

From **“THE STORM”**

By McKnight Malmar

She inserted her key in the lock and turned the knob. There was no light anywhere in the house. Ben was not home, then.

The storm was growing worse. For the first time she regretted this move to the far suburbs. There was no one this side of the crossroads.

Carrying a cup of coffee into the living room and setting it on the small, round table, she felt the house was colder than ever.

She wished for Ben almost feverishly. He was a good husband.

As she straightened, a movement at the window caught her eye.

She froze there, not breathing. The glimmer of white behind the sheeting blur of rain had been – she was sure of it – a human face.

She must have imagined those staring eyes. Nobody could be out on a night like this. Nevertheless, she found the aloneness intolerable.

Perhaps Ben could be reached at the hotel where he sometimes stayed. She went to the telephone and lifted the receiver.

The line was quite dead. The wires were down, of course.

She fought panic.

She would get some wood for a fire in the fireplace, but she hesitated at the top of the cellar stairs. The light, as she switched it on, seemed insufficient. Rain was beating through the outside door to the cellar, because that door was standing open. The inner bolt sometimes did not hold, she knew very well. It took her a long minute to nerve herself to go down the steps and reach out into the darkness for the doorknob.

The wind helped her and slammed the door resoundingly. She jammed the bolt home with all her strength. Suddenly the thought came that turned her bones to water. Suppose the face at the window had been real? Suppose its

owner had found shelter in the only shelter to be had within a quarter mile – this cellar.

But she took herself firmly in hand. She had only to get an armful of wood.

She almost ran to the woodpile. The something made her pause and turn before she bent to gather the logs.

What was it? A spark of light where no spark should be.

An inexplicable dread clutched at her heart. Her old trunk that stood against the wall was open just a crack; from the crack came this tiny pinpoint of reflected light.

She went toward it like a woman hypnotized. It was only one more insignificant thing, the vision of the face at the window, the open door.

She threw back the lid. For a long moment she stood looking down into the trunk.

Slamming down the lid, she ran up the stairs. She shut the door at the top of the stairs with a crash that shook the house, then she turned the key.

Her first impulse was to get out of the house. But in the time it took to get to the front door, she remembered the face at the window. Perhaps she had imagined it. Yet she could not stay here – not with that thing in her trunk.

Her old trunk had held the curled-up body of a woman. One hand had rested near the edge of the trunk, and on its third finger there had been a man's ring, bearing the raised figure of a lion with a small diamond between its paws.

Her craving for Ben became a frantic need. As if to accent her helplessness, the wind stepped up its shriek and a tree crashed thunderously out in the road.

Then the storm held its breath for a moment, and in the brief space of silence she heard footsteps on the walk. A key turned in the lock. The door opened and Ben came in.

She flung herself on him, and he kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She was almost shamefaced when she finally told him of the face at the window, the open door, and the body in the trunk. None of it, she saw quiet clearly now, could possibly have happened.

Ben said so, without hesitation.

“But – you will look in the trunk, Ben? I’ve got to know.”

He went to the cellar door, opened it and snapped on the light. Her heart began to pound once more.

She heard the thud as he threw back the lid of the trunk. She clutched at the back of a chair, waiting for his voice, “There’s nothing here but a couple of bundles. Come take a look.”

Her knees were weak as she went down into the cellar again.

Ben was by the open trunk, waiting for her.

Her eyes looked, almost reluctantly into the trunk. “It’s empty!”

“I – dreamed it all. I must have.” Her voice broke. “I thought – oh, Ben I thought ---“

“What did you think, my dear?” His voice was odd, not like Ben’s at all. She backed away from him.

He moved then. It was only to take his hand from his pockets to stretch his arms toward her; but she stood for an instant staring at the thing that left her with a voiceless scream forming in her throat.

She was never to know whether his arms had been outstretched to take her within their shelter or to clutch at her white neck. For she turned and fled, stumbling up the stairs in a mad panic of escape.

His steps were heavy behind her, but he tripped on the bottom step, falling on one knee, and cursed.

Terror lent her strength and speed. She could not be mistaken. Although she had seen it only once, she knew that on the little finger of his left hand there had been the same, unmistakable ring the dead woman had worn.

The blessed wind snatched the front door from her and flung it wide, and she was out in the safe, dark shelter of the storm.