

# The Lady of the Night Wind

By VARICK VANARDY  
Author of "The Two-Faced Man,"  
"Alias the Night Wind," etc.

### THIS STARTS THE STORY

A week-end house party is being held at Myquest, the country home of Katherine and Bingham Harvard. A card game is indulged in by a group of the more guests, among whom are Tom Clancy, Harry Archer, Danford Damming, Horton Sears and Conrad Belknap. Belknap is discovered cheating at the cards by Katherine. He has come to her home as a newly made friend of the Archers. In the absence of her husband Katherine tells Belknap that he must leave her home at once. He laughs scornfully at her demand and refuses to do so. Katherine is about to tell her husband, upon his arrival at the city, but hesitates. Belknap seems to exert a peculiar influence over her, which makes her all the more determined to ferret out his real identity, as she is convinced of his deception.

### AND HERE IT CONTINUES

#### A Voice on the Wire

IT SO HAPPENED THAT Harry Archer and his wife were standing together at the top of the veranda steps, and that Julius—Katherine's black-voiced servant and trusted ally—had appeared at that moment in the doorway, so she seized upon the double opportunity.

"Julius," she called calmly, and when the black came nearer added: "Mr. Belknap will want you to take him to the 10-30 train."

Then, without a pause in her speech, and with these words, she addressed the Archers: "Such unpleasant news, Belle. Mr. Belknap has just told me that he must leave us tonight. Isn't it too bad?"

There were expressions of surprise from every direction, for the entire company had heard the announcement. Those who were seated bent forward in their chairs as if to utter a word in two or three. Tom Clancy and Danford Demming, who were standing, moved nearer to the group on the steps, and Belknap, at the bottom of them, smiling, unperturbed, shrugged his shoulders and drawled with deliberate distinctiveness:

"Really, I had no idea that I was so popular. You know, I felt rather like an outsider—being such a stranger among you—and probably I put too much emphasis upon the summons that I received to go to the city tonight."

"But—now that both Mr. and Mrs. Harvard have urged me to stay, and—well, I have changed my mind. I won't go. I couldn't think of it under the circumstances," Julius replied in a low voice, as if he were not to be overheard. "Please listen to me, madaam; I—I— I am in terrible trouble. I—I—I— I and she ended by uttering a perfect imitation of a gasping sob.

"But even so, before the woman at the opposite end of the wire could speak, Katherine continued rapidly, and brokenly, as if she were in great mental distress:

"Please tell me how I can call you on the telephone; please, please, please do. I cannot talk now. I dare not. I am likely to be interrupted at any moment. But, oh, I do so need a friend—a man I know!"

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"But even so, before the woman at the opposite end of the wire could speak, Katherine continued rapidly, and brokenly, as if she were in great mental distress:

"Oh, you mustn't ask questions, now. You can't imagine what might happen if I should be caught, and then I would never have another chance to use the phone. Please be kind and help me. I am in a terrible trouble and distress. I am in a terrible trouble and distress. I am in a terrible trouble and distress. I am in a terrible trouble and distress."

There was a hesitating silence at the other end of the wire. Then:

"Very well, Ganesvort, five-four-three-two-oh; but never before at midnight, and you must understand—"

"Oh, somebody is coming!" Katherine interrupted. "Thank you. Oh, you can't know how much good—"

She hung up.

Then, with a deep sigh, which was also accompanied by a convulsive gasp, she leaned back in her chair and wrinkled her brows in thought.

It had been imperatively essential that she should not say too much—not too little—just then; but the point at which she had reached sought to be achieved.

She had succeeded in arresting the woman's attention and in securing her sympathy, without arousing her suspicion—the woman who, all too evidently, was an accomplice of Conrad Belknap in whatever felonious designs he might have upon the house of Harvard. Katherine had made it appear that she was in great distress, that she was deeply in need of a woman's aid and sympathy; and, knowing because of the short conversation she had overheard, that the strange woman would be suspiciously alert by reason of her presence on the wire, she had succeeded in conveying the impression that she had heard nothing.

Also, the woman could have no idea whence Katherine had spoken. She would get the impression of crossed wires, so-called. She might, at the next opportunity, question Belknap about the circumstances covertly, but he, having already hung up the receiver and gone, would have nothing to impart.

Altogether, Katherine felt that the achievement of a point in the battle of wits between herself and Belknap, for already she was convinced that the contest between them had reached that point. Had he not really informed the woman accomplice of his intention to remain at Myquest "through the coming week, at the least?"

Oh, yes, Katherine was determined that she would talk with the voice again; but not too soon; no, not too soon. There must be time to think and plan in the meanwhile. She would have to be wary, well poised, and provided with a plausible story to unfold.

All of the time while Katherine sat there turning the incident over in her mind, she was convinced of two pleasing and helpful, although minor, considerations. One, that the woman accomplice both disliked and feared Conrad Belknap; the other, that the possessor of such a throaty, richly melodious, sympathetic voice must be good and kind at heart, no matter what might be the condition and circumstances that bound her to such a knave as Belknap had already proved himself to be. She went out of the room presently, strangely exhilarated—either because she was conscious of the eve of battle between her wit and her unbidden guests; or, because of an intuition that the unknown woman, with the sweet voice, would some day develop into a friend in need, to serve as a foil against Belknap. At the top of the stairway she met him face to face.

"You are—" she hesitated—"infectious!" she ended.

"I am—I," he retorted, showing his teeth in another wolfish smile.

It seemed then, for the briefest instant, as if she would indeed leave him. Her life-body swayed slightly forward in the beginning of the act to do so, but neither of her daintily shod feet moved under her. She stood quite still, Belknap chuckled again. He restored the cigarette case to his pocket, brought out a gold match safe, and coolly lighted up.

She knew that he did it all purposely to test her, to defy her, to dare her to carry out her threat. She knew that she ought to do so, and banded no more words with him. But she could not do it.

She knew that he was conquering her spirit by the mere power of his will, and that for some miserably unknown reason which she could not define at all, she dare not defy him.

She knew that she was frightened, but she did not know what it was that she feared; and in that moment she feared herself for temporizing with the man whom she honestly believed to be a real denizen of the underworld—a crook.

Having lighted his cigarette, properly inhaled the smoke, and expelled it, he said, with cool and careful selection of each word he uttered:

"We all have pasts, Mrs. Harvard; some of them are made by ourselves; some of us have them manufactured for us by others. But—they are none the less our pasts, whether they happen to be self-made, or otherwise. Sometimes we try to outlive them and forget them, and we deceive ourselves into the belief that we have succeeded; but they live—and they rise up to confront us when we least expect it. I have my past, and it is not all pleasant, though it was self-made. You have your past, and although you did not make it, it is none the less ugly."

"If you should go now and carry out what you threatened to do I could see your ugly past," she said, and then, thus engaged, the white, set features of a person she both knew, gazing fearfully upon her—upon her particularly—upon her between the iron bars of a narrow prison window. Can you guess, Mrs. Harvard, to whom I refer?"

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He made no attempt to interrupt her. He permitted her to finish what she had to say without changing his attitude or altering his demeanor; nor did the wolfish smile leave his face. It grew fiercer, his eyes became more mocking and insolent—and threatening.

"Brave words, Mrs. Harvard," he responded coldly, retaining the inscrutable smile as he quoted the words he had spoken to her a half-hour earlier at the summer-house on the edge of the lawn. "You wish to know whether you are a person who should be respected, or a person who should be despised, by the world at large? I shall not change my mind about going away; I shall not go. You will change your mind about what you have just threatened to do, for—you will think better of it."

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Katherine should have taken him at his word, and gone; but she did not. She should have carried out her threat to the end; but she hesitated. She would have passed him by without another word; but she temporized. Even she, who was not given to temporizing, she still faced him unflinchingly. It is true; but she stayed. There was about her not one outward sign of fear or misgiving; but Belknap knew that both were present in her heart and brain, else she would have left him.

Could she have suspected, even remotely, how greatly the game he was playing depended upon her not taking him at his word—how much it depended upon his success in instilling in her that nameless dread of something intangible, but threatening—could she have guessed that three-fourths of his insolent offensiveness was pure bluff; that she would have passed him then, with head held high, would have summoned her husband and her friends, and denounced Conrad Belknap for what he was. Instead—

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Am I to understand that you dare to threaten me?"

"Precisely that, Mrs. Harvard. You have threatened me: I give you back threat for threat. I am threatening you—with the consequences of what you might still feel foolishly do."

"You threaten me—with what?"

He shrugged again, took out his cigarette case, selected one from it, and answered:

"I have just told you; with the consequences of an extremely foolish whim that you must certainly, although not so strongly now."

"You are—" she hesitated—"infectious!" she ended.

"I am—I," he retorted, showing his teeth in another wolfish smile.

It seemed then, for the briefest instant, as if she would indeed leave him. Her life-body swayed slightly forward in the beginning of the act to do so, but neither of her daintily shod feet moved under her. She stood quite still, Belknap chuckled again. He restored the cigarette case to his pocket, brought out a gold match safe, and coolly lighted up.

She knew that he did it all purposely to test her, to defy her, to dare her to carry out her threat. She knew that she ought to do so, and banded no more words with him. But she could not do it.

She knew that he was conquering her spirit by the mere power of his will, and that for some miserably unknown reason which she could not define at all, she dare not defy him.

She knew that she was frightened, but she did not know what it was that she feared; and in that moment she feared herself for temporizing with the man whom she honestly believed to be a real denizen of the underworld—a crook.

Having lighted his cigarette, properly inhaled the smoke, and expelled it, he said, with cool and careful selection of each word he uttered:

"We all have pasts, Mrs. Harvard; some of them are made by ourselves; some of us have them manufactured for us by others. But—they are none the less our pasts, whether they happen to be self-made, or otherwise. Sometimes we try to outlive them and forget them, and we deceive ourselves into the belief that we have succeeded; but they live—and they rise up to confront us when we least expect it. I have my past, and it is not all pleasant, though it was self-made. You have your past, and although you did not make it, it is none the less ugly."

"If you should go now and carry out what you threatened to do I could see your ugly past," she said, and then, thus engaged, the white, set features of a person she both knew, gazing fearfully upon her—upon her particularly—upon her between the iron bars of a narrow prison window. Can you guess, Mrs. Harvard, to whom I refer?"

It seemed to Katherine as if fingers of ice clutched at her heartstrings then.

In that instant she understood the reason for that vague dread and fear which she had sensed since the moment when she had faced this man in the moonlight at the summer-house steps, and the four gentlemen, with whom she had played poker, to go with me to the library. It is my purpose to tell them, plainly and unequivocally, everything that I saw when I looked between the portieres, and to describe your conduct since then, also—unless you choose to change your mind again and leave Myquest now, at once."

He made no attempt to interrupt her. He permitted her to finish what she had to say without changing his attitude or altering his demeanor; nor did the wolfish smile leave his face. It grew fiercer, his eyes became more mocking and insolent—and threatening.

"Brave words, Mrs. Harvard," he responded coldly, retaining the inscrutable smile as he quoted the words he had spoken to her a half-hour earlier at the summer-house on the edge of the lawn. "You wish to know whether you are a person who should be respected, or a person who should be despised, by the world at large? I shall not change my mind about going away; I shall not go. You will change your mind about what you have just threatened to do, for—you will think better of it."

"You are standing thus far between her and the stairway, but with the close of his statement he stepped aside, leaving her ample room to pass him if she wished.

"Go ahead," he said calmly, "if you have the courage to take the bit in your teeth, and run; but let me beg that you will not forget that I hold the reins that a curb is generally regarded as an instrument of torture and that I am a merciless driver when I encounter a fractiousness. Go ahead, if you like. Call your husband and the others to the library. Speak your little piece."

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