

Short story
1950 words
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OCTOBER CHILL

I know that the cool crisp days of October are welcomed by most people as a delightful relief from the sweltering heat of the summer season, but the month has had a different significance for me during the last few years when I've viewed its approach with a sort of dread and foreboding. However, it wasn't always this way, for I used to look forward to October as the beginning of the most beautiful season of the year. When I was in short pants, I used to associate the month with Hallowe'en, and that made my anticipation even keener. There was something thrilling about Hallowe'en with all its make-believe ghosts and witches and goblins that made it my favorite day next to Christmas. Memories of my childhood remained with me as I outgrew my short pants, and Hallowe'en remained a favorite time until one All Hallow's eve something happened that shattered my smug disbelief of ghosts. So now I regard the coming of October and Hallowe'en with grim and chilled foreboding rather than with the thrilled anticipation of old.

It was in 1938. You probably remember it as the year that Glenna Garber, the beautiful ~~fi~~ screen actress, was killed by her husband in a murder-suicide affair and the year that James Hamilton, the renowned portrait painter suddenly went insane. I mention these names because they have much to do with what I have to relate. You probably didn't realize

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that there was any connection between the two events, but you will by the time I finish my story.

I was in Hamilton's employ at the time he went mad, but to make my story clear, I'll have to go back a few months to the time I started working for him. I was studying at the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles when I heard that Hamilton was looking for someone to work for him; I thought it an excellent opportunity to watch a master artist at work; so I applied for and got the job. I lived at Hamilton's home as a sort of houseboy and studio assistant. Naturally I was thrilled at the opportunity of being so close to such a great figure in the art world, but I soon came to regret it.

Without doubt Hamilton was a great artist, but as a personality he was obnoxious. He did not know the meaning of courtesy and was vain and arrogant. He was slovenly in his habits, and his morals were of the loosest sort. You probably recall the scandal he was involved in when Lady Shipley, the English noblewoman, committed suicide over him. Lady Shipley had heard of Hamilton's fame as a portraitist and had come over to America to have him do her portrait. Now Hamilton was the type to fall in love with every half-way pretty woman who happened to be posing for him, and, although she was in her late thirties, Lady Shipley was strikingly beautiful. I must say that Hamilton had a good deal of charm for women despite his dissolute character, and it wasn't long before Lady Shipley was returning his love. However, soon after when Hamilton had

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finished her portrait and had started work on another painting, he transferred his affections to his new model.

He never did take love seriously and regarded the women he was successful in seducing as sacrifices offered to him by God. Lady Shipley, however, did not take their affair so lightly. She was a widow and when she fell in love with Hamilton had determined to marry him. She pled in vain with the artist, but being unsuccessful took poison and killed herself for unrequited love. Hamilton was mildly annoyed at being involved in a scandal, but Lady Shipley's death meant nothing to him, and he did not give it a second thought.

The following summer he met the glamorous Glenna Garber while vacationing at Lake Arrowhead. She was there with her director-husband, William Stone. You remember William Stone, short, paunchy, bald, and three times as old as Glenna, but as rich as Rockefeller. At the time of Glenna's marriage to him, everybody said that she was after his money. When Glenna met Hamilton, she was naturally thrilled and thought she might like to have her portrait painted. She approached Stone with the idea; he was pleased with the thought of the distinction ^{that} having his wife done in oils would bring him and commissioned Hamilton to do her portrait as soon as the summer season was over.

Glenna Garber came to Hamilton's studio for her first sitting early in September. That started the usual pattern of Hamilton's technique. He plied her with subtle and cautious

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flattery that first day, and I could see that she went home almost completely captivated by his charm. This continued for nearly a week with Hamilton's flattery and glances growing more bold and passionate and Glenna's fascination increasing.

Finally, one evening when Glenna came in and assumed her pose, Hamilton flung his palette down and sharply remarked, "What's the matter with you, Miss Garber? You haven't the life and vitality that you should have. How do you expect me to paint a decent portrait of you when you look like every downtrodden female on Hollywood Boulevard?"

Glenna looked all right to me, and she must have known that she looked all right too, but she just appeared puzzled and crestfallen and said very meekly, "I'm sorry; I'm sure I don't know what's wrong." Had it been her husband who had rebuked her, she would undoubtedly have snapped back at him.

"What you need is someone to really love you," said Hamilton moving toward her. "How can you expect to inspire a painter to make a masterpiece of you unless you yourself are inspired?" His voice had become husky and caressing. Glenna seemed surprised at first, but half-rose expectantly, hypnotized by Hamilton.

Such scenes that Hamilton put on only increased my disgust of him, and knowing that I wouldn't be needed anymore that night, I hurried out to get a beer. I fervently hoped that if I ever became a great artist, I wouldn't turn out to be such an unprincipled degenerate as Hamilton.

After that, Hamilton and Glenna began to be seen everywhere together; it wasn't talked about too much though,

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because people more or less took for granted such behavior on the part of movie actresses and artists.

However, William Stone apparently objected very much to the way his beautiful wife was carrying on. One night in late October when the painting was almost completed, Glenna came rushing into the studio very much perturbed and almost in hysterics. "Oh, Jamie, Bill has threatened me again; this time he said he'd kill me if I didn't stop seeing you."

Hamilton tried to soothe her and, taking her into his arms, said, "Now, don't worry, darling; he wouldn't dare raise his hand against you. Your portrait will be done tomorrow, and then you can go to Mexico and get a divorce; I'll join you there later, and we can get married."

"But he's so stubborn and jealous, Jamie; he insists that he won't give me a divorce."

"Now don't worry; just leave everything to me," Hamilton replied.

The next day was Hallowe'en, and I asked Hamilton if it would be all right for me to take the evening off as I'd been invited to a masquerade party. He said that it would be all right with him, but that he wanted me to stay around until he'd finished Glenna's portrait that evening.

Glenna came up to the studio about 5:00 o'clock; she seemed quite disturbed about something, but didn't say very much. A couple of hours later, Hamilton finally stepped back from the easel and looked at his work. He nodded approvingly and motioned for me to gather up the materials and clean the brushes.

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"Well, Glenna," he said, "it's finished at last, my portrait of the most beautiful woman in the world; don't you want to look at it?"

"No, not tonight," she said very nervously. "No, don't touch me," she added very quickly as he moved toward her.

"Why, what's wrong, darling? Are you ill?" asked Hamilton, puzzled.

"No, just--just tired; I'm tired of it all." She began sobbing. "I'm not going to see you anymore; you made Lady Shipley commit suicide, and now you--."

"What utter nonsense; what has Lady Shipley got to do with all this?" asked Hamilton impatiently. "Surely you're not taking your husband's threats seriously?"

But Glenna just shook her head and ran out the door sobbing. Hamilton stood rooted to the spot for a few minutes completely dazed. Then he said to me, "I'm going after her; wait until I return." I knew that it wouldn't do me any good to argue with him that he'd promised to let me have the night off; so I just nodded.

He came back in a few minutes with the announcement that she was nowhere to be seen. "I'm going down to her house to see that her husband doesn't harm her," he said. "Hurry and get dressed, and I'll drive you downtown after I see her."

I finished cleaning up in a hurry and then got into my costume. Hamilton was impatient, but was too much perturbed over Glenna to make more than a few caustic remarks about my "promptness."

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We got into Hamilton's car and drove over to the palatial Stone home only to find many policemen and plainclothesmen rushing in and out of the door. There seemed to be a good many of them all around the house.

"I wonder what's wrong," said Hamilton anxiously. He brought the car to a stop, jumped out, and hurried up the sidewalk to stop one of the plainclothesmen. "Is something wrong here?" he asked. "Has something happened to Miss Garber?"

"Plenty," was the answer, "old man Stone shot and killed his wife and then killed himself this morning; don't you read the newspapers?"

"This morning!" exclaimed Hamilton, "Why that's impossible."

"Yeah? well the stiff's are still inside and they're plenty cold, brother," said the officer.

Hamilton started to say something else, but changed his mind and came back to the car in a daze. I was in a cold sweat myself, but I saw that he was in worse shape than I was; so I slid behind the wheel and took him home. There wasn't anything I could do for him, and I didn't want to stick around there; so I went out to the masquerade party. When I returned, Hamilton was in the studio, stark raving mad, and kept shouting, "Glenna, you're a ghost! Glenna, you're a ghost!"

The beautiful portrait he had finished that evening was slashed to ribbons. I called his doctor and in the mean-

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time tried to calm the artist down. The doctor came in a short while and called in a psychiatrist who examined Hamilton and then questioned me at great length, finally dismissing me as having too vivid an imagination. He thought that I had been drinking too much as I did have a cocktail at the party, and it was still on my breath. For the records it was decided that Hamilton's mind had snapped from overwork. It was thought that he might recover after a bit, but he is still in the Norwalk asylum.

As for me, Glenna's ghost was quite a shock, but she didn't mean anything to me; so the shock didn't last very long. I did have a rather trying time of it for a few months afterward, but I have come to regard everything that happened as a bad dream. But when the nippy October air comes, I can't help but think back on some of the events that happened that Hallowe'en in 1938.