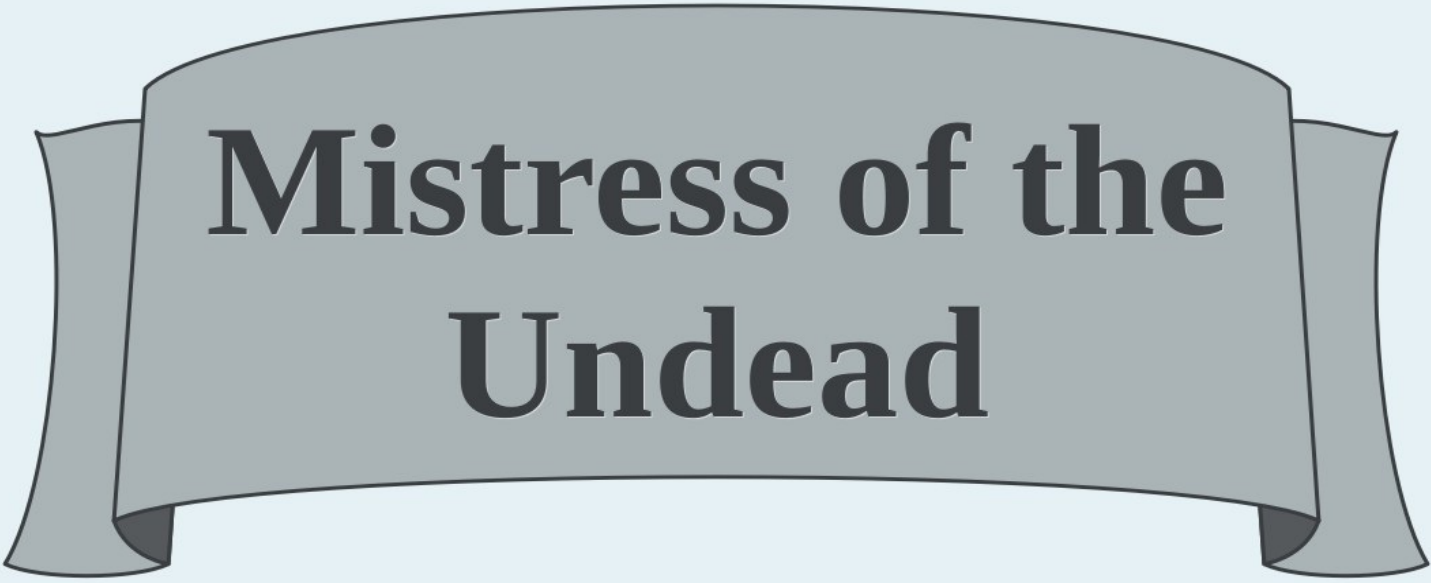




Mistress of the Undead

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Lazar Levi

1940

For thirty minutes she lived. Thirty minutes she suffered while the plane wreckage and dismembered human bodies burned around her. And one year later she told her story!

“DEATH!”

Tim Blake whispered the single word as he gazed in horror at the cuckoo clock on the mantel shelf. Fear contorted his rugged brown face when he turned to John Turner.

“God, man, did you hear that?” he asked.

John Turner had heard nothing except striking of the clock, but he felt strangely queer. An eerie silence followed as vibrations of the cuckoo’s mournful croaks died away slowly.

“What was it?” He managed to get words out of a dry throat.

“Hit struck seven,” Tim replied, in nervous agitation, “and it’s only six o’clock. Death’s a comin’ to this here very house, and it’s only a hour away.” He was trembling and beads of perspiration popped out on his weather-beaten face.

From the next room there came a pitiful moan, hollow and weird. John Turner thought it whining of the cold January wind—Na wind that had caused him to stop and warm at Tim Blake’s shack on the edge of the marsh before plodding on to the lodge, where he and three other duck hunters were quartered for a week’s shoot.

“Hit’s the ole woman!” Tim Blake barely whispered the words. They seemed to lodge, chokingly, in his throat.

“Is she ill?” Turner asked.

“Sick for nigh onto a month,” Tim whispered. “An’ she ain’t got but a hour to live by the clock.” The old man’s face twitched, revealing the inward agony tearing at his gaunt body. He wrung his hands pathetically.

“You don’t believe that clock striking the wrong hour means anything, do you?” Turner asked the backwoodsman.

“Hit ain’t never done it but onct afore in all the fifty years me and Nancy has been married,” Tim Blake moaned. “Hit was the night the Little City airplane crashed and kilt all them people right out thar in the swamp.”

Warning of foreboding danger seemed to Turner to permeate the Blake shack now, as Tim paced the floor. Turner stood up uneasily, ready to make his escape from the room, which had become strangely cold and bleak despite the red hot stove glowing in the semi-darkness.

“Yuh can do it!” Tim swung around and shouted at him. Turner stepped back as the old man took long strides in his direction. Blake caught the lapels of Turner’s coat and shook him violently. “Fetch a doctor from Lake Worth for Nancy,” he shouted, excitedly. “If yuh hurry, yuh can git ‘im back here ‘fore the hour is up, and it won’t be too late. Fer God’s sake, hurry!”

John Turner wanted to refuse. It was a long way to Lake Worth by foot. He had no way to ride. He wore rubber boots and was not accustomed to walking. Most likely he couldn’t get the doctor back in time.

“Yuh can’t go back on me and Nancy,” the old man pleaded, as Turner hesitated. Tears were streaming down Tim Blake’s face. “Death’ll be here in a hour. The clock’s done said so. Hit done it a year ago, come this very night, and thet thar airplane crashed right on the hour, with nary a soul left alive to tell ‘bout it.”

“Sure, I’ll go,” Turner heard himself say, his own voice sounding queer to him.

John Turner and Tim Blake had been good friends ever since Turner started coming to the marsh duck hunting, but there was no reason why he should go stumbling through the bitter cold to get a doctor for Nancy Blake when it was impossible to get the physician back within an hour. He had not wanted to make this promise, but the words slipped off his tongue against his will.

Tim Blake shoved him toward the door and out into the open. It was dark, with low clouds hanging ominously overhead. The wind, cutting like sharp blades of ice, licked at Turner’s hands and face as they reached the gate.

“Hurry, man,” Tim pleaded. “Hit’s ten miles ‘round the marsh, but yuh can make

it.”

“I’ll cut across the swamp and save time,” Turner assured him as he started walking away.

TIM caught him by the arm and jerked him around. His voice was pleading and queer, as he begged.

“You can’t make it that way, son. There ain’t nary a man bin through thar since them airypine passengers was kilt in the swamp.”

“I’m not afraid,” Turner laughed, scornfully, but his voice was shrill and uncontrollable.

“‘Tain’t that,” Tim moaned. “Hit’s the ghosts! They won’t let a body past. Fer God’s sake, go ‘round so’s yuh’ll be sartin to git thar ‘fore too late.”

“All right,” Turner answered, impatiently.

He set out for the rutty road around the edge of the marsh. He lowered his head against the raging wind, and rammed his hands deep in his pockets to keep them warm. It was bitter cold.

At the edge of the marsh it was quieter, and it felt warmer to Turner. Suddenly his feet seemed drawn toward the swamp by some mysterious power. He tried to turn back into the narrow, open roadway, but his lower limbs refused to coordinate with his thoughts.

Once in the swamp, undergrowth seemed to part in front of him as he advanced. He looked down at the soggy ground. His feet made no tracks. Sawgrass was knee-high. None of it swashed against his legs like it usually did when he was working his way toward a blind to shoot ducks.

Above him limbs of trees were so closely knitted they blotted out the sky with an inky blackness. He soon lost all sense of direction, but his feet kept carrying him forward, splitting through the middle of the marsh toward Lake Worth, without any mental effort on his part.

All at once something struck him violently on the head. He felt himself pitch forward on the mushy ground, yet he seemed to be standing still. He drew out

his watch and struck a match. It was 6:30 o'clock. He had only a half-hour to get the doctor back to Nancy Blake—and she was dying at seven o'clock.

Frantically he tried to fling his body forward, but he was without power to move.

There was a roar in the distance. He listened intently. The howling wind started again, singing a mournful dirge through the tall trees in rhythm with the approaching noise.

A glaring beam moved toward him, throwing a narrow shaft of light through the opaqueness above him. On each side of the staring yellow eye he saw green and red pilot lights.

The Little City plane! Sister ship to the one crashing here a year ago, he thought. He'd let it guide him. It would pass directly over Lake Worth. He wasn't lost now. He'd follow its tail light.

He laughed at his sudden relief from fright—but a delirious sound came from his throat, and his own laughter was terrorizing to him. He turned to watch the oncoming plane.

Noise of the whirring motors grew louder and louder. The light was shimmering through the tree tops overhead. Then he wondered why the plane had a headlight. Blind flying was customary.

He stood waiting for the huge liner to pass over, so he could swing along behind it.

Level of the light dropped lower and lower on the bodies of the tall trees, as the plane came closer to him. Noise from the motors merged with the wind into one long, weird moan. Above it he heard the shrill shouting of excited voices—voices of frightened people.

Damn! The ship was dropping low. Too low to clear the swamp trees, unless the pilot nosed it up!

John Turner stood frozen in his tracks, straining like a wild animal at a leash. He couldn't move. He tried to wave a warning to the pilot. His arms hung limp by his sides. Frantically, he began shouting, but roar of the motors and screaming voices of the passengers drowned out his voice until he couldn't hear himself.

Wheels of the plane struck the treetops and shaved them off like straws. The airliner dropped lower. Tree limbs failed to retard its speed. Debris of plane and trees was falling all around Turner.

Lower and lower the ship dropped, battering itself against timber and shattering off wings. The pilot apparently made no effort to raise it. The craft headed toward Turner. All the passengers seemed crowded down front. They stared wild-eyed at him there in the path of the onrushing plane.

Between pilot and co-pilot sat a queer looking little man. They were laughing at John Turner as the wingless plane plummeted toward his head.

They were aiming the damned thing at him! He dropped to the ground and the liner shot over him, barely head high. It was a narrow escape!

THE giant liner hit tree trunks, and bounded from one to the other like a rubber ball. Arms and legs from human bodies hurtled through the air. Headless bodies splashed in swamp waters, turning them blood red.

Scream after scream rent the air, loud and terrifying. Trees finally battered the plane to earth, and all was quiet again. Moans of the dying ceased.

Turner's head ached. He felt of his hair. Blood was matted there. It was cold. The injury had occurred too long ago to have been caused by the plane. Something had struck him before it came crashing through the trees.

Part of the plane wreckage burst into flames, casting an eerie glow over the marshland, and making dancing, fantastic figures out of tree shadows.

John Turner stood up. The plane had cut a clean path through the saplings and undergrowth. Parts of human bodies were scattered along in the narrow opening. Sawgrass was splotched with blood.

He found it possible to move now, but his feet sank ankle deep in the mire. Tree limbs slashed at his face and shrubs tugged at his legs and knees as he ran from one body to another to see if he could detect life in any of them.

They were battered, torn and bleeding. Flesh and brains were scattered over the ground and hanging from stiff blades of swamp grass. A woman, apparently the mother of a child, had her arms twined about its neck, a curly head on her breast.

Rest of the body was gone. John Turner threw his arms across his face to blot out the gruesome picture.

When he opened his eyes again, the victims had regained normal shape, and they appeared to be resting in sleep on the ground.

It was terribly quiet in the marsh now, except for crackling of the burning plane. Turner hurried toward the ship. Perhaps there was someone in it he could save.

A FIERCE heat stopped him. From the flames stepped a young woman. One arm had been severed at the shoulder. Blood had stained the white knitted frock. She glided toward Turner. He was afraid to move.

Her pale face was framed in a halo of blond hair, shimmering in the firelight. Turner would have thought her dead, were it not for the red lips. She saw him staring at her mouth, as she stood close, and answered the question in his eyes.

“Indelible lipstick,” she smiled. “It’s been there for a year. It never seems to come off.”

“AÑa year,” he stammered.

“Yes, I put it on the night of the crash,” she replied. “My perfume has lasted, too.” She seemed pleased with the facts.

“What made the plane come down like that? Didn’t the pilot see the trees?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she sighed. “I’m sure he did it on purpose.”

“On purpose!” he almost shouted.

“It all began late this afternoon,” she said. “Something happened to one of the passengers. I think he must have gone insane suddenly.” She swayed slightly in the breeze, and Turner caught her in his arms. Gently he eased her to the ground beside a tree.

“The hostess humored him every way possible,” she continued. “He decided he wanted to sit between the pilot and co-pilot. It amused him to ride there, just like a toy would delight a child.

“He had become pacified before we reached the last port, or they might have put him off. How lucky that would have been for all of us,” she said, regretfully.

“When we took off again, he went back to his seat between the pilots, where he was perfectly calm.

“The ship had been in the air all day and the pilots were tired. I was tired. Motors of the plane were droning in perfect accord, singing a sort of lullaby. Then this insane man began to talk in a low, soothing voice. I could hear him. He would say, ‘You are tired, very tired. Relax now and rest. Rest comfortably. Don’t be afraid. I will tell you what to do. Trust me. Relax. Rest.’ His voice trailed off into the distance, quiet and intoxicating. His words seemed to rest mind and body.

“Suddenly he said to the pilots, ‘You are resting now. I am in command. Listen to me. Do as I say. You can’t refuse—you can’t refuse.’

“I knew then that he was a hypnotist. I tried to scream out, but I was speechless! I tried to move. My whole body was asleep.

“The plane began to fly in circles. I was afraid we wouldn’t get to Little City on time. At last the little man said to the pilot, ‘Fly straight west. We are all going west!’ I was elated. I thought the fiendish design was complete.

“‘You are up too high!’ the insane man shouted.’ I felt the plane drop instantly several hundred feet, the pilot responding to his every whim. The insane man chuckled gleefully.

“‘Lower,’ he shouted to the pilot. ‘Lower, lower. Faster. Faster, man.’

“Passengers became panicky. They knew something was wrong. They all rushed to the front of the plane, and that made it drop more rapidly.

“‘Faster, faster, faster,’ shouted the insane man, and the pilot sent the plane, like a shooting comet, head on into the trees. It might have been better, had we nosed straight on down, but the ship hit those huge trees, flying parallel to the ground.

“All the time the two pilots and the insane hypnotist were laughing fanatically, like they were hilariously drunk.

“I was the only one out of eighteen not instantly killed. I lived thirty minutes after the crash. No one knows that,” she moaned.

“I couldn’t find anyone when I stumbled out of the wreckage. I’ve looked here in the marsh every night for a year, since the wreck happened. People seem afraid to come through here at night. You are the first one I’ve found. Please, please get me a doctor,” she pleaded, and then fainted in his arms.

HORRIFIED, John Turner tried to revive her. Cupping his hand, he dipped up swamp water and dashed drops on the beautiful face, as pale as death.

Soon her eyes opened. They were a beautiful blue, deep as shadowy pools against the white of her face. She smiled wanly, seemingly refreshed, and pressed her soft body tightly against his. Her warm breath was on his face, as she looked at him and inquired, “What time is it?”

“Six-thirty-five,” he told her, looking at his watch by light of the plane flames.

“Twenty-five more minutes,” she said, pitifully, tears dampening her cheeks.

“ForÑfor what?” he stammered.

“To live,” she sobbed. “I die at seven o’clock, unless you get me a doctor here. I’ve tried every night to find someone to send. I’ve failed so often. I don’t believe I can try again.”

“I’ll get him,” Turner said, determinedly, “but won’t it be better for you to come with me?”

She looked at her shoulder. “I’m too weak from loss of blood,” she answered. “I’ll be all right. Nothing ever bothers me here, with them. But please do hurry! I want to tell just how the accident happened. There have been so many guesses and rumors; none of them right.”

He looked at her, face drawn from pain, but still beautiful. She looked so pathetic. So alone. He bent and kissed the red lips.

“Thank you so much,” she smiled, and clung tightly to him for a moment.

He lifted her in his arms, and gently placed her in a shallow, dry depression that

ran back under the roots of a large tree.

Her fingers grasped his arm as he started to rise. He bent and kissed her again. She closed her eyes, and smiled faintly, as he smoothed the hair back from her brow.

John Turner rose and plunged off frantically toward Lake Worth for the doctor. His feet sank deeply in the swamp grass. Low limbs switched him fiercely in the face. The cold numbed his arms and legs, but he stumbled on.

He was thinking of the injured girl. He had thought very little about girls. Few of them interested him. Strangely, this one did. He wanted her to live!

How did he know he was going in the right direction? It seemed that someone asked him that question. He stopped. The forest was quiet. He was alone there. Then he forgot from what direction he had come. Something was trying to confuse him. He had to hurry. The girl would die at seven o'clock.

He started running, feeling confident that Lake Worth must be in front of him, although he did not actually know in what direction he was moving.

A fallen log tripped him. He fell, sprawling in cold water. It was several seconds before he could get to his feet. Time must be flying. She'd die unless he hurried. He wanted her to live. She was young, and beautiful. She deserved to live.

Suddenly the swamp ended. Lights loomed up in the distance. Lake Worth! He was almost exhausted, but he sped along with every ounce of energy left in his weary body.

He found the doctor at home. It was impossible for him to talk coherently, but he thought he made the doctor understand.

His clothes were torn and caked with mud. His hands and face were bleeding from cuts and scratches. The doctor begged him to come in and rest, but he refused.

He watched the doctor mount his horse and gallop off down the narrow wagon trail, then John Turner ran back toward the swamp, back toward the scene of the crash and the girl.

Turner had no idea where he was going, but his feet seemed to think for him. He plunged into the marsh and ran, stumbling blindly through water and undergrowth.

There was a dim light in front of him. The burning plane! He flung himself in that direction. Remains of the giant liner had been reduced to embers when he reached it. It was growing dark again. He couldn't see the bodies of those strewn on the ground any longer.

He called the girl. There was no answer. The doctor was not there. He could have ridden faster than that.

Turner tried to find the tree where he had left the injured girl. He was afraid she had crawled away and died.

HIS watch pointed to one minute after seven o'clock when he looked at it. She was dead now. There was a sudden glow at the foot of a tree. He ran toward it. There was the shallow crypt where he had laid her. It was empty. From beneath the roots there rose a wraithlike glow through the fog.

He flung himself face downward on the ground and mourned her death, groaning in his agony.

A voice said, "That old piece of the plane's undercarriage must have fallen from the tree and struck him on the head. I saw it hanging up there yesterday and wondered why someone had not climbed up and gotten it."

Turner recognized the speaker as one of his hunting companions.

"He must have been lying here for a half hour," another said. "Lucky how the phosphorous glow from the roots of that old dead tree led us right to him."

"What time is it?" he managed to ask.

"Ten minutes after seven," one of the party answered.

"She must have died, then," he sighed.

"At exactly seven o'clock." It was Tim Blake's voice, low but steady.

“I’m awfully sorry,” Turner said.

“You did your part, son,” the old man replied. “You fetched the doctor, all right. He jist got thar a minute too late.”

A minute too late! She would have been saved, if he hadn’t been a minute too late. And he had tried so hard for her.

Frantically, he tried to remember whether he had sent the doctor to Nancy Blake, or the dying girl. His thoughts were confusing. Then a peaceful sensation fused through his body. He fainted and dropped back to the ground. A voice floated calmly toward him from the direction of the tree, a woman’s voice.

“Thank you, so much,” it said. “Better luck next time, for us both.”