

# The Devil





# The Devil Flower

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## CHAPTER I - Dr. Gregory's Hospital

WHAT a job I picked out!" Dr. Frank Robeson was talking to himself grumpily.

A crudely stenciled sign on the main highway had said "Gregory Pines Sanitarium . . . two miles." Frank had followed the tortuous windings of the steep and narrow side road for more than twice that distance.

Abruptly his roadster nosed out into a clearing.

"For crying out loud!" Frank whispered to himself, "where am I?"

Across this clearing he was in, there was the entrance to a rocky gorge that cut into the sharply rising slope ahead.

Frank shifted gear and clung to the wheel as his protesting car bumped into the shadows.

Here the going was even worse. The dry floor of the canyon was strewn with boulders and loose rock. The ravine twisted as had the road through the woods. Suddenly from around one of its contours came a roaring, clattering Juggernaut. A hoarse shout, the screech of brakes. Frank wrenched his wheel, swerving the roadster to the wall of the canyon. Too late. A careening flivver struck his car with a sickening grind of fenders, caromed off and rolled over. At once it burst into flames.

In swift fear for the driver of the other car, Frank stumbled toward the blazing wreck. His assistance was not needed—or wanted. A cadaverous, thickspectacled individual in soiled dungarees crawled from the heap and made off down the ravine without a backward glance.

"Hi, there!" Frank sang out. "Are you hurt?"

The stranger wheeled jerkily, his row chalky features contorted with an emotion which might have been either fear or rage. "Lemme be!" he snarled. "If I was you I'd be gettin' along outa here before this gas tank blows up."

He turned and shambled away until lost to view around a bend. Amazed and angered, Frank stared after him. But he heeded the advice of the churlish yokel and returned speedily to his own car.

Ruefully he surveyed its damaged side. But the motor purred softly when he depressed the starter pedal, and his roadster lurched forward with its usual vigor. The running gear, fortunately, was undamaged.

Soon there echoed through the canyon the rumbling detonation which told him that fire had reached the gasoline tank of the wrecked car.

“And that,” grinned Frank Robeson, “is that.”

Then his grin froze to a grimace of horror. On the hood of his own car was a blob of bloody, fleshy substance. But it was not meat, either animal or human. It was something infinitely more ghastly, tentacle-like, translucent—evidently blown away from the explosion. Shuddering, Frank jumped to the ground and wiped it from the metal with a greasy rag, then slid back under the wheel and drove crazily toward his destination.

His broad face again relaxed and a puzzled light was in his steel-blue eyes when he came out of the gorge and looked up at the rambling frame structure that nestled amid the pines on the mountainside before him. It was the institution he had come so far to visit. An indefinable gloom lay over it—like a pall.

Pulling off at the side of the road, he regarded the place thoughtfully. Nothing marked it as greatly different from the many health resorts in the mountains.

The broad porch, the green shutters, the spacious grounds with the inevitable croquet court, the arched signboard—all were conventional. And yet . . .

FRANK was probably the only staff member of New York’s Park Medical Center who had entertained any doubts at all regarding Dr. Gregory’s hospital. And only recently at

that. He had voiced his suspicions to his old friend, Dr. Dudley Cowan, chief of the surgical staff.

“Nonsense,” Cowan had said. “Frank, we’ve been sending private patients to Gregory for years. You’ve sent many of your own. You know as well as I do that all who return are enthusiastic.”

Cowan's wrinkled brow had furrowed more deeply at this. “True,” he admitted grudgingly, “and both were your patients. I know how you must feel, but I still think you're barking up the wrong tree. We can't question Gregory’s trustworthiness.”

“All the same, I’m going to run up there to look the place over,” Frank told him stubbornly. “Tomorrow.”

Frank had set out on the tiresome motor trip with grim determination. Two of his patients had died at Gregory Pines within six months. Of pernicious anaemia, the death certificate read. Peculiar. But Gregory’s reputation was spotless; it would be folly to question his diagnoses. And unethical.

At first Frank had been only puzzled. Later he had sent Lemuel Curtis to the institution to recuperate from a severe operative case of double mastoiditis. Vague misgivings assailed him when Curtis left, but he was utterly unprepared for the telephone message that came from Curtis a few days later. Curtis was a wealthy broker.

“The whisper of death is in the air here,” Curtis told him over the wire. “I’m panicky, Doctor. I’ve lost hope.”

“Keep a stiff upper lip. I’ll be up to see you.”

Frank Robeson was a man of his word. But now that he was here he was not at all sure of himself. If Lem Curtis died . . .

He shivered. An uncanny silence was upon the place of the wind in the pines. He remembered the fearhusky voice of Curtis over the telephone. And he even thought of that gory blob in the gorge.

Shaking off his feelings, he started his car. There was but one thing to do. He'd make himself known to Gregory and ask to see Curtis professionally. He'd stay a few days and watch things.

The breeze whipped his shock of sandy hair into a tangle as the roadster labored up the steep drive. Grim lines were around his lips and his shoulders squared aggressively. Seeing him thus, observers might have thought him a determined sportsman rather than one of the cleverest surgeons of the metropolis. Which Frank was.

MARTIN GREGORY was a genial if somewhat pompous man in his early fifties. A Vandyke beard and owlish eyes gave him a professorial air. His was the assured manner of one long used to deference. He was a man satisfied with his own success. But his hand was flabby and moist in the hearty grip of his caller.

Frank came to the point at once. "Any objection to my visiting Lemuel Curtis, Doctor?" he asked.

"None at all." Gregory was hesitant and his pudgy fingers were tapping the desk top. "Curtis, I might warn you, is not improving as we had expected."

"No?" Frank raised his left eyebrow in the disconcerting way he had. "There has been no change in treatment, I presume?"

"None. You are at liberty to examine the patient's chart."

Still those thick fingers tapped the desk. Frank thought that he saw an uneasy flicker in the other's eyes.

"Gregory," he blurted, "you're holding something back."

The older man flushed, then paled. “I resent that, Doctor,” he spluttered. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll reply with another question. Does Curtis have symptoms resembling those of Galloway and Ingalls before their deaths?”

“A-ah!” Gregory rose angrily, then dropped into his chair. “You’ve asked for it and I’ll tell you. Yes, the symptoms are the same—and you should know them well.” He stared accusingly.

“I!” Amazed, Frank returned the stare blankly.

“Who else?” Gregory’s voice dropped suggestively and his eyes were shifty. “It had struck me that your last three patients arrived in quite different condition from that reported by you. Why did you send them, Doctor Robeson?”

Frank had caught a Tartar. The older man had turned the tables adroitly and was regarding him from beneath lowered lids. What had been implied was plain enough.

“You surprise me,” Frank replied slowly, checking his rising ire, “I’ve sent my patients to you in good faith and usually with excellent results. But Galloway and Ingalls died here. Curtis, you say, is in a condition similar to theirs. You infer that I know something about it, that I knowingly sent you hopeless cases. This I deny, and I want your explanation.”

Gregory smiled oilily. “Perhaps we’re talking at cross purpose,” he offered, again placatingly. “I admit these three cases puzzled me. Possibly I was wrong in mistrusting you.”

“You were wrong,”—curtly. “Do I take it from you that the Galloway and Ingalls death certificates were falsified?”

“That’s damned impertinence!” bellowed Gregory, purpling. “I did not understand—do not—” He subsided glumly.

“In other words you don’t know what is wrong with Curtis?”

“Do you?” His bovine placidity returning, Gregory leered.

“I only know his condition when he left New York,”—stiffly. “It was satisfactory outside of the usual post-operative weakness.”

“Come, come, Doctor!” Gregory arose, genial once more. “You and I are beating about the bush. We must admit that conditions seem to be odd. We’ll see Curtis immediately; then I’ll leave it to you to say who is at fault.”

Though unsatisfied, Frank assented. On the way he mused darkly.

More than ever he was suspicious. Certainly no untoward symptoms had marked any of these cases. Gregory’s nervousness, his most evasive replies, his sudden changes of front, were decidedly mysterious.

And there was that red thing on the hood of the car.

CURTIS, it developed, was quartered in a private cabin some little way from the main building. The path through the pines led past a low rambling structure which Gregory explained was his experimental laboratory. He did not dwell on the subject further, seeming most reluctant to do so, and that served to arouse Frank’s suspicions still more.

“Biological?” he asked, striving to speak pleasantly.

“Partly so,” Gregory implied by his air that it was none of his visitor’s business.

But Frank had seen a skulking figure at the rear of the building. It was the gaunt and colorless individual of the soiled dungarees.

“Who’s that?” he demanded.

“Rufus Ballinger. Sort of helps me in the laboratory. Expert botanist.” Gregory hurried along the path, obviously wishing to avoid the neighborhood of the laboratory.

Frank cudgeled his memory. Ballinger’s name was familiar but most elusive. Somehow, somewhere, he had heard of this man. And in an unsavory connection, he felt sure. It would come to him later. He looked back, saw the thick-spectacled one bending over a

most curious milky-stemmed plant that grew waveringly from a pot he was removing from an open hotbed.

“Here’s where Curtis is,” said Gregory, indicating a small green and white house with broad sleeping-porches and awninged windows.

It was a most attractive place, ideally located, and obviously of most modern design. Entering with his host, Frank saw that it was arranged to take care of two patients and had a well-appointed room for the nurse between the two bedrooms. Only one bed was now occupied, and this by Lemuel Curtis, who lay reclining on his side with his paper-white hands outside the covers.

“Glad to see you, Doc,” he greeted Frank in a weak voice. “Thought you’d never get here.”

In one swift glance Frank noted that the mastoid bandages were tight and clean and that they were tied in the approved manner. But his heart sank when he observed the wanness of his former patient’s countenance and the bloodlessness of his lips. It was unbelievable that the man could have failed so much in the few days he had been here.

“Got to you as soon as I could, old man,” Frank said cheerily. “And how goes it? Feeling better?” He had known the young broker for a number of years, and counted him as an intimate friend.

“Pretty good for an old guy.” Curtis essayed a smile but was obviously trying to signal with his eyes. And his hand crept out over the covers unostentatiously.

“Would you like to see his chart?” Gregory asked Frank amiably.

“If you don’t mind.”

As the older physician turned to reach for the daily record, the nervous fingers of Lem Curtis twitched into view and crammed a folded paper into Frank’s fist. He covered it at once, then pocketed it. Curtis grinned knowingly.

GREGORY was extending the chart, but Frank gave it scant heed. It was only a tabulation of temperatures, respiration rates, feedings, and the usual run-of-mine hospital information.

“How about his blood tests, blood counts?” Frank inquired.

Reluctantly, Gregory brought them. Amazed, Frank saw unmistakable evidence of the dread pernicious anaemia. The daily increase in deficiency of red corpuscles was indeed alarming. He looked again at the chart and noted that the use of calves’ liver was properly recorded. Everything seemed to be in order.

“You haven’t considered blood transfusions?” he asked.

“Not as yet. As you know from your own experience, the latest practice does not encourage their use too much.” Gregory smiled in his unctuous, insincere manner.

“Right. Well, I’ve seen enough for the present, Doctor. Shall we return to your office?” Frank was anxious to get where he could read the note Curtis had been so anxious to get to him.

“Yes, suppose we do.” The older physician was actually beaming. This had turned out to be easier than he had anticipated. “And, Doctor, you’ll not be able to get away from the Pines tonight; suppose I assign a room to you and have your bags brought in. Perhaps you’d like to remain a few days here yourself?”

“I had hoped to; in fact I planned to—if you agreed, of course. I like it here.”

Gregory did not know quite how to take this, but he let it pass. With his guest so affable, he could hardly do otherwise.

“See you later, Lem.” Frank waved airily and followed his host from the cabin.

LATER, in the seclusion of his room, he puzzled over the shakily penciled note.

*“Something mighty queer here,” it read. “Nurse on duty all day but not at night. Gregory visits late and gives me medicine that’s not reported on the chart. Dope, I think,*

*because I get so drowsy I just have to pass out. Wake every morning weak as the devil—and mentally depressed. That whisper is still in the air. Do something, Doc, or I'm a goner. I KNOW it."*

This called for thought, for watching and waiting. The note did not clarify things at all. Frank determined, though, that he'd see this through, regardless of professional ethics or of consequences. He considered several possibilities. None seemed logical. This man Ballinger might be involved; possibly not. Gregory, on the face of it all, seemed to be the one to suspect. If Ballinger were in on it, in what connection could it be? Again the surgeon racked his brain for memory of that odd name. The connection still eluded him.

If Gregory were administering drugs to Curtis, why? What could it have to do with the apparent anaemic condition? Of course, there was the possibility that Curtis was so greatly concerned over his own condition that he was inclined to exaggerate ordinary happenings in his own mind. But something was very much wrong here. He would have to find out what it was.

Late that afternoon he strolled down toward the laboratory and, from a distance, saw Gregory and Ballinger stooping over one of the many hotbeds outside. They were so absorbed they did not notice his coming.

Taking advantage of their preoccupation, he circled the building cautiously and secreted himself behind a clump of bushes within sight and earshot. Immediately the plant those two were examining took his entire attention. It was like no growth Frank had ever seen, having a mass of rubbery, vinelike branches that seemed always to be in motion. Weirdly so, as if actuated by some external force. Yet there was no sign of a breeze that might have blown them about.

At the tips, the rubbery members were milky-white in hue and nearly transparent, but near the heavy main stem they shaded off into a deep pink hue. As the doctor watched, the rosiness near the stem of the unnatural plant began to rise and fall, much as if it were a liquid boiling in a test tube. A sickly-sweet odor assailed his nostrils and his instant impression was that it came from the growth. Ballinger was lifting the pot that held the vegetable incongruity and was removing it from the hotbed.

“Careful, Rufe,” Gregory cautioned.

His face was turned toward the hiding-place and Frank saw with a start that the older physician’s eyes were fixed—staring—as if he were in a trance.

“Lemme be!” snarled the uncouth Ballinger. “I know what I’m doin’. This here’s the last time this one comes outa here, too.”

IT was quite incomprehensible. Frank drew himself into the smallest space possible as the other two made for the laboratory, Ballinger carrying the potted monstrosity. The door closed behind them. Frank moved stealthily to one of the windows, hoping to peer inside. But he found it curtained so heavily that nothing could be seen. Disappointed, he returned to the porch of the main building.

Dusk came quickly and with it came the return of Martin Gregory, who dropped heavily into a deck chair beside Frank. His eyes looked better now but there was still a deliberation in his movements that bespoke some sense-deadening influence. The man must be a narcotic addict. A strange place, Gregory Pines. Robeson’s nerves chilled.

“Find your room satisfactory?” Gregory drawled.

“First rate. Couldn’t be better. All the same I can’t seem to get Curtis out of my mind. What is your honest opinion of the case, Doctor?”

The older man’s eyes narrowed. No sign of drowsiness or of a lethargic disinterest was in them now. “It’s just as I told you; you saw for yourself, didn’t you? And you can

examine Curtis again in any way and as often as you like. Perhaps you can help me in the case.”

This last was said with a knowing smirk.

Frank shifted his attack. "Fond of your botanical research, aren't you, Doctor?"

The change in the man was startling. He purpled; cleared his throat noisily. "You been spying on me?" he demanded.

Frank raised his left eyebrow quizzically. "Would that worry you?" he countered.

"Now you look here!" Gregory sprang from his seat and his pudgy fingers clasped and unclasped in the sheer fury that was within him. "I've been more than courteous, allowing you the run of my place and Pve seen fit to put you up for awhile and let you see this patient of yours as often as you please. But I warn you; keep your meddling nose out of my affairs or you'll find yourself in a peck of trouble."

With this outburst he stalked off, slamming the screen door after him.

AFTER supper, Dr. Robeson wandered through the grounds aimlessly, still without seeing Gregory or Ballinger. Finally he decided to return to his own room and await developments, or at least to plan a course of action. He had not realized how physically tired the day had made him and dozed off in an easy-chair while merely contemplating the events which had led up to the situation.

Awakening with a start, he looked at his watch and saw that it was well past the midnight hour. Something told him he should not retire at once; he paced the floor for the better part of a half-hour, then decided to get out in the open. Perhaps it was only a hunch, but he felt that he might learn something of value by another round of the premises.

All was quiet. There was no moon, but enough of the light of the stars was there to enable him to make his way down the path which led past the laboratory to the cottage where Curtis was housed. He was disappointed—no lights in the cabin. About to return to his room,

he was stopped in his tracks by the unmistakable sound from within that marks a deeply drugged man—a heavy shuddering snore. Lem Curtis! Frank stepped to the door of the cabin, found it open and walked in. It was a surprise to find that his patient—and friend—was in a stupor, from which nothing could arouse him at the moment. The nurse was off duty, of course, and on the spur of the moment Frank ransacked her cabinet, obtained the necessary materials and with the aid of a hand flash withdrew a generous sample of Curtis' blood. He observed a fresh puncture almost at the point where he himself needed.

The man did not stir or even groan at the sharp stab; his face was a ghastly mask in the light of the flash. But Frank was all professional now; his personal feelings were put aside. He snapped off the flash and tiptoed from the building, sprinting down the path toward the laboratory. The grounds, seemingly, were deserted, the main building dark excepting for the dim lights of the corridors.

FRANK was no second-story worker, nor had he the slightest knowledge of or sympathy with the back-porch-casement-opening burglar. But he learned somehow the way to get into Ballinger's laboratory. With the blood sample carefully protected in its tube, he cautiously felt his way to the bench of the microscopes and with only a single palm-shielded flash from the electric hand lamp found the switch of the illuminator of one of the excellent instruments. This gave him plenty of light without any betraying glare. Quickly he found a slide, stain and cover glass, and prepared his specimen.

He searched the brilliant field of vision carefully. The smear was a perfect one. The deficiency of red corpuscles was so evident as to require no count. But no microcytes, those minute elementary granules associated with anaemia, were present. Curtis was not an anaemic. His blood was being drained artificially from his weakening body. That other puncture meant that Gregory had robbed him of his life fluid, not infused it.

It came to Frank instantly, this horrible thing, and thoughts of Rufe's squirmy and rustling plant rushed in to show the solution.

Rufus Ballinger was killing men to satisfy his insane lust for experimentation with plant life, there could be no doubt of that. He was endeavoring to produce flora that was half fauna—probably all fauna in his crazy mind. Worse than this . . .

A whispering sound close at hand startled Frank into something like normalcy. He turned his head in the direction from which the eerie noise had come and saw slimy pink tentacles reaching over the window-sill from outside. One of the plants had gone berserk! The thing was alive and it was gigantic! Flowers, blood-red in hue, with faces like crimson gargoyles, budded and bloomed in a second of time, looked at him with sinister gloating . . . advanced with the speed of a pack of stalking wolves.

Breath-takingly, a pungent odor assailed his nostrils. The lights of the laboratory flashed on blindingly. Abruptly he knew no more.

WHEN consciousness returned, slowly and painfully, Frank found himself flat on his back in dewy grass. Dawn was just breaking, as evidenced by the paleness of the eastern horizon. There were sounds of men talking in low monotone and he strained his barely aroused senses to recall what this was all about and his ears to learn the meaning of the muttered intensities of speech. Suddenly, as if he had snapped out from under an anaesthetic, he remembered.

He sat up, stiffly—they had not tied him. He had been drugged; the odor of nitrous oxide was strong in his nostrils. What they had used to supplement that first whiff he did not know, nor how they had managed to accomplish it. In the semi-darkness he saw Gregory and Ballinger working over one of the hotbeds of the strange plant growth.

“If I was you,” Rufe was saying, “I’d put him out the way. Dead men don’t talk, Martin, and he’d be easier’n the others.”

“Come, come,” Gregory responded slowly and with apparent difficulty in his speech. “There are more important things right at this time. Watch what you are doing.”

Ballinger squealed shrilly— like a rat, Frank thought. “The damn thing nearly tore my hand offa me,” he whined. “Why’d we take that extra pint from Curtis?”

Still in somewhat of a daze, Frank reflected that there are about thirteen pints of blood in the average human body. That even a professional blood donor can hardly give up more than about a quart every two weeks and still remain robust. But this!—these devils must have been taking a pint a day from the young broker—an extra pint tonight! No wonder the external symptoms of anaemia were manifest in Curtis! No wonder those other lives had been cut short.

Frank, his head clearing by now, rolled over on his side and saw that forms were taking shape more distinctly in the brightening dawn. He saw that the two men were working over one of the wriggly plants, that it was more gigantic than any he had before seen and infinitely more active. Its tendrils whipped about like the arms of an octopus, and Gregory was quite terrified at the swift movements of the horrid appendages, ducking and cowering like a frightened schoolboy.

“Get yourself together, Doc,” snarled Ballinger, and he struck the older man's cheek with the flat of his hand.

An incomprehensible thing happened then. The plant, like a faithful hound protecting its master, struck out at the uncouth botanist.

The unfortunate man screeched and fought horribly. He was helpless in the clutches of the thing he had created.

Frank forced himself from his horrified helplessness.

“Gregory!” he yelled leaping forward. “Watch out! The damned thing will get you when it’s finished with Ballinger.”

THE botanist suddenly ceased struggling. The plant, dripping red now, was writhing its members about Martin Gregory's face and neck. Gregory screamed like a trapped and horribly injured animal.

Tingling with artificial paralysis as his hands were, Frank felt in his pockets. Of course he always carried his hypodermic kit with him. It was there.

Gregory now was only half conscious. Frank loaded his hypo with phenol—full to the neck. He crawled toward the dying man. The wriggling plant had him almost completely wrapped up in its tentacles.

He plunged the needle into the heavy root-stem of the thing. Its charge shot home. A wildly thrashing tentacle knocked him down. It coiled about his neck, and stinging pain shot through him. He fought desperately to escape.

Gregory screamed again, obviously helpless again the octopus-like thing which was engulfing him. Despair gripped Robeson. The poison wasn't working. He choked as the tentacles tightened convulsively.

HEN those blood-dripping flowers shrivelled their faces. The arms relaxed. With a gasp of relief, Frank tore away the dripping things with suckers that stuck graspingly and drew away his life-blood.

Ballinger was dead—his body a waxy husk.

Lemuel Curtis now would be no more molested. Gregory, Frank realized, had been innocent. And Gregory would live.

Gregory, hypnotized by the mad botanist — who would never again kill human beings —had been only a tool.

Curtis's life was safe now; he would recover with proper treatment. Building him up with the proper vitamins would take care of that.

Frank climbed erect and tottered to the small cabin to assure the young broker of his ultimate safety. And then, reviving his own faculties, he hobbled back to the scene of the plant's extinction.

By now Gregory's mind was almost normal. Frank helped him to his room . . . they helped each other.

"It was a bad dream," was all Gregory said. Frank nodded. Better let it end that way.

Ingalls and Galloway were gone beyond recall, Curtis was safe. Ballinger was dead—and in the morning they'd kill the young plants. Yes—it had been a bad dream.