to see, risk her spotting me as I went along the lane?

Keeping to the shadows, I moved along under the low-hanging trees, looking toward the fields. Then suddenly I saw what Miss Abby must have seen. There were men in the fields, a number of them. I pressed myself against the trunk of a giant sycamore and watched them. They were Negroes, and they were working in the fields. Moreover, they were probably under orders, Miss Abby's orders. I understood abruptly that her watching them was to see that they did their work. But Negroes that worked at night!

Back in my room once more, I was still more thoroughly mystified. Did they work every night? It was true that I had seen no workers anywhere on the plantation during the day just passed, but then, I had not left the front of the house, and from there little of the plantation could be seen. I thought that next day surely I would mention this to Rosamunda Marsina, and the incidents of the night before, too.

Then I thought of something else. All the while that I had stood watching the Negroes, no word had passed among them. That was surely the height of the unusual.

But on the second day, I found that I had to go into New Orleans for some painting materials I had not supposed I would need, and for some clothes, also, and thus lost the opportunity to speak to Rosamunda Marsina before evening.

In the city, I went immediately to Sherman Jordan's apartment. Despite the fact that I had promised Rosamunda Marsina that I would say as little about my stay with her as possible, I told my friend of my whereabouts.

"I knew pretty well you were out there," he said. His voice was not particularly cordial. I said nothing. "I daresay you are completely entranced by the beautiful Creole who lives there?"

"How did you know?" I asked.

He shrugged his shoulders, giving me a queer look. "There are stories about," he said.

"About Miss Marsina?" I felt suddenly angry.

"Not especially. Just stories about that place. Nothing definite. If you haven't noticed anything, perhaps it's just idle gossip." But Jordan's attitude showed that he did not believe the stories about the house in the magnolias to be just "idle gossip."

And I *had* noticed something, but instantly I resolved to say nothing to Jordan. "What stories?" I asked.

He did not appear to have heard my question. "They're from Haiti, aren't they?"

I nodded. "Yes. The old woman is a Haitian. The girl is not." Was he getting at something?

"Haiti—a strange, fascinating place." He stood looking out of the window. He turned suddenly. "I'd like to beg you to drop that work out there, John, but I know it wouldn't be of much use asking that, now you've started. There's something not right about that place, because strange stories don't grow out of thin air."

"If there's anything wrong out there, I'm going to find out."

He shrugged his shoulders. His smile was not convincing. "Of course," he said. Then: "You know, there's an old proverb in Creole patois—'*Quand to mange avec diab' tenin to cuillere longue.*'"

"I don't understand Creole patois," I said, somewhat irritated.

"Literally, it is: 'When you sup with the devil, be sure you have a long spoon.'"

"I don't follow you," I said.

He smiled again. "Oh, it's just another warning."

I had no desire to listen longer to anything so indefinite and vague; so I changed the subject. I don't think anything he could have told me would have influenced me; I would have gone back to that house and Rosamunda Marsina no matter what was lurking there. But I expected nothing so strange, so horrible, as that which I did discover.

I returned to the house that evening, and again put off saying anything to Rosamunda. But she herself afforded me an unlooked for opening before I went to bed that night. She had come down from upstairs, and I could see at once that there was something she wanted to tell me.

"I think it's only fair to tell you," she said, "that your door will be locked tonight, after you have gone to bed."

"Why?" I asked, trying not to betray my astonishment.

"It is because it is not desirable that you walk around at night."

This hurt me a little, suggesting as it did that perhaps I might make use of the darkness to spy out the house. I said: "Rosamunda, there are stories about this house, aren't there?"

I was sorry at once, for she looked suddenly very frightened. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I have heard things in New Orleans," I said slowly.

She mastered herself a little, asking: "What?"

"Oh, nothing definite," I replied. "Some people think that there is something wrong out here."

"Something wrong? What?"

"I don't know."

"Have you seen anything wrong?"

"No . . ." I hesitated, and she caught my dubious tone.

"Do you suspect anything?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

She looked at me a little coldly. Already I was beginning to repent my having spoken to her about the house. Also, she had suspected at once that I had broken my promise to her and had talked about the house. I had not foreseen that, and cursed myself for a fool. I had succeeded only in creating an atmosphere of tension.

That night I was awakened by a sharp cry of terror, which was cut off abruptly even before I was fully awake. I was out of bed instantly, standing in the middle of the room, listening. Once I fancied I heard the sound of Rosamunda's voice, a low, earnest sound, as if she were pleading with someone. Then, silence. How long I waited, I do not know. At last I took up my electric candle and made for the door. Then I remembered that it would be locked—as Rosamunda had told me. Yet I reached out and turned the knob, and the door was not locked!

I looked cautiously out into the hall. But I had time to see only one thing: a bloodless face, convulsed with hatred, staring into mine—the same face I had seen against the window of the second floor—and above it, a heavy cane upraised. Then the cane descended, catching me a glancing blow on the side of the head. I went down like a log.

How long I lay there I do not know; it could not have been long, for it was still dark when I came to—and found Rosamunda's frightened eyes watching my face anxiously, felt her delicate fingers on my forehead. I struggled to sit up, but she held me quiet.

"Be still," she murmured. Then she asked quickly: "You are not badly hurt?"

"No," I whispered. "It was just enough to put me out."

"Oh, it was my fault. If I had locked the door it would not have happened."

"Nonsense," I said quickly. "If I hadn't been so curious . . . if I hadn't heard your voice . . ."

"I am glad you thought of me, John." It was the first time she had used my Christian name, and I felt more pleasure than I cared to admit. But before I could express my sentiment, she said swiftly: "In the morning you must go."

"What? Go away—and not come back?"

She nodded. "If you do not go away, both of us will suffer. I should not have let you come, let you stay."

Boldly I said: "I'm not going until I can take you with me."

She looked closely at me; then bent quickly and kissed me. For a moment I held her in my arms; then she pushed me gently away. "Listen," she said. "In the morning you must go with your baggage. Go anywhere—back to New Orleans. But at sundown, come back to me. You must not be seen by Aunt Abby. I will wait for you in the magnolias just below the veranda."

I stood up, steadying myself against the doorframe. "I'll come back, Rosamunda," I said.

She nodded and fled down the hall. I went back into my room and packed my things.

In the morning I departed ostentatiously, making it certain that the older woman, Abby, had seen me go. But in the evening I was back. I never left the vicinity, and was within sight of the house all day. How could I leave there—when Rosamunda might be in danger? I approached the house that evening effectively screened by low trees and the magnolias.

Rosamunda was standing before the veranda, almost hidden in the bushes. She was agitated, standing there twisting her handkerchief in her hands. She ran forward a little as I came up. "Now I must tell you," she breathed. "I must tell someone—you. You must help me." She was obviously distraught.

I said: "I'll do anything I can for you, Rosamunda."

She began to talk now, rapidly. "We came from Haiti, John. That is a strange island, an island of weird, curious things. Sometimes it is called the magic island. And it is. Do you believe in magic things?"

I did have a knowledge of magic beliefs, some old legends I had picked up in the Indian country, and quite a collection of tales I had heard from levee Negroes. I nodded, saying: "I know very little of it, but I think it can be."

"You have never been to Haiti?"

"No," I replied.

She paused, turned and looked a little fearfully at the house; then spoke again. "There are many strange beliefs in Haiti," she said, talking slowly, yet betraying an eagerness to finish. Then she looked deep into my eyes and asked: "Do you know what a zombi is?"

I had heard weird half-hinted stories of animated cadavers seen in Haiti, whispered tales of age-old Negro magic used to raise the dead of the black island. Vaguely, I knew what she meant. Yet I said: "No."

"It is a dead man," she went on hurriedly, "a dead man who has been brought out of his grave and made to live again and to work!"

"But such a thing cannot be," I protested, suddenly horrified at an idea that began to form in my mind, a terrible suggestion which I sought to banish quickly. It would not go. I listened for Rosamunda's hushed and tense voice.

"Believe me, John Stuard—they do exist!"

"No, no," I said.

She stopped me abruptly. "You are making it hard for me."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I will believe you." But inwardly I protested; surely such a thing could not be! Yet I could not banish from my mind the memory of strangely silent figures working the fields at night.

Rosamunda spoke swiftly, her words coming in an agonized rush. "That woman—Abby—she knew how to raise these people from their graves. When we came to New Orleans, we came alone. Just the two of us. She was in a hurry to get out of Haiti; I now think she was wanted in Port au Prince. I do not know. I was only a little girl, but I can remember these things. Every

year they come more and more distinctly to me. Soon after we were here, the slaves came."

I cut in: "What slaves?"

"They are in the cellars—many of them. All Negroes. We keep them in the cellars all day; only at night Abby sends them out to work. I have been so afraid you might find them, for you heard them screaming—and you might have seen them in the fields at night."

"But surely you don't mean—you can't mean . . ."

"I do. *They are dead!*"

"But, Rosamunda . . . !"

"Please, let me tell you what I know." I nodded, and she went on. "I was quite old when Matilda came. She was the last of them. All along up to her, the slaves came, one after the other. I never saw them come. One day they were just here; that is all. But many nights Abby was gone—and soon after, slaves would come. Abby always took care of them herself, making sweet bread and water for them. They ate nothing more. After Matilda came, something happened. Aunt Abby hurt herself, and couldn't leave the house. She wouldn't have a doctor, and since then she could leave her room only with great difficulty. She had a speaking tube put into her rooms; it ran down into the cellars, so that she could direct the men—those poor dead men—into the fields. They were taught to come back as soon as light showed in the eastern sky. Only Abby could direct them, but I could tell Matilda what to do. Over Matilda Abby had no power—it often happens that way.

"After she came, there were no more slaves. I was quite grown then, and I came on a newspaper one day that told of a series of grave robbings that had been climaxed by the recent snatching of the body of a colored woman, Matilda Martin. That was right after Matilda came. Since then, I have known. At first it was horrible for me to live here, but there was no place for me to go. I have been living with these dead men and Abby, John, and I cannot go on—and I cannot leave these poor dead ones behind me. I want to go away with you, but they must be sent back to the graves from which she took them."

Looking at her frightened yet determined face, I knew that she would go away with me. I did not want the house, nor the magnolias; I wanted Rosamunda Marsina. "There is a way, then, to send them back?" I asked, still only half believing her shocking story.

She nodded eagerly. "They must be given salt—any food with salt—and they will know they are dead, and will find their way back to their graves."

"And Miss Abby?" I said.

She looked at me. "She is too strong; we can do nothing if she knows."

"What shall we do?" I asked.

Rosamunda's eyes went suddenly cold. She said: "Matilda can be directed to Abby. Only I can direct her. Matilda hates Abby as I do. Abby is a fiend—she has robbed these dead of their peace. If I go from here, she must not be able to follow—else she will hound us until we are dead, and after that . . . I don't want to think what might happen then."

An idea came to me, and at first I wanted to brush it aside. But it was persistent—and it *was* a way out. "Rosamunda," I said, "send Matilda up to Abby."

Rosamunda looked at me. She nodded. "I was thinking that way," she said. "But it must be before she has the salt, because once she has tasted salt there is nothing left for her but to find her grave."

Then she shot a frightened glance at the windows of the second floor. She clutched my arm. "Quick," she murmured. "They will be coming from the cellars soon. We must be ready for them. They never refuse food, never. I have made some little pistachio candies, with salt. We must give the candies to them."

She led the way, almost running into the house. I came silently after her. Below me I could hear the shuffling of many feet, and above, the dragging footsteps of Miss Abby, moving away from her speaking tube. Rosamunda snatched

up the little plate of candy and preceded me to the back door.

Then suddenly the cellar doors opened, and a file of staring men shuffled slowly out, looking neither to right nor to left, seeing us, yet not seeing us. Rosamunda stepped boldly forward, holding out the plate. The foremost of them took a piece of the salted candy, and went on, munching it. Their black faces were expressionless. When the Negroes had all taken of the candy, Rosamunda turned to reenter the house. "Come quickly," she said. "Soon they will know." I hesitated, and saw—and my doubts were swept away, leaving my mind in chaos.

The little group had stopped abruptly, huddled together. Then, one by one, they began to wail terribly into the night, and even as I watched, they began to move off, hurriedly now, running across the fields toward their distant graves, a line of terrible, tragic figures against the sky.

I felt Rosamunda shuddering against me, and slipped my arm gently around her. "Listen!" she said, her voice trembling. Above us I could hear suddenly the angry snarling voice of Miss Abby. At the same time the sound of wood beating wood came to us: Abby was pounding the walls with her cane.

Matilda stood in the kitchen, and Rosamunda went up to her at once, addressing her in a soft, persuasive voice. "Above there is Abby, Matilda. Long ago she took you away from where you were—took you to be her slave. You have not liked her, Matilda, you have hated her. Go up to her now. She is yours. When you come down, there will be candy on the table for you."

Matilda nodded slowly; then she turned and began to shuffle heavily into the hall toward the stairs. Upstairs, silence had fallen.

Both of us ran from the kitchen, snatching up two small carpet-bags which Rosamunda had put into the corridor, and which she pointed out to me as we went. We jumped from the veranda and ran down the path. Behind us rose suddenly into the night the shrill screaming of a woman in deadly terror. It was shut off abruptly, horribly. Rosamunda was shuddering. We turned to run. We had gone only a little way down the deserted road when we heard the nearby sound of a woman wailing. That was Matilda. Rosamunda hesitated, I with her, pressed close in the shadow of an overhanging sycamore. We looked back. A shadowy figure was running across the fields; in the house a lamp was burning low in the kitchen. And yet, was it a lamp? The light suddenly flared up. I turned Rosamunda about before she had time to see what I had seen. Matilda had turned over the lamp. The house was burning.

Rosamunda was whimpering a little, the strain beginning to tell. "We'll have to go away. When they find Abby dead, they'll want me."

I said, "Yes Rosamunda," but I knew we would not have to go away, unless that fire did not burn. We hurried on to New Orleans, and went to Jordan's apartment.

Next day it was discovered that the house in the magnolias had burned to the ground, Miss Abby with it. The Creole woman, Rosamunda Marsina, had spent the night with her fiance in the apartment of Sherman Jordan—so said the papers. Jordan had seen to that. Rosamunda and I were married soon after and went out to rebuild that house.

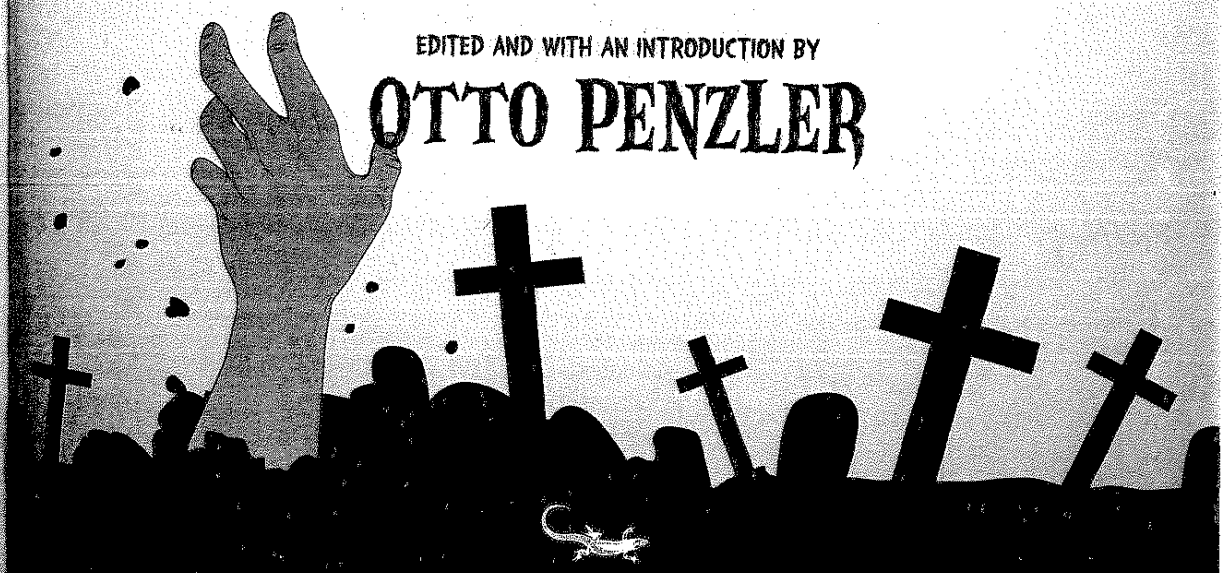
Since then, I have tried often to dismiss the events of that horrible night as a chaotic dream, a thing half imagined, half real. But certain things forbade any such interpretation, no matter how much I longed to believe that both Rosamunda and I had been deceived by too vivid belief in Haitian legends.

There were especially those other things in the papers that day—the day the burning of the house was chronicled—things I kept carefully from Rosamunda's eyes. They were isolated stories of new graveyard outrages—that is what the papers called them, but I know better—*the finding of putrefied remains in half-opened graves of Negroes whose bodies had been stolen long years ago—and the curious detail that the graves had been half dug by bare fingers, as if dead hands were seeking the empty coffins below.*

ZOMBIES! ZOMBIES! ZOMBIES!

EDITED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

OTTO PENZLER



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